

Navigating the tension between fatherhood ideals and realities of a post-con

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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, Pujehun, 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. Qualitative 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. Focus Group Discussions and Interviews

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





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: “*I use stories to tell them about the war, and I use jokes to make them laugh. I tell them that the war is over and that they should be happy. I tell them that the war is over and that they should be happy.*” (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 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).

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.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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