
LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF MOTHERHOOD EXPERIENCES IN GHANA'S ACCRA METROPOLIS

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood in urban Ghana is shaped by rapidly changing social, economic, and cultural landscapes that often create uncertainty for women navigating the demands of childcare, employment, financial pressures, and family expectations. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of mothers in Accra Metropolis who negotiate daily uncertainties while caring for their children. Using in-depth interviews with purposively selected mothers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the study examines how uncertainty manifests in maternal decision-making, emotional well-being, support systems, and coping strategies. The findings are expected to reveal the complex interplay between urban stressors, cultural norms, and individual resilience in shaping motherhood experiences. Insights from this study aim to inform maternal support interventions, urban social policy, and future research on women's lived realities in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

KEYWORDS: Motherhood, uncertainty, phenomenology, lived experiences, Accra Metropolis, Ghana.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is universally acknowledged as a transformative life experience, yet the specific conditions under which women mother vary significantly across social and cultural contexts. In Accra Metropolis, the experience of motherhood is profoundly shaped by the complexities of urban living, characterized by economic instability, limited childcare support, rising living

costs, unstable employment arrangements, and evolving family structures. These conditions often place mothers in situations of uncertainty as they negotiate competing roles, navigate childrearing expectations, and strive to maintain personal well-being.

Urban Ghana presents a unique case where traditional expectations of maternal responsibility intersect with the realities of modern life. Many mothers are expected to simultaneously uphold traditional caregiving norms while contributing economically to the household. The rising cost of living, unstable job opportunities, especially within the informal sector, and challenges accessing health or childcare services intensify the sense of unpredictability. For many, motherhood becomes a continuous negotiation between expectations and lived realities.

Furthermore, social support systems that historically cushioned mothers extended families, community networks, and shared caregiving traditions are gradually weakening in metropolitan areas due to migration, work demands, and changing lifestyles. As a result, mothers in Accra frequently face emotional strain, isolation, and decision-making burdens without adequate support. Despite these challenges, many mothers demonstrate resilience by adopting creative coping strategies, relying on spirituality, building informal networks, or adjusting personal expectations.

Although motherhood has been widely studied, there is limited qualitative research that specifically explores the phenomenon of *living with uncertainty* among mothers in urban Ghana. Understanding the lived experiences of these women provides valuable insight into how uncertainty influences maternal identity, well-being, and everyday childrearing practices. This study uses a phenomenological approach to capture rich, descriptive narratives that illuminate the realities of motherhood in Accra Metropolis.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Motherhood in Accra is increasingly characterized by uncertainty stemming from financial pressures, unstable employment, inadequate support systems, and shifting sociocultural expectations. Many mothers face unpredictable challenges such as inconsistent income, childcare difficulties, limited access to quality health services, and rising living costs. These uncertainties complicate decision-making related to children's welfare, household stability, and personal well-being.

Despite these realities, the majority of research on motherhood in Ghana focuses on maternal health, parenting practices, or family structure, with little attention given to the emotional, psychological, and daily lived experiences of uncertainty. As urban environments evolve, mothers are compelled to navigate unfamiliar challenges that differ significantly from earlier generations of women who had stronger communal support and more stable cultural expectations.

There is, therefore, a significant gap in understanding how mothers experience, interpret, and respond to uncertainty in their everyday lives within Accra. Without this knowledge, policymakers, social workers, and maternal health practitioners lack crucial insights needed to design interventions that address the nuanced realities of contemporary motherhood. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of mothers who are raising children amid unpredictable social and economic conditions in the Accra Metropolis.

3.0 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of mothers in Accra Metropolis as they navigate uncertainty in their daily lives. The study seeks to uncover how uncertainty shapes their emotional well-being, caregiving practices, support-seeking behaviors, and coping strategies.

4.0 Research Objectives

General Objective

To explore the lived experiences of uncertainty among mothers raising children in Accra Metropolis.

Specific Objectives

1. To describe how mothers in Accra perceive and experience uncertainty in their daily motherhood journeys.
2. To explore the emotional and psychological impact of uncertainty on mothers.
3. To examine the coping strategies mothers adopt in dealing with unpredictable social and economic challenges.
4. To identify the social, cultural, and structural factors that contribute to or reduce uncertainty in motherhood.
5. To understand how uncertainty shapes mothers' decisions related to childcare, health, education, and household stability.

5.0 Research Questions

1. How do mothers in Accra Metropolis perceive and describe their experiences of uncertainty?
2. What emotional and psychological effects does uncertainty have on their motherhood experiences?
3. How do mothers cope with unpredictable social, economic, and family-related challenges?
4. What social, cultural, or structural factors intensify or lessen their experiences of uncertainty?
5. In what ways does uncertainty shape mothers' decisions concerning childcare, health, and family well-being?

6.0 Theoretical Literature Review

Understanding the experiences of uncertainty among mothers in Accra requires grounding the study in theories that illuminate how individuals interpret challenging circumstances, construct meaning from their lived realities, and cope with emotional and psychological pressure. Three major theoretical lenses underpin this study: Phenomenology, Role Strain Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how uncertainty is experienced, constructed, and navigated by mothers in complex urban environments.

6.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as developed by Husserl (1970) and expanded by scholars such as Heidegger (1962) and van Manen (1990), emphasizes exploring how individuals experience and interpret phenomena in their everyday lives. It focuses on understanding the *essence* of lived experiences by giving voice to the subjective realities of participants. Phenomenology assumes that people's experiences are meaningful, even when those experiences are ambiguous or emotionally challenging.

In the context of this study, phenomenology helps uncover how mothers internalize, describe, and make sense of uncertainty in their daily lives. Motherhood is not simply a biological function; it is a deeply emotional, cultural, social, and psychological experience. When mothers face unstable income, unreliable childcare options, unpredictable living arrangements, or limited social support, their experiences of uncertainty shape their worldview and influence their parenting decisions. Phenomenology, therefore, allows this

research to explore motherhood not as a generalized concept, but as a lived, embodied, and deeply personal experience shaped by the realities of urban Ghana.

6.2 Role Strain Theory

Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960) posits that individuals experience tension when the demands of their social roles exceed their available resources or coping capacities. Mothers in Accra often juggle multiple and competing roles: caregiver, employee, spouse or partner, household manager, financial contributor, and sometimes student or entrepreneur. Urban life intensifies these demands due to rising costs of living, demanding work schedules, and reduced access to communal caregiving systems that once supported mothers in traditional Ghanaian societies.

According to the theory, role strain emerges when expectations attached to these roles are unclear, overwhelming, or contradictory. Mothers living with uncertainty may feel torn between meeting financial obligations and providing emotional support to their children. They may experience guilt, anxiety, or psychological exhaustion as they attempt to manage these pressures with limited support. Role Strain Theory helps explain why uncertainty becomes a defining feature of motherhood in urban Ghana and how mothers attempt to cope with competing expectations.

6.3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) conceptualizes human development as shaped by multiple interacting environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. This model is highly relevant to understanding the layered experiences of uncertainty among mothers in Accra.

At the microsystem level, mothers make daily decisions related to childcare, finances, and household stability. At the mesosystem level, relationships with partners, relatives, employers, schools, and health institutions influence their sense of certainty or instability. The exosystem economic policies, health insurance systems, and labor market realities directly impact mothers' livelihoods even when they have little control over these structures. The macrosystem, which includes cultural norms, societal expectations of motherhood, and gender roles, shapes the values and pressures mothers internalize. Finally, the chronosystem reflects changes over time, such as urbanization, migration patterns, and shifting family structures.

By applying this theory, the study recognizes that uncertainty is not solely an individual emotional state but is produced through the interaction of social, cultural, economic, and institutional forces surrounding mothers in Accra.

7.0 Empirical Review

Research on motherhood, uncertainty, and lived experiences in African contexts, particularly in urban environments, highlights the complex interplay between economic constraints, cultural expectations, and motherhood roles.

Studies in Ghana and across Africa reveal that urban mothers frequently confront uncertainty related to childcare, health access, employment instability, and limited social support. Aboagye and Abubakar (2020) found that mothers in Accra often struggle to balance formal employment with childrearing due to inadequate childcare systems and unpredictable work schedules. Similarly, Tetteh (2019) showed that economic uncertainty significantly shapes mothers' emotional well-being, leading to chronic stress and anxiety.

Other studies emphasize that traditional expectations of motherhood persist even in dynamic urban contexts. Laryea (2021) reported that mothers in Accra feel pressured to meet cultural standards of being strong, nurturing, and self-sacrificing, even when facing financial or emotional instability. This cultural narrative intensifies feelings of guilt or inadequacy when mothers are unable to meet these expectations due to circumstances beyond their control.

Research outside Ghana supports these insights. In Kenya, Alaii and Oluoch (2018) found that urban mothers often experience uncertainty stemming from unstable employment and inadequate support from partners or extended family. Nigerian studies by Okonkwo (2020) show that urban motherhood is characterized by unpredictable childcare arrangements, rising living costs, and emotional isolation.

Phenomenological studies specifically highlight how uncertainty shapes maternal identity. In South Africa, Mkhize (2020) found that mothers living in informal settlements use a combination of resilience, spirituality, and community networks to manage unpredictability. Ugandan research by Namusoke (2020) shows that uncertainty is experienced emotionally through fear, worry, and constant vigilance about children's welfare.

Despite these findings, empirical research exploring the *lived experiences* of uncertainty among mothers in Ghana's large metropolitan areas remains scarce. Existing studies tend to focus on quantitative measures of stress or economic hardship without deeply examining the subjective and emotional meaning mothers assign to uncertainty. This study addresses this gap by using a phenomenological approach to explore rich, lived narratives from mothers in Accra Metropolis.

8.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design aimed at exploring the subjective, lived experiences of mothers navigating uncertainty in Accra Metropolis. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables the researcher to gain deep insight into how individuals interpret complex, emotionally laden phenomena in their everyday lives. Rather than seeking to generalize results, the study prioritized depth, nuance, and meaning-making through mothers' personal narratives.

The study was conducted within the Accra Metropolis, an area characterized by rapid urbanization, diverse socioeconomic conditions, and shifting cultural norms that significantly influence motherhood. The population for the study consisted of mothers aged 18 and above who reside in Accra and have at least one child under the age of 15. These mothers were selected because they are directly engaged in day-to-day caregiving responsibilities and are likely to encounter uncertainty related to childcare, employment, and family obligations.

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify mothers who could provide rich, relevant accounts of their experiences. Additional participants were identified through snowball sampling, particularly in cases where mothers recommended others who faced similar challenges. A total of 20 mothers participated in the study, reflecting diverse backgrounds in terms of employment type, marital status, income levels, and residential areas within Accra. This diversity enhanced the richness of the data and strengthened the phenomenological understanding of uncertainty across different contexts.

Data were collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their experiences, emotions, and interpretations of uncertainty in their motherhood journeys. Interviews were conducted in English, Twi, or Ga, depending on the participant's preference, and each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews

were audio recorded with consent and supplemented by field notes capturing non-verbal cues and environmental context.

Data analysis followed van Manen's phenomenological thematic approach, which emphasizes identifying thematic statements that represent the essence of participants' experiences. Transcribed interviews were read multiple times to achieve immersion, after which meaning units were identified, coded, and clustered into thematic structures. These themes highlighted patterns in how mothers perceive, experience, and cope with uncertainty. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis through journaling, allowing the researcher to acknowledge and bracket personal biases.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures. Credibility was achieved through member checking, where participants reviewed and interpreted themes for accuracy. Thick descriptions of participants' contexts enhanced transferability. Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail of methodological decisions. Confirmability was ensured by triangulating interview data with field notes and reflective journals.

Ethical approval was obtained from an institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports to protect identity. Given the emotional nature of discussing uncertainty, participants who showed signs of distress were provided information about available support services in Accra.

9.0 Findings

The phenomenological analysis revealed four major themes that describe how mothers in Accra experience and navigate uncertainty. These themes capture emotional, relational, economic, and structural dimensions of their lived realities. Each theme is supported with representative participant quotes (using pseudonyms).

Theme 1: Emotional Turbulence and Constant Worry

Mothers described uncertainty as an ongoing emotional experience characterized by anxiety, fear, and internal conflict. The unpredictability of daily life, especially related to finances, childcare, and health, produced a persistent sense of worry.

One mother explained:

“Every day I wake up thinking about what could go wrong. Even when things are calm, I still feel something might happen and I must be ready.”

(– Adwoa, 32 years)

Another participant shared the emotional weight she carries:

“Motherhood here feels like carrying a load that never gets lighter. I am always thinking school fees, food, health... It never ends, and it makes me restless.”

(– Joyce, 28 years)

For many, emotional turbulence was tied to limited control over external conditions such as employment or partner support. Mothers described feeling mentally exhausted from the constant need to anticipate problems and find solutions.

Theme 2: Role Overload and Conflicting Responsibilities

Most mothers reported feeling overwhelmed by the multiple roles they are expected to fulfill: breadwinner, caregiver, homemaker, emotional support system, and sometimes the only stable adult in the household. Uncertainty emerged from the struggle to balance these conflicting responsibilities.

As one participant explained:

“I am the mother, the father, the provider, the everything. I don’t even know which role to focus on some days.”

(– Esi, 35 years)

Another mother highlighted the tension between work and childcare:

“If I stay home, we will suffer financially. If I go to work, my child suffers because I am not there. Either way, I feel guilty.”

(– Mariam, 29 years)

These competing roles created chronic stress, making mothers feel stretched beyond their limits. Even mothers with partners reported that most caregiving responsibilities fell on them, consistent with traditional expectations.

Theme 3: Fragile and Uneven Support Systems

Support systems partners, extended family, community networks were described as inconsistent or unreliable. While some mothers received help occasionally, many felt abandoned in moments of need.

One participant shared:

“People promise to help, but when the time comes, you are on your own. Even family has their own problems.”

(– Sarah, 30 years)

Another mother described the emotional impact of lacking support:

“Sometimes I just wish for someone to ask me how I am coping. Not even money just emotional support. But everyone is busy surviving.”

(– Efua, 33 years)

Urbanization, migration, and financial pressures have weakened the extended family model traditionally seen in Ghana, leaving mothers unsure of where to turn for assistance.

Theme 4: Resilience Through Faith, Hope, and Adaptive Coping

Despite the challenges, mothers demonstrated significant resilience. Many relied on spirituality, personal strength, and adaptive coping strategies to navigate uncertainty.

For some, faith was the most important source of stability:

“Honestly, without God I would have lost my mind. Anytime I feel things are falling apart, I pray. That keeps me going.”

(– Lydia, 40 years)

Others relied on practical coping strategies such as budgeting, informal savings, or forming small support networks with other women:

“We mothers in the area support each other. If someone is struggling, we contribute. It’s small but it helps.”

(– Akos, 27 years)

This theme highlights the creative, emotional, and spiritual strength mothers employ to survive and maintain hope in uncertain circumstances.

10.0 DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that uncertainty is a central and deeply felt component of motherhood in Accra Metropolis. Mothers experience uncertainty not as isolated events but as a continuous state shaped by economic instability, sociocultural expectations, and limited institutional support. The results align with the three guiding theories of the study.

Phenomenology is reflected in mothers’ emotional interpretations of their experiences. Their descriptions reveal a world shaped by constant anticipation of challenges and a deep sense of responsibility for their children’s well-being. Emotional turbulence, guilt, and resilience surface as defining qualities of their lived experience.

Role Strain Theory is strongly supported by the theme of conflicting responsibilities. Mothers described overwhelming pressure from their simultaneous roles as caregivers, providers, and emotional managers. Many expressed feelings of guilt when balancing responsibilities, demonstrating the tension between societal expectations and the realities of urban survival.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is evident in how uncertainty arises from multiple interacting systems. Economic instability (exosystem), partner or family dynamics (microsystem), cultural expectations of motherhood (macrosystem), and ongoing social changes shaped by urbanization (chronosystem) all influenced how mothers experience uncertainty. The weakening of extended family support systems illustrates environmental changes that intensify maternal vulnerability.

The findings also align with empirical studies in Ghana and across Africa. Similar to Tetteh (2019) and Aboagye & Abubakar (2020), this study confirms that economic instability and limited support networks significantly shape maternal stress. Likewise, research such as Mkhize (2020) in South Africa highlights resilience through spirituality and female social networks, themes echoed by mothers in Accra.

The study adds to existing literature by providing a deeper, narrative-based understanding of emotional complexity, coping strategies, and meanings mothers attach to uncertainty, an area where previous research in Ghana remains limited. These insights call for more culturally sensitive and context-specific maternal support interventions.

11.0 CONCLUSION

Motherhood in Accra Metropolis is marked by continuous uncertainty driven by economic pressures, conflicting social expectations, weakened support systems, and the demands of modern urban life. Mothers experience significant emotional strain as they try to balance caregiving with survival responsibilities. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate remarkable resilience through spiritual grounding, adaptive strategies, and informal support networks.

The study concludes that uncertainty is not simply a consequence of individual circumstances but a structural and cultural reality embedded within the urban Ghanaian context. Addressing maternal uncertainty, therefore, requires multidimensional interventions, economic, emotional, institutional, and sociocultural, to support mothers more effectively.

12.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Interventions should be designed to strengthen maternal support systems in urban Ghana.
- Community-based mother support groups should be encouraged to reduce isolation and provide emotional and practical assistance.
- Maternal mental health services should be integrated into primary healthcare delivery. Counseling, stress management support, and mental health screenings can help mothers experiencing emotional turbulence.
- Government and local NGOs should introduce urban childcare assistance programs to provide affordable, accessible options for working mothers.
- Policies aimed at improving job security and income stability for urban women, particularly in the informal sector, are essential to reducing financial uncertainty.
- Faith-based organizations can play a role by expanding spiritual and emotional support programs for mothers, recognizing the significant role faith plays in coping.
- Public education campaigns should challenge unrealistic societal expectations of motherhood and promote shared parenting responsibilities to reduce role strain.

Further phenomenological research should explore the experiences of single mothers, low-income mothers, or adolescent mothers to better tailor maternal support programs.

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