

Navigating the tension between fatherhood ideals and realities of a  
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(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 behaviors, and substance use (Block, 2016; Mehus et al., 2018).

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. Data Collection

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. Interview and Focus Group Discussions

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. Informed Consent

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 qualita-

their children to take care of them in old age. This was discussed as a







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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