



Navigating the tension between fatherhood ideals and realities of a post-conflict setting: A phenomenological study of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Fatherhood
Caregiving
Child soldiers
Low-resource
Post-conflict
Sierra Leone

ABSTRACT

The concept of “fatherhood” in many African countries has traditionally been understood in terms of instrumental support to one’s family, most notably, financial provision. However, in Sierra Leone and elsewhere, this narrow understanding of fatherhood is changing as a result of shifting demographic trends and in response to crises such as civil war and the recent Ebola outbreak in west Africa. Little is understood about how males formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups during childhood (Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups/CAAFAG) are navigating fatherhood as young adults. This study uses a phenomenological approach to understand 1) the meaning and importance of fatherhood for CAAFAG and war-affected fathers, 2) what fatherhood looks like normatively and ideally, with attention to norms about nurturing care and violence, and 3) how ideals of fatherhood may or may not be in tension with socioeconomic circumstances. We find that CAAFAG and war-affected fathers are committed to providing emotional support, encouragement, and a loving upbringing in addition to striving to provide financially for their families. Fathers experienced the greatest tension between their ideals of fatherhood and their structural circumstances; in other words, they felt inhibited in becoming the types of fathers they hoped to be due to the realities of living in a post-conflict, resource-constrained environment.

1. Background

Male caregiving in much of Africa has traditionally been understood in relation to providing for one’s family, both in terms of financial support and physical protection (Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005). In addition, increasingly embedded within a father’s role in this context is the expectation that they will financially support their children’s education and teach them life skills, with the belief that doing so offers social and economic opportunities for children in the future (McLean, 2020c; Mehus, Wieling, Achan, & Oloya, 2018). As a result, African men may feel that being a “good” father has become more expensive and difficult to achieve than in the past (Stark & Landis, 2016).

This narrow understanding of fatherhood has been slowly shifting in light of global demographic trends including lower fertility, increasing urbanization, and reconfigurations of gendered divisions of labor within

the family (Smith, 2017; Inhorn, Chavkin, and Navarro, 2015). Recent research from South Africa, for instance, demonstrates an increased belief that men ought to be more involved in the intimate aspects of day-to-day childcare and in providing supportive guidance (Ratele, Shefer, & Clowes, 2012). Research from Uganda and Sierra Leone, countries marred by histories of political violence, show that the expectations to provide physical protection have expanded to include efforts to foster and maintain emotional stability and peace within the home (McLean, 2020b; Mehus et al., 2018). These changes do not necessarily indicate a radical shift in caretaking roles, but rather an integration of new caregiving roles with more traditional conceptualizations of fatherhood (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015).

Navigating and balancing these dynamic expectations of fatherhood can create tension for fathers, especially for those with limited material and social resources. For example, many men in sub-Saharan Africa have historically had to travel far away from their families to find paid work

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Abbreviations

CAAFAG	children associated with armed conflict and armed groups
FGD	focus group discussion
LSWAY	Longitudinal Study of War-affected Youth
RPCA	Research Program on Children and Adversity

(Block, 2016; Mehus et al., 2018), which continues to be the case for many due to economic instability (McLean, 2020b). As a result, men frequently have had to choose between hands-on caregiving or financial provision (Block, 2016). Throughout the continent, rising rates of disease, such as HIV/AIDs and Ebola, and armed conflicts, have led to an increase in single-parent households and orphan care from non-biological caregivers (Bryant & Beard, 2016; Wagner et al., 2019). Out of necessity, men may take on a variety of caregiving roles, such as engaging in emotional care and partaking in the everyday tasks of bathing, feeding, and dressing children, even while still categorizing this as “woman’s work” (Block, 2016).

Fathering practices are not homogenous; men adapt their behaviors based on their experiences, interpretations of norms, and the feasibility of meeting various expectations within socioeconomic, psychological, and physical contexts (Malinga, 2015; Mehus et al., 2018). Nor do young men today necessarily repeat the fathering attitudes and behaviors that they witnessed in their own fathers (Smith, 2017). This may be especially relevant for contexts where young men—due to disruptions associated with conflict or changing social norms—did not receive consistent instructional guidance on how to perform necessary household tasks (Block, 2016; Malinga, 2015).

Today, men in sub-Saharan Africa navigate changing fatherhood norms within the context of daily stressors such as poverty, infectious disease, limited social support systems, and other environmental stressors. These stressors have implications for men’s abilities to successfully parent, and have been associated with poor physical health (McEwen, 1998), risk-seeking behavior (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989), and an increased potential for child maltreatment (Brown, Doom, Lechuga-Peña, Watamura, & Koppels, 2020). Many African men further experience mental distress when they cannot live up to expectations of what it means to be a good parent (Adinkrah, 2012; Ramphele, 2002; Ratele, 2016).

In order to support positive fatherhood, and to protect against inter-generational transference of violence, it is critical to understand the roots of stressors for fathers and their methods of navigating them. The aims and objectives of this study are to explore 1) the meaning and importance of fatherhood for former CAAFAG and war-affected youth in Sierra Leone, 2) what fatherhood looks like normatively and ideally, with attention to norms about nurturing care as well as violence, and 3) how ideals of fatherhood may or may not be in tension with men’s socioeconomic circumstances.

2. Context

Many Sierra Leonean fathers today grew up during the country’s civil war (1991–2002), when young people were frequently abducted from families and communities, forcibly recruited into fighting forces, and exposed to psychological, physical, and sexual abuse (Alleyne-Green, Kulick, Grocher, DeLoach McCutcheon, & Betancourt, 2019; Betancourt, Borisova, de la Soudière, & Williamson, 2011). Wartime violence led to physical injuries and disabilities, loss of family, social rejection by family and community members, and heightened rates of post-traumatic stress reactions (Alleyne-Green et al., 2019; Betancourt, Keegan, Farrar, & Brennan, 2020; Denov, 2010). Globally, in post-conflict settings, parental psychological distress has been found to be associated with harsh

parenting practices and greater violence against children (Seddighi, Salmani, Javadi, & Seddighi, 2021; Sim, Fazel, Bowes, & Gardner, 2018; Stark and Landis, 2016).

The Ebola epidemic further disrupted the development of young fathers in Sierra Leone, constraining their abilities to parent in various ways. Isolation and quarantine measures separated families from their neighbors and extended families (Calain & Poncin, 2015). The death of many caregivers, particularly mothers, placed additional caregiving responsibilities on men, whose roles shifted as they became single fathers or began caring for non-biological children in addition to their own biological children (Murray, Drew, Memmott, Bangura, & Maring, 2021). Traditional fatherhood roles tied to financial provision became more challenging as businesses closed and laborers were unable to travel for work (McLean, 2020b). However, some men improvised new forms of care, taking on high-risk jobs at Ebola Treatment Units to provide for their families, or by engaging in more hands-on nurturing of children and of the sick (McLean, 2020b).

These findings support additional work that points to emerging beliefs, practices, and norms surrounding fatherhood and gender roles in Sierra Leone (McLean, 2020a; Thulin, McLean, Sevalie, Akinsulure-Smith, & Betancourt, 2022; Zuilkowski et al., 2019). While patriarchal norms exist wherein masculinity is defined in relation to breadwinning (Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Enria, 2016), McLean (2020a) describes how recent social and political events have created space for “emergent” forms of fatherhood to take root (Inhorn, Chavkin and Navarro 2015), including those tied to more nurturing and intimate aspects of care, even among fathers who have experienced violence from their own upbringing.

The social and financial challenges experienced during Ebola continue to this day, as Sierra Leone currently experiences high rates of unemployment, poor infrastructure, and weak governance and social service provision, causing widespread poverty in both urban and rural areas (World Bank, 2021). Studies of caregiving in this context have emphasized the relationship between daily stressors and poor mental health (Betancourt, McBain, Newnham, & Brennan, 2015; Betancourt, Thomson, et al., 2020; Newnham, Pearson, Stein, & Betancourt, 2015), which may in turn negatively affect parenting (McLean 2020b; Murray et al., 2021). While existing research is illuminating, the unique experiences of former CAAFAG, including how they navigate tensions between ideal notions of fatherhood and daily stressors have not been fully explored. This study aims to fill this gap by highlighting the lived experiences of fatherhood with both former CAAFAG and other war-affected fathers in Sierra Leone. Our analysis is informed by social support theory, which can provide guidance as to how to understand the roles fathers have or wish to have with their children in this context. The theory delineates four attributes of social support: instrumental, informational, emotional, and appraisal (Langford, Bowsler, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997).

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

All data were collected during a fourth wave of data collection for the Longitudinal Study of War-affected Youth (LSWAY) in Sierra Leone (NIMH Project Number: 4R01HD073349-05), a mixed methods study designed to understand the long-term effects of war on youth who were formerly abducted by rebel forces. Not all CAAFAG youth were involved in front line fighting: some prepared food and did laundry for commanders, while others were informally adopted by commander’s wives who wanted children (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis, 2010; Shepler, 2014). Nonetheless, across all roles, exposure to physical and sexual violence were common in both males and females. While only 5% of males self-reported experiencing sexual violence (as opposed to 44% of females) this is likely underreported (Betancourt et al., 2011). LSWAY findings have illuminated how risk and protective factors have shaped the readjustment of CAAFAG over time (Betancourt,

Thomson, et al., 2020; Betancourt, Keegan, et al., 2020). By the study's fourth wave, many participants had become parents; additional research questions were added to examine how war experiences and subsequent environmental stressors such as the Ebola epidemic have affected family dynamics, parenting, intimate partner relationships, and child development.

3.1.1. Study sites

LSWAY has historically taken place across six districts in Sierra Leone: Kono, Kenema, Makeni, Pujehan, Bo, and Moyamba. In 2002, during the first wave of data collection, CAAFAG who were served by Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Services were recruited from a random door-to-door sample in these districts (N = 395). In 2004, additional CAAFAG who were not served by DDR were recruited from Makeni (N = 128), the last district in Sierra Leone to be released from rebel control (Betancourt, Thomson, et al., 2020). In the fourth wave of LSWAY, a quantitative battery was administered to all participants (and their intimate partners and children) who could be relocated and consented (Betancourt, Thomson, et al., 2020), a 67% retention rate from the first wave. While these participants spanned 11 districts of Sierra Leone in wave four, the majority of study participants lived in Kono (42%), and thus, most qualitative research was conducted in Kono District, a diamond-mining area where many CAAFAG remained after the war to earn money.

3.1.2. Sampling procedures

Qualitative data were collected in 2017 and 2018 and included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Fifteen in-depth interviews with male former CAAGAG were conducted to explore participants' general experiences raising children after the war, as well as the war's impact on their experiences of fatherhood. CAAFAG fathers were purposively sampled for in-depth interviews based on their scores in the low or high quartiles of a locally-adapted parenting behaviors and values measure (Blattman & Annan, 2010) (See Table 2). Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with non-CAAFAG community members with similar demographics to participants in the longitudinal study, in order to explore parenting values and expectations of fathers in Sierra Leone more broadly (See Table 1).

3.1.3. Methods of data collection

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted in Krio with research assistants trained by the local partner, Caritas, and the program manager from the Research Program on Children and Adversity (RPCA), formerly based at Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Research assistants used an interview guide specific to the type of interview, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and translated into English.

3.1.4. Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained both verbally and in writing from all participants. A research assistant would read the entirety of the consent form to the participant and allow them to ask any follow-up questions. If they agreed to be interviewed, they would provide written consent via a

signature or a fingerprint. All research procedures were approved by both the Harvard Institutional Review Board and the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee.

3.2. Data analysis

Research assistants transcribed interviews in Krio and translated each transcript into English. Data were analyzed using methods guided by both Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) and Thematic Content Analysis (Anderson, 2007, pp. 1–4) approach in which a codebook was developed to organize emergent themes. First, we (the first two authors) used grounded theory "open coding" to inductively identify emerging patterns and themes, reflecting on the transcript content by writing memos and notes. Second, we began to draft a codebook to capture patterns and themes including both theory-driven and grounded-theory derived categories and code including definitions and examples, and inclusion and exclusion criteria for each code (Boyatzis, 1998). An iterative process was used to identify themes, draft a codebook, and pilot this codebook on a subset of transcripts. We repeated this process several times until we had a version of the codebook that we felt was inclusive and clear enough to establish inter-rater reliability between two coders. After a satisfactory inter-rater reliability was achieved (97% with minimum overlapping = 50%), we separately coded each of the remaining focus group discussions and key informant interviews. We met weekly throughout the coding process to attend to any codebook challenges and discuss memos regarding content of interviews and focus group discussions, while making small amendments to the codebook as necessary. After all transcripts were coded, we used axial coding to examine relationships between the themes in our codebook, and ultimately, compare our findings with existing theory and frameworks. All qualitative analysis utilized MAXQDA software (VERBI Software, 2021).

4. Findings

4.1. The meaning and importance of fatherhood

In FGD interviews, war-affected fathers described their general conceptions and perceived benefits of fatherhood, and provided examples of why they wanted to become fathers. Many fathers emphasized that raising children is not merely the job of one or two parents, but a community responsibility. They framed child-rearing as a collective process that involves extended family and community members in providing correction, guidance, and other appraisal support. One father said: "*Child raising is not one man's business. If children are going astray or this and that in the absence of the parent, you in the community must act as a sister or brother. If the child has done wrong make sure you don't hide it from the father or the mother. Tell them what the child is doing. If we make that correction earlier the child will grow up fine*" (father from focus group 2).

Fathers also discussed the ways in which a child's good or bad behavior is a reflection of their parents and the extended family. Setting a good example and raising a child to be well-behaved was considered important not only for the child's future but also for the father's own standing in the community, and all family members who might be connected to the child. One father said:

A child is born by one individual, but not one individual will bring up a child. So, I believe that anybody, any member of the family, including grandparents, uncles, and cousins, will be a part of bringing up a child. Everyone has the responsibility to bring up the child because if the child grows up with bad manners, it will negatively reflect on the family. For instance, if the child is caught stealing, they would say "Hey this child is from the (redacted) family" (father from focus group 8).

Fathers discussed how their roles were important for preparing children for their future, and the perceived benefits to them if their children were to find success in the future. Nearly all fathers conveyed a desire for

Table 1

War-affected fatherhood focus group participants (N = 9).

Focus Group #	District	Gender	Total No. Participants
1	East - Kenema	Mixed	10 (50% male, 50% female)
2	East - Kenema	Fathers	6 (100% male)
3	South - Bo	Mixed	8 (37.5% male, 62.5% female)
4	South - Bo	Fathers	7 (100% male)
5	North - Makeni	Mixed	7 (71% male, 29% female)
6	North - Makeni	Fathers	8 (100% male)
7	West - Western Area	Mixed	8 (62.5% male, 37.5% female)
8	West - Western Area	Fathers	10 (100% male)
9	North - Makeni	Mixed	8 (50% male, 50% female)

Table 2
CAAFAG fatherhood interviews sampled by low and high parenting quartiles (N = 15).

Quartile	Pseudonym	District	Marital Status	Age at Interview	No. of Children	Education	Household Income in the Last Month (Leones)	Ethnicity
Low	Araphan	Kono	Married	32	2 (biological)	Primary	20,000	Kono
Low	Hassan	Kono	Married	33	4 (biological)	Some Secondary	100,000	Yalunka
Low	Ibrahim	Kono	Never married/lived with partner	23	–	Tertiary	70,000	Temne
Low	Foday	Kono	Married	39	9 (biological and non-biological)	Higher Education	0	Kono
Low	Maliki	Kono	Married	31	3 (biological and non-biological)	Tertiary	0	Kissi
Low	Momodu	Kono	–	26	4 (biological and non-biological)	Some Secondary	13,000	Kissi
High	Sahr	Kono	Engaged	28	3 (non-biological)	Tertiary	–	Kono
High	Musa	Kono	Lived with a partner/now single	30	2 (biological)	Secondary	70,000	Kono
High	Saidu	Kono	–	–	–	–	–	–
High	Brima	Kono	Living with partner/now single	30	2 (biological)	Secondary	100,000	Kono
High	Alpha	Kono	Married	37	3 (biological and non-biological)	Tertiary	500,000	Kono
High	Jusu	Kono	Living with partner/not married	25	2 (biological)	No Education	–	Limba
High	Kaloko	Kono	Married	29	3 (biological and non-biological)	Some Secondary	–	Mende
High	Yamba	Makeni	Living with partner/not married	25	2 (biological)	Secondary	300,000	Temne
High	Momoh	Pujehan	Living with partner/not married	25	1 (biological)	Some Secondary	40,000	Mende

their children to take care of them in old age. This was discussed as a mutual exchange, in which fathers would take care of their children and invest in their education when they were younger, and then the roles would reverse and children would take care of their parents as they aged. Fathers specified they wanted their children to become engineers, doctors, nurses, community or political leaders, or just to “become somebody big.” The role of education and desires for future family assistance and recognition were prevalent. As Saidu stated: “*if I can help my child to become educated, he will not be strained like we were when we started. I believe that if the child is educated, he will be our helper in the future.*” Multiple times, fathers specified that they wanted their daughters to acquire education and to achieve career success. Momoh spoke about his daughter becoming president one day:

When she acquires education and acquires any of the powers, even the community will get the compliment. They will say ‘that president came from that town, and the small, old man that you are seeing is her father.’ She will be able to help the community and the family. So, that is the benefit if a girl child is educated.

Additionally, fathers spoke about their desires to raise their children in such a way that they developed strong character and integrity as adults, being people that were “good” and who helped others. Araphan described his prayers for his children:

Let [my children] become important people in the country that people will be looking up to, or getting help from, that is my prayer to God for them. Let them become somebody, an important person in the country, or even the world, where anywhere they are people will search for them, and it will be them that helps.

Finally, fathers described how they wanted better for their children than what they had experienced both as children and adults. Maliki said “*yes, I scrambled. But I want them to go smoothly without any scramble. I don't want them to struggle, I want the best for them.*”

4.2. Normative and ideal fatherhood

Data revealed a number of norms and ideals that fathers held about

raising children. Fathers provided instrumental, informational, emotional, and appraisal support to their biological and non-biological children (Langford et al., 1997). Instrumental support refers to tangible goods and materials and financial aid, informational support refers to advice, suggestions, and guidance, and emotional support refers to the provision of love and empathy (House, 1981; Langford et al., 1997). Love and care may be shown through informational and instructional actions, but emotional support specifically is that which is categorized by the desire to communicate one's feelings towards others and to ensure that they feel loved and comforted (Langford et al., 1997; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). Finally, appraisal support is that which provides supportive and constructive feedback (Karkouti, Wolsey, Bekele, & Toprak, 2021) with the goal of building and affirming competence (Sterrett et al., 2011).

4.2.1. Instrumental support

When fathers discussed instrumental support provided to their children, it was often accompanied by frustrations of not being able to provide for children's basic needs due to contextual barriers. Nonetheless, fathers described the way in which they provided for basic needs like security, food and clothes, and paid their children's school fees. One father, Maliki described how he protected his children, saying “*they have a right to security and protection. Normally when they go out, I say to them ‘whenever somebody disturbs you, you should call me. Do not fight for yourself, you have me.’*” He adds, “*they should feel secure. We should be able to defend them.*”

Other fathers described providing food for their children and helping to bathe children, with some fathers worrying that if they did not provide such basic needs, then children would disrespect them or look elsewhere for guidance and support. For example, as one father explained, “*if you do not feed and clothe them, some children will not even come home. They will be on the street for the rest of the day*” (Jusu). Another father, Sahr, became a father to his nieces and nephews after his brother, their biological father, passed away from Ebola. He communicated how he prioritized the children's basic needs:

Instead of me using that money (income gained from work) on girlfriends, leaving my family in hunger, I will not do that. Since I am not

married yet, I am getting all these (parenthood experiences) at the grassroot. All of these children that I am taking care of depend on me. If I say I will not help them, how would they feel? They will feel that I have abandoned them, or that I do not like them. That is why I am trying and I will not forget them.

Fathers generally described how they would use their earnings to pay children's school fees. Some fathers worried that their ability to pay fees would not be sustainable: *"There will come a time when I will not have the ability to support him (with school fees). It is one big problem"* (Kaloko).

4.2.2. Informational support

Fathers offered examples of informational support provided to children, such as encouraging children to study, giving guidance on health and sanitation-related behaviors, and pointing out right from wrong. Fathers recalled how religious practices or institutions also served to instruct their children, either directly or indirectly by giving fathers parenting advice. Finally, fathers also pointed to the role of elders in providing information regarding local traditions.

Fathers in FGDs provided insight as to ways in which fathers can provide informational support to children, ranging from *"things that are good and bad"* (father from focus group 9), *"book learning, education, and business is their own weapon"* (father from focus group 2), *"bad friends in the community"* (father from focus group 1), and *"how to wash their hands before they eat"* (father from focus group 2). Araphan also talked about teaching his children right from wrong:

You will see some women will drink until they fall on the road side. My daughter will say, "This is a mad woman." I will say, "She is not a mad woman. Here is what is not good – she drinks and smokes, and you will find out that she is not doing anything good for herself, because if she has ten thousand dollars, she will spend all of it on alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana." I told my daughter that it is not good and asked her, "If you are like that will you be happy?" She said no, and I said, "I hope you do not act like that."

Fathers emphasized their own role in setting a good example for their children to model what was right and wrong. One father in a focus group said, *"If you want your child to grow up well, he or she can learn from you and their mother. Make sure that you don't curse, fight, or use bad language in the presence of a child. If you do that, then the child will do the same thing in the street"* (father from focus group 5).

Araphan described how he would instruct his daughter who preferred to play to also spend time studying:

She is weak when it comes to studying, but I do pressure her ... she likes playing a lot, even when she is studying, but when I am with her there will be some fear in her. She will go, sit, and have time with her books. After I leave, then they will go and play.

Many fathers described taking their children to the mosque or to church for additional instruction:

We will come back home and ask the children about the sermons they preached in the church. I will sit and discuss with them, saying 'what did you really understand? I want you to tell me.' I will explain things to them nicely and we will do something from the Bible (father from focus group 4).

Araphan also provided an example of how he received parenting information from religious leaders:

I used to go to the mosque and learn the Quran, you will meet some Imams that preach well. They will tell you that children you are bringing up who are orphans do not have fathers or mothers. It is inside the Bible and the Quran that you have to care for them as your biological child ... So, I like Imams that advise people how to care for adopted children and children who have lost their parents. It makes me happy, even though I am a Christian. When I see my pastor in Bible class, I will ask him [how to care for my non-biological children].

Elders were described as key figures in guiding children. They were identified as important figures for teaching children the value of local traditions and culture, including local languages of their tribes. One father stated, *"If the elders in the community see the child is doing a wrong thing, they should intervene and correct them at once"* (father from focus group 7). Another father said, *"we need (elders) in the community that will help to protect and direct the children what to do so that at the end the future will be fine"* (father from focus group 1). One father described how his family lives far from their village, which makes it difficult for children to learn local languages and traditions from their grandparents and elders. He said, *"With the help of the grandparents speaking these native languages to their grandchildren at home ... they will start speaking it little by little"* (father from focus group 8).

Another father discussed this value of local traditions as a way to make sure children are brought up well, saying, *"I trained him up natively because nowadays this English principle that has dominated Sierra Leone is leading our children astray and it is making them forget about their culture"* (father from focus group 8).

4.2.3. Emotional support

Fathers discussed supporting their children emotionally through demonstrations of love and encouragement, spending time and playing with their children, and contributing to a positive household dynamic. Momodu discussed his interactions with his children in the home: *"everything works with just being patient. I encourage them, I talk to them nicely, and I coax them ... We are always very close."* In one FGD, another father similarly discussed his habits with his child:

I normally joke around with him and I teach him. Sometimes it may look like I am not teaching him, but I am. I teach him by having fun with him. From time to time, I take him to the cinema, we walk around together, and sometimes people think he is my younger brother because I encourage him at the lowest possible level in order that he has love for me and for any other person (father from focus group 8).

Finally, fathers described how a positive relationship between the mother and father, or peace in the home, provided a supportive environment for children. As Sahr stated: *"There is no proper care for the child when the father and mother are not in peace."* Some fathers defaulted to mothers for emotional support, specifically for daughters. In a focus group, one father explained that *"if a girl has started menstruating, only her mother can notice this, and if she has fallen in love with a guy, the mother will also be the first to know"* (father from focus group 4). Another father in the same focus group confirmed: *"There are certain things the father does not discuss with his children. It is only the mother (that discusses those things)."*

4.2.4. Appraisal support

Fathers gave specific examples as to how they provided appraisal support, specifically around advising and correcting their children on right and wrong through discipline and conversation. Fathers gave varied examples of disciplining their children, reflecting different perspectives on the role of discipline and correction. Many fathers, both in FGDs and in interviews, were opposed to corporal punishment and preferred to advise or verbally correct their children, reflecting a belief in affirming and corrective guidance in line with appraisal support. For example, fathers said *"beating is not a solution, I think the best way is to call the children politely and advise them"* (father from focus group 8) and *"if you shout at them, that will make (the children) become tormented. They will not know how to do things straight again"* (Ibrahim). Maliki described how his method of correcting his children was informed by the way he was raised: *"I was brought up (in a violent home), and normally when my uncle shouted, I would be scared. I promised myself that I would not raise my kids like that."* However, many other fathers disagreed; for example, Brima stated: *"at times, if you give them too much encouragement, they could go another way. That is when I get angry ... I will hit or beat them."*

Several fathers described how they adapted their parenting styles to

be different than what they had grown up with. Araphan described how he instructed his children to make different choices than he had made: *“It has been more than eight years since I have gone to a club. I talk to my children about all of the things that I have departed from. I say ‘I do not even want you to start them.’ So, I do advise them. Thank God that they regard me and they listen.”*

4.3. Ecological factors that impact fathering

Fathers discussed a number of ecological factors that impacted their lived experiences of fatherhood, including economic factors, such as their family's livelihood and wide-scale poverty, lack of time, and outside, Western influences on parenting practices. Referring to his family's situation, Saidu said:

While we were in Kono, it was different. Over there, life is a little bit easier and it is not costly, but here, everything is costly. You want a child to eat but it costs money. In Kono, I could just pass behind my house and cut off a bunch of bananas and sell it, boil it, so I can do that and survive together with my child and my woman. But here, there are no bananas – everything is money.

Speaking to larger scale economic challenges, Momodu said:

I am crying to the government for them to help us, because right now, after Ebola, it is rough for people in this community. There is no help. To get even the money that people used to receive ... you would have to strike hard before you can get it. We are crying to the government to help us, for them to help this community.

Fathers described spending time and playing with their children at home, though many also described how it was challenging to find adequate time and to be fully present because of the need to work long hours. In a focus group, fathers described how they *“only have time to play with them on the weekend”* and they *“do not have much time after work”* (father from focus group 8). Araphan attributed the quality time he spent with his children as a result of recent unemployment: *“I do spend time with them, because I do not have anywhere to go. I do not have work, there is no work.”* He remembered what it was like while he was working: *“we were working for fifteen days in a row and then getting one day off. I used to have time with my children on that day off, I would play and make fun with them.”*

Healthcare, food, water facilities, and educational facilities were all mentioned as important community factors that influence a father's ability to raise a child. Health facilities, and more specifically the costs of healthcare, came up a number of times. Momodu said, *“I take my children to the hospital for treatment when they get sick ... I have to spend money, which is difficult to come by.”*

Fathers described the ways in which the war changed fatherhood in the country, such as by impacting the ability of fathers to provide housing for their families and by indirectly influencing the amount of time that parents had with their children. As Kaloko said:

The war affected so many children. Most children are not living with their parents because one way or the other they lost their mothers or their fathers during the war. All the houses were burnt down so for them to even have a good place to sleep, they have to work harder just to build even if it is a single room so that they can live there. All these things happened because of the war so there is a very big link to the war.

Another father from focus group 5 spoke to the community changes that have happened since the war:

Before the war, parents themselves raised their children ... The role of the mother at that time was to prepare food and manage the home while the father disciplined and provided clothing and food for the kids. However, the way parents and caregivers raise their children has changed after the war. Now parents or caregivers no longer have time

to raise their children properly (due to competing livelihood responsibilities). For instance, most children now care for themselves and become street children.

The Ebola epidemic of 2014–2016 was another significant ecological event that had lasting effects on fatherhood in Sierra Leone. Children were not allowed to go to school, play with friends, or leave the house for nearly two years, and schools were closed for nine months (Smith, 2021). Momoh described how Ebola impacted parenting: *“Children should be together joking, playing, and eating together, but during Ebola, they had to stop all of that. Ebola affected child upbringing.”*

A few fathers expressed frustration that their behavior was feeling altered by outside influences, specifically, regarding the ways that they disciplined their children. One father stated that he felt embarrassed by *“the white people who came with ‘child rights.’ To beat a child is child abuse, they say. This thing is really embarrassing us”* (father from focus group 6).

Parents described how losing a caregiver, due to the war or the Ebola epidemic, has affected children. Kaloko spoke of his own experiences of having lost a caregiver, saying, *“If I had not lost my parents during the war, I might have been somebody today.”* Araphan mentioned that many of the children orphaned by the war and Ebola have resorted to dropping out of school to beg or work in the markets.

4.3.1. Navigating the tensions that arise

When discussing their experiences as fathers, many gave examples of tensions that arose between their values and beliefs about fatherhood, and their behaviors as parents, while describing how they navigated these tensions. Fathers described resolving quarrels that arose in the home between wives or children and parents, finding ways to support their family despite socio-economic challenges or a dearth of community resources, and supporting non-biological children who were orphaned because of the Ebola pandemic or sent away from their biological parents for other reasons.

Many fathers explained how they would “hustle” or “strive” in order to pay for school fees, food, or medical supplies for their children, resulting in less time spent with their children. Yamba stated *“unless people go out and hustle (work in the bush) to help their children survive, living in the community is difficult.”* Another father explained: *“I hustle for two or three days so that they can continue schooling”* (Momodu). Araphan clarified that when medical issues arose with his children, hustling was not enough, and it was necessary to borrow money for a month to pay for their medical fees. Foday decided to send his children to a school that was further away in a rural area because it had cheaper school fees, even though the school was *“poor in quality compared to the city.”*

Foday also described renting a cheaper house closer to work as his response to the tension between earning money for his family and spending time with his family.

“My family does not like when they wake up in the morning and I am already gone (at work). I want to go to bed together with my family and wake up with them ... I bring them everything that I have from working and my wife says ‘Even the little that you are bringing for us is enough if we are staying together. If all of us are together we are able to economize.’”

Because the Ebola epidemic and the war left many children without parents, it was not uncommon for families to raise non-biological children who had been orphaned. Many fathers emphasized the importance of treating non-biological children the same as they would treat biological children. Kaloko described how he treated children equally: *“There is no difference (between biological and non-biological children). I should not love (my biological daughter) more than my brother's child. I show them the same love and they also show me the same love. My brother's child calls me daddy, there is a good relationship between us.”*

Nearly all fathers provided examples of prioritizing and maintaining a positive family dynamic despite socio-economic challenges. Fathers described how external stressors, like lack of food or money, can cause

children to become irritated with their parents. One father from a focus group discussion described how he would use storytelling and joking to mediate this tension: “*When the mother and I have problems with children, I will start telling them comedic stories ... if the story amuses them to a point of laughing their heart out, I will know that the dispute is settled*” (father from focus group 3).

5. Discussion

Although much literature regarding fatherhood in sub-Saharan Africa tends to assume that fathers are focused on providing instrumental support over emotional and instructional support (Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Enria, 2016), the findings from this study emphasize that former CAAFAG and war-affected fathers in Sierra Leone are also committed to providing emotional support, encouragement, and a loving upbringing for their children. These findings further emphasize the fact that fathering behaviors, whether instrumental, emotional, instructional, or appraisal, are frequently dependent on situational and environmental contexts, and that fathers utilize a variety of supportive behaviors, rather than strictly adhering to a dichotomized idea of “traditional masculinity” versus a “nurturing masculinity” (Burchardt, 2018). These findings lend support to McLean’s (2020a) theory of post-conflict masculinities, which challenges stereotypical characterizations of African men and fathers, and suggests a shifting ideal of fatherhood that is more defined by emotional support. These findings also support recent literature coming out of South Africa (Sikweyiya, Nkosi, Langa, Operario, & Lurie, 2022) and Angola (Sprall & Abranches, 2022) that illustrates the existing tension when economic and environmental stressors prevent fathers from achieving their ideal versions of parenting.

We find that former CAAFAG and war-affected youth who have become fathers engage in loving and caring behaviors toward their children, and seek to have their children engage with other caring role models and elders in the community. These findings are aligned with other recent research that speaks to more intimate forms of care being provided by African fathers (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021; Mkhwanazi & Manderson, 2020). Some fathers still provided examples of engaging in harsh discipline practices, while others preferred to discipline their children in non-violent ways. The disparities in discipline practices could be explained by findings from Alleyne-Green et al.’s study, which found that CAAFAG parents victimization by violence during the war was associated with more nurturing behaviors, while parents who perpetrated violence during the war demonstrated lower levels of nurturing behaviors (2019).

However, we also found that Sierra Leonean fathers faced difficulties in navigating the tensions that arose between providing various types of care. Fathers identified the greatest tension between their parenting values and parenting practices within the realm of instrumental support. In other words, while fathers value practices in all four realms of support, the array of ecological stressors (such as high levels of poverty and lack of economic opportunities) influence the ways in which fathers can provide instrumental support to their children. Specifically, this study found that economic difficulties make fulfilling fatherhood ideals and expectations extremely difficult and may exacerbate psychological distress, which supports findings in other parts of Africa that have experienced similar economic hardship (Block, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021; Malinga, 2015; Sikweyiya et al., 2022). While CAAFAG and war-affected fathers provided examples of how war experiences shaped their ability to function as ideal fathers, including how abduction and war prevented their own fathers from modeling fatherhood, the tensions that they expressed relate specifically to the ways in which the war and Ebola epidemic have exacerbated *current* economic challenges, which were felt by fathers regardless of how they participated in or were affected by armed violence. Fathers described how financial stressors have limited their abilities to provide emotional, instrumental, and appraisal support to the extent they wish to. These qualitative findings confirm prior quantitative findings from LSWAY that daily stressors have a greater impact on

current wellbeing than experiences during the war itself (Newnham et al., 2015).

The civil war not only impacted the economic environment, but also ushered in international NGOs and language around the rights of the child, as reflected in our interviews (McLean, 2020a). Fathers identified tension between their own traditional parenting values and these values that they felt were imposed on them by outside influences. For example, fathers highly valued elders teaching their children local languages and traditional behavioral norms. In addition, fathers that harshly punished their children sometimes expressed their disappointment that Western influences were discouraging this practice. These findings align with a study undertaken with the same cohort of CAAFAG, which found that parents were practicing harsh punishment techniques such as beating children or withholding food. These parents felt that outside, Western influences were promoting a child rights movement that made it more difficult for them to discipline their children in ways that they thought were best (Zuilkowski et al., 2019). Corporal punishment in homes remains lawful in Sierra Leone, though the 2004 Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Act recommended its prohibition. However, a newly formed Children’s Commission is leading advocacy efforts to eliminate corporal punishment in homes (Lansford et al., 2017).

Fathers explained how religion, both Islam and Christianity, provided moral education on parenting. Islam and Christianity are both culturally salient in Sierra Leone, particularly after the civil war as religious groups provided emergency supplies for individuals and places of refuge (Conteh, 2011). Globally, religion plays a significant role in terms of moral education on parenting, and when religious entities are so prevalent and regarded, they can be harnessed for community interventions (Petro et al., 2018). For example, Puffer and colleagues have recently implemented a church-based intervention in rural Kenya which aims to strengthen family relationships, reduce HIV risk, and address mental health challenges (2016). However, religious doctrines can also uphold traditional views of masculinity, reifying patriarchal norms and conflicting with everyday realities (Schulz & Janson, 2016; Burchardt, 2018). While fathers in this study discuss the moral education that religious institutions provide, they do not specify how gender ideologies may be influenced by religious education or experiences.

This study fills an important gap by providing specific insight to the experiences of a little-studied population, CAAFAG, who now navigate adulthood and fatherhood. Many are navigating fatherhood after having been separated from their own caregivers at a young age, experiencing and perpetrating violence, and experiencing social rejection and tenuous reunification at the end of the war (Betancourt et al., 2008). They now navigate fatherhood in an environment that has experienced compounding stressors of conflict, epidemic, and poverty, which at times is made even more complex by the resulting stigma and discrimination that former CAAFAG and Ebola survivors faced (Calain & Poncin, 2015; Denov, 2010). Despite this challenging environment, former CAAFAG fathers are showing that they want to be supportive fathers, though this is sometimes difficult as a result of compounding stressors. For these fathers who are well-intentioned but under-resourced, interventions that provide material support could be particularly beneficial. It is also worth noting that experiences of fatherhood described by former CAAFAG were not noticeably different from other war-affected fathers who participated in focus group discussions.

The experiences of participants in this sample indicate that fathers are experiencing distress and frustration, and any mental health and psychosocial interventions for conflict-affected youth and families would likely have a greater effect if combined with economic opportunity and poverty-reduction strategies. Due to limited resources and weakened infrastructure in the ecological environment, it is even more critical to consider the benefits of educational settings and employment programs as sites for psychosocial interventions (Betancourt et al., 2021), and to design interventions across multiple levels of the ecosystem. Ongoing economic tension and recent crises like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are likely to place additional stress on fathers, making it even more

important to prioritize poverty-reduction programs and policies to support the well-being of fathers and their children. Recent innovations in sub-Saharan Africa include father-engaged family home visiting programs linked to cash for work and other social protection programs which hold great promise for promoting parent-child relationships in Sierra Leone as well (Betancourt, Jensen, et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

This study fills an important gap by illustrating the lived experiences of fatherhood among male former CAAFAG and other war-affected fathers in Sierra Leone, and the tensions that exist between ideal and lived versions of fatherhood. Fathers in our study describe their parenting experiences in a manner that does not align with stereotypical generalizations about African men; they also point to an overall changing landscape of fatherhood that encourages nurturing and other forms of non-material support. Despite the strengths of our study in its detailed exploration of the norms, values and expectations of fathers in post-conflict Sierra Leone, the research is not without limitations. In particular, the small sample size and qualitative nature of the study offer limited generalizability to the broader population of men, and especially CAAFAG, in Sierra Leone and elsewhere. Future quantitative studies are needed to explore the differences between CAAFAG and non-war-affected fathers, as well as differences arising from factors such as ethnicity, or duration of time spent in conflict or separated from family members. Nevertheless, our study raises important questions for future research, about how strengthening social protection systems and efforts to support fathers experiencing poverty may be instrumental for promoting health and well-being among conflict-affected families.

Funding

This study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH Project Number: 4R01HD073349-05).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

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