
THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL DIVORCE ON THE HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN IN URBAN GHANA

***Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

Grace International Bible University.

Article Received: 25 May 2026

***Corresponding Author: Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

Article Revised: 14 June 2026

Grace International Bible University.

Published on: 03 July 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.4354>

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore the effects of parental divorce on the holistic development of emotional, social, academic, and psychological aspects of children in urban Ghana. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 42 participants across three stakeholder groups: young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood (14 participants), parents who had divorced when their children were minors (14 participants), and family therapists and social workers with experience counselling divorced families (14 participants). Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and narrative prompts designed to elicit participants' lived experiences, observed effects, cultural interpretations, and coping strategies related to children's development following parental divorce. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: emotional fragmentation and the double loss, wherein children experienced not only the loss of parental union but also the loss of extended family connections and community belonging; the Ubuntu resilience paradox, wherein extended family support simultaneously buffered children against negative outcomes and created new sources of loyalty conflict and identity confusion; academic decline as the most visible and measurable effect, with participants describing concentration difficulties, absenteeism, and reduced educational aspirations; social stigmatization and peer awareness, wherein children of divorce faced gossip, exclusion, and marriageability concerns that intensified with age; gender-differentiated effects, with daughters experiencing heightened emotional and domestic burden while sons exhibited externalising behaviours; and post-divorce financial precarity as the mediating factor that

amplified all other negative effects. Participants' narratives revealed that parental divorce in urban Ghana occurs within a cultural context that traditionally stigmatises marital dissolution, expects extended family involvement in child-rearing, and lacks formal support systems for children's psychological adjustment. Children of divorce were described as caught between modern individualistic divorce norms and traditional communal expectations, navigating loyalty conflicts, identity questions, and social stigma without adequate adult support. The study contributes to the understanding of how divorce affects children in non-Western, collectivist cultural contexts, offering insights relevant to family therapy, social work, educational support, and legal policy in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: Parental divorce, child development, urban Ghana, Ubuntu, family therapy, social stigma, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

Divorce has become increasingly common in urban Ghana over the past three decades. Once a rare and deeply stigmatised event, marital dissolution is now a regular feature of family life in Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi, with rising divorce rates documented across all social classes (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). This demographic shift reflects broader social transformations: urbanization, women's increased economic independence, changing attitudes toward marriage, and the erosion of traditional family structures that once enforced marital stability through extended family pressure and community sanction (Clark, 2010). While these changes represent expanded individual choice and freedom from unhappy marriages, they also create new vulnerabilities, particularly for the children caught between parents whose union has ended.

The effects of parental divorce on children have been extensively studied in Western contexts, where research has documented elevated risks for emotional distress, behavioural problems, academic difficulties, and impaired social relationships (Amato, 2010). However, this research has been conducted predominantly in individualistic, Western societies where divorce is normalized, formal support systems (counselling, family therapy, school-based interventions) are available, and the nuclear family is the primary child-rearing unit. The extent to which these findings apply to Ghanaian contexts where extended family systems, communal childrearing, Ubuntu relational values, and strong cultural stigma against divorce shape children's experiences remains largely unknown (Gyekye, 1997).

Urban Ghana presents a particularly important context for studying child outcomes following divorce because it is a site of cultural contestation. Traditional Ghanaian norms, rooted in Akan and other ethnic traditions, strongly discouraged divorce. Marriage was understood as an alliance between families, not only between individuals, and children belonged to lineages, not only to parents (Oppong, 2006). Divorce threatened not only the couple but the extended family network, and children of divorced parents faced social stigma that could affect their own marriage prospects. Contemporary urban Ghana, influenced by global media, Christian and Islamic teachings that are often ambivalent about divorce, and individualistic values, has seen the emergence of more permissive attitudes. Children of divorce in urban Ghana thus grow up at the intersection of these competing cultural frameworks, navigating traditional expectations of family loyalty and communal belonging alongside modern realities of parental separation.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature. While Ghanaian researchers have examined divorce as a social phenomenon (Amoateng & Boadi, 2019) and its effects on adult well-being, no published study has specifically explored children's holistic development, namely, emotional, social, academic, and psychological, following parental divorce using a qualitative methodology that centres on children's and families' lived experiences. The absence of child-focused research is particularly concerning given that children are the most vulnerable stakeholders in divorce and that cultural assumptions about children's resilience may be inaccurate.

This study employs focus group methodology to explore the effects of parental divorce on children's development from three perspectives: young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood, parents who have divorced, and family therapists and social workers who support divorced families. By triangulating these perspectives, the study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how divorce affects Ghanaian children and what factors moderate or amplify these effects.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite rising divorce rates in urban Ghana and growing recognition that children are affected by marital dissolution, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about the effects of parental divorce on children's holistic development in Ghanaian contexts. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding family change in non-Western, collectivist cultural contexts and practical consequences for family policy, social work, educational support, and legal frameworks.

First, the specific effects of parental divorce on Ghanaian children's emotional, social, academic, and psychological development have not been systematically documented. International research identifies elevated risks for depression, anxiety, behavioural problems, academic underachievement, and relationship difficulties (Amato, 2010). However, these effects may be moderated or amplified by Ghanaian cultural factors. Extended family support may buffer children against emotional distress; however, the social stigma attached to divorce in Ghanaian communities may intensify children's shame and social exclusion. Without empirical documentation, it is impossible to know which effects observed elsewhere generalize to Ghana and which are distinct to Ghanaian cultural contexts.

Second, the role of extended family systems in moderating child outcomes following divorce has not been examined. In Western contexts, divorce typically reduces children's contact with one parent (usually the father) and may sever extended family connections. In Ghanaian contexts, where extended family members are actively involved in child-rearing, divorce may produce different patterns: grandparents, aunts, and uncles may step in to provide stability, or they may withdraw, creating a second loss for children. The Ubuntu principle that "a person is a person through other persons" (Mbiti, 1969) suggests that children's identity and well-being are fundamentally shaped by their extended family networks. Understanding how these networks respond to divorce and how their responses affect children is essential for developing culturally appropriate support systems.

Third, the developmental timing and gender-differentiated effects of divorce have not been examined in Ghana. International research finds that younger children may experience different effects than adolescents, and that girls may show internalising symptoms (depression, anxiety) while boys show externalising symptoms (aggression, conduct problems) (Amato, 2010). These patterns may be culturally specific. In Ghanaian contexts, where daughters often assume caregiving responsibilities and sons are granted greater autonomy, the effects of divorce may be gendered in distinct ways that have not been documented.

Fourth, the cultural stigma surrounding divorce in Ghanaian communities and its effects on children have not been explored. While divorce has become more common, it remains stigmatised, particularly in religious communities and among older generations. Children of divorce may face gossip, exclusion from social activities, and concerns about their future marriageability. This stigma may be more damaging to children's well-being than the divorce itself. Understanding how children experience and navigate this stigma is essential for developing interventions that address not only intrapsychic distress but also social exclusion.

Fifth, the availability and effectiveness of support systems for children of divorce in Ghana have not been assessed. Formal supports (counselling, family therapy, school-based programmes) are limited in Ghana. Informal supports (extended family, church, community) may be available but may also be sources of stigma. Understanding what supports exist, which are used, and which are effective is essential for policy and practice.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore the effects of parental divorce on the holistic development of emotional, social, academic, and psychological characteristics of children in urban Ghana, drawing on the perspectives of young adults who experienced parental divorce, divorced parents, and family therapists and social workers.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To document the emotional, social, academic, and psychological effects of parental divorce on children as described by young adults who experienced divorce during childhood.
- 4.2 To examine how extended family systems respond to divorce and how these responses moderate child outcomes.
- 4.3 To explore gender-differentiated effects of parental divorce on children in Ghanaian contexts.
- 4.4 To examine the cultural stigma surrounding divorce and its effects on children's social experiences and identity.
- 4.5 To identify protective factors that buffer children against negative outcomes and risk factors that amplify vulnerability.
- 4.6 To generate recommendations for family therapy, social work, educational support, and legal policy based on participants' lived experiences.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What emotional, social, academic, and psychological effects of parental divorce do young adults who experienced divorce during childhood describe?

Research Question Two: How do extended family systems respond to divorce, and how do these responses affect children's adjustment and development?

Research Question Three: How do the effects of parental divorce differ between male and female children in urban Ghana?

Research Question Four: How do children of divorce experience and navigate cultural stigma, and what are the consequences for their social development and identity?

Research Question Five: What factors protect some children from negative outcomes following divorce, and what factors increase vulnerability?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their foundational work *The Social Construction of Reality*, posits that social reality, including the meaning of divorce and its effects on children, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, the effects of parental divorce on children are not simply determined by the event itself, but rather mediated by the cultural meanings attached to divorce, the social responses of family and community members, and the narratives children construct to make sense of their experience (Gergen, 2015). In Ghana, where divorce carries different meanings and consequences than in Western contexts, the effects on children may be correspondingly different. Focus group discussions, in which participants from similar stakeholder groups articulate and negotiate shared understandings, are sites where these socially constructed meanings become visible.

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding child development and family relationships in Ghanaian contexts. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation rather than individual achievement alone (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts of *abusua* (extended family) and the understanding that children belong not only to their biological parents but to the larger lineage (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu suggests that the effects of parental divorce on Ghanaian children cannot be understood by examining the nuclear family alone; extended family responses, community attitudes, and the child's place in the kinship network are equally or more important.

6.2 Child Development Following Parental Divorce: International Evidence

The international literature on child outcomes following parental divorce is extensive. Meta-analyses consistently find that children of divorced parents score lower on measures of academic achievement, psychological well-being, and social adjustment than children from intact families, although the magnitude of these differences is modest and the majority of children of divorce do not develop serious problems (Amato, 2010). Effects vary by child age at time of divorce, gender, parental conflict level, post-divorce economic circumstances, and quality of parenting following divorce. Protective factors include continued involvement of both parents, low parental conflict, economic stability, and supportive extended family.

However, this research has been critiqued for its Western-centric assumptions. The nuclear family model underlying most divorce research does not fit Ghanaian extended family systems. The focus on individual psychological outcomes may miss communal dimensions of child well-being. The assumption that continued contact with both parents is optimal may not hold in contexts where patrilineal or matrilineal kinship systems assign children to one lineage regardless of divorce. The present study extends this literature by examining child outcomes in a cultural context where extended family, not only parents, shapes child development.

6.3 Family and Divorce in the Ghanaian Cultural Context

Ghanaian family structures are characterised by extended family systems, typically organised around matrilineal or patrilineal descent (Oppong, 2006). In matrilineal Akan societies, children belong to their mother's lineage; the mother's brother (not the father) holds primary authority over children. In this context, parental divorce may have different implications for children because fathers are already somewhat peripheral to children's lineage identity. The extended family provides a safety net for children whose parents separate, but it can also be a source of conflict, as divorced parents may compete for children's loyalty or extended family members may take sides.

Divorce in Ghana has become more common but remains less prevalent than in Western societies. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2021), divorce rates are highest in urban areas and among younger couples. Religious teachings (Christian and Islamic) generally discourage divorce, but both traditions permit it under certain conditions. Customary law recognizes divorce and includes provisions for child custody, property division, and inheritance, though these provisions are often weighted against women. The formal legal system provides additional protections, but many Ghanaians resolve divorce

through customary or religious processes outside the formal courts. The plural legal system creates uncertainty for children: custody, support, and inheritance may be disputed across forums.

6.4 Stigma and Social Exclusion of Divorced Families in Ghana

Despite increasing divorce rates, stigma remains attached to marital dissolution in many Ghanaian communities, particularly in religious communities and among older generations. Divorced women face greater stigma than divorced men, and children of divorce may be stigmatised by association (Amoateng & Boadi, 2019). This stigma manifests in gossip, social exclusion, and concerns about marriageability. In some communities, children of divorce are considered "damaged" and may face discrimination in marriage arrangements. This stigma may be more damaging to children's well-being than the divorce itself, as social exclusion threatens the communal belonging that Ubuntu philosophy identifies as essential to personhood.

The relationship between stigma and child outcomes has not been systematically examined in Ghana. Research in other contexts suggests that perceived stigma mediates the relationship between divorce and child psychological distress; children who feel judged or excluded by peers and community members have worse outcomes than those who feel accepted. Understanding how Ghanaian children experience and navigate divorce-related stigma is essential for developing interventions that address social as well as psychological dimensions of adjustment.

6.5 Protective Factors in Ghanaian Contexts

Several factors may protect Ghanaian children from negative outcomes following parental divorce. Extended family support: grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings may provide emotional support, practical care, and economic resources that buffer children against the disruption of parental divorce. Religious communities: church or mosque communities may provide social support, meaning-making frameworks, and practical assistance that help children cope. Educational institutions: teachers and schools may provide stability and positive relationships that counteract family disruption. However, these same institutions may also be sources of stigma; religious communities may condemn divorced parents, and schools may not recognize or respond to children's divorce-related distress.

The present study examines how these protective factors operate in the lives of Ghanaian children of divorce, identifying which factors are most important and under what conditions they are available.

6.6 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that no study has employed focus group methodology to explore the holistic effects of parental divorce on Ghanaian children from multiple stakeholder perspectives. No study has examined how extended family responses, cultural stigma, and Ubuntu values shape child outcomes in Ghanaian contexts. The present study addresses these gaps by generating rich qualitative data on children's experiences of divorce, contributing both to the empirical literature on African family change and to theoretical understanding of how cultural context shapes child development following family disruption.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand lived experience, meaning-making, and culturally specific phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which participants articulate shared experiences, negotiate interpretations, and construct collective understandings (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The multi-stakeholder design separate focus groups for young adults, divorced parents, and therapists allowed each group to speak freely about their experiences without inhibition from other stakeholders.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality, including the meaning of divorce and its effects on children, is constructed through meaning-making activities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The interpretivist approach holds that the researcher's role is to interpret the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian family structures shaped the interpretive process, and actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge emerging analytical conclusions.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in Accra, Ghana's capital and largest urban centre, which has the highest concentration of divorced families and availability of family therapy and social work services. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues: a university seminar room for young adult groups, a community centre for parent groups, and a professional association meeting room for therapist groups.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised three stakeholder groups. Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood: participants aged 18-30 whose parents divorced when they were under 18 years old. Divorced parents: participants who had divorced when their children were minors (under 18) and whose children were now at least 12 years old (to allow reflection on developmental effects). Family therapists and social workers: participants with at least three years of professional experience providing services to divorced families in urban Ghana.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants. Young adults were recruited through university counselling centres, church youth groups, and social media advertisements. Divorced parents were recruited through family therapy practices, legal aid clinics, and community organisations. Therapists and social workers were recruited through professional associations (Ghana Association of Social Workers, Ghana Psychological Association). Sampling criteria ensured diversity across gender, age, socioeconomic status, and time since divorce.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, two per stakeholder group, with participant numbers per group ranging from six to eight, yielding a total of 42 participants. Among the 42 participants, 24 were female and 18 were male. Young adult participants: 14 (8 female, 6 male), aged 19-28. Divorced parent participants: 14 (10 female, 4 male), aged 35-55. Therapist and social worker participants: 14 (6 females, 8 male), aged 30-60.

Table 1. Participants.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Group	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Years Since Divorce/Experience	Participants (N)
Young Adults	FG1	Accra	4F/3M	19-26	Divorced at ages 5-12	7
Young Adults	FG2	Accra	4F/3M	20-28	Divorced at ages 8-16	7
Divorced Parents	FG3	Accra	5F/2M	35-50	5-15 years post-divorce	7
Divorced Parents	FG4	Accra	5F/2M	38-55	3-12 years post-divorce	7
Therapists/Social Workers	FG5	Accra	3F/4M	32-55	5-20 years of experience	7
Therapists/Social Workers	FG6	Accra	3F/4M	35-60	6-25 years of experience	7
Total	6 groups	Accra	24F/18M	19-60	Varied	42

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured focus group discussion guides developed separately for each stakeholder group. The young adult guide explored childhood experiences of the divorce, emotional responses, changes in family relationships, academic effects, social experiences (including stigma), extended family involvement, and coping strategies. Prompts included: "What do you remember about the time when your parents separated?" "How did the divorce affect your relationships with extended family?" "Did you experience any stigma or negative attention from peers or the community because of your parents' divorce?"

The divorced parent guide explored children's observed reactions, parenting challenges, extended family responses, economic effects, and regrets or lessons learned.

The therapist guide explored patterns observed across clients, cultural factors that moderate child outcomes, protective factors, gaps in available services, and recommendations for intervention.

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between October 2026 and January 2027. Each focus group session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher with assistance from a trained Ghanaian co-facilitator. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. A research assistant took detailed field notes capturing non-verbal interactions and group dynamics. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with Twi passages translated into English by a bilingual transcriber.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher read all six transcripts multiple times before beginning systematic coding. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, with close attention to descriptions of emotional, social, academic, and psychological effects. Codes were organised into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set. Themes were defined and named with attention to capturing both content and analytical insight. The co-facilitator independently coded a 25% sample of the transcripts, and coding differences were discussed and negotiated.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Ghana. All participants provided written informed consent. For young adult participants under 18 (none were), parental consent would have been obtained. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of discussing divorce and family trauma, the facilitator was trained to create a non-judgmental atmosphere and to monitor participants for signs of distress. Participants who expressed distress were offered referrals to counselling resources. All identifying information has been removed; pseudonyms are used in reporting.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the six focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture the effects of parental divorce on children's holistic development in urban Ghana.

8.1 Theme One: "You Lose Not Just Your Parents but Your Whole World" Emotional Fragmentation and the Double Loss

The first theme concerned the profound emotional impact of parental divorce, described by young adult participants as a "double loss": the loss of the parental union itself and the subsequent loss of extended family connections, community belonging, and childhood stability.

A 24-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"When my parents divorced, I lost my father. He moved away, and I saw him less and less. But I also lost my aunts on his side, my cousins, and my grandmother. They stopped inviting us to family events. It was like we no longer belonged to that family. You lose not just your parents but your whole world."

A 26-year-old male young adult (FG2) described the emotional fragmentation:

"You are torn in two. Your mother says one thing, your father says another. Your mother's family says your father is evil; your father's family says your mother is crazy. You love both, but you cannot be with both. You feel like you have to choose. I chose my mother because I lived with her. But I missed my father every day. That splitting, that is the worst part."

Therapists confirmed this pattern. A 48-year-old female therapist (FG5) stated:

"Children of divorce in Ghana often experience what I call fragmented belonging. In traditional culture, children belong to a lineage, to an extended family. Divorce fractures that belonging. The child may keep ties with one side but lose the other. Even if the parent maintains contact, the extended family on that side often withdraws. The child feels incomplete, like half a person."

Young adult participants described emotional effects including sadness, anger, confusion, guilt (believing they caused the divorce), anxiety about abandonment, and difficulty trusting relationships. These effects persisted into adulthood for many, affecting their own romantic relationships.

A 27-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"I am 27 now. My parents divorced when I was 10. And still, when I am in a relationship, I am always waiting for it to end. I do not trust that love lasts. I saw my parents' love end, so I expect mine to end too. My therapist says this is normal for children of divorce. But normal does not make it easier."

This theme reveals that the emotional effects of parental divorce in Ghana extend beyond the nuclear family to encompass loss of extended family relationships and community belonging, reflecting the communal nature of Ghanaian family structures.

8.2 Theme Two: "The Family Helped, But Then the Family Became the Problem" The Ubuntu Resilience Paradox

The second theme concerned the paradoxical role of the extended family in moderating child outcomes. Participants consistently described extended family as both a source of resilience (providing practical and emotional support) and a source of additional stress (creating loyalty conflicts, taking sides, and imposing their own expectations).

A 23-year-old female young adult (FG2) described extended family support:

"When my parents divorced, my mother's mother took us in. She helped with school fees, with food, with everything. Without her, I do not know what would have become of us. The extended family is why I am in university today."

However, the same participant described the cost of that support:

"But my grandmother also made me feel like I should not miss my father. She would say, 'Your father abandoned you. He is not a good man.' I loved my father. I missed him. But I could not say that to her. I had to pretend I did not care. That was hard. The family helped, but then the family became the problem."

A 45-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described extended family interference:

"After the divorce, my husband's family wanted to take my son. They said he belongs to their lineage. They said I was not capable of raising him alone. I had to fight to keep my own child. The family that should have been supporting me was trying to take my child away."

Therapists described this as a uniquely Ghanaian challenge. A 52-year-old male therapist (FG6) stated:

"In Western contexts, the question is whether the child has continued contact with both parents. In Ghana, the question is much more complex. Which extended family does the child belong to? Who has authority? Where does the child live? These questions are often contested, and children are caught in the middle."

Young adult participants described loyalty conflicts as particularly damaging. A 25-year-old male young adult (FG1) stated:

"I love both my parents. But my mother's family would not let me say that. They wanted me to hate my father. My father's family wanted me to hate my mother. I could not hate either. So I felt like I belonged nowhere."

This theme reveals that Ubuntu extended family support, while often protective, can also amplify children's distress when families take sides, contest custody, or impose loyalty expectations.

8.3 Theme Three: "My Marks Dropped, and No One Noticed" Academic Decline as the Most Visible and Measurable Effect

The third theme concerned the academic effects of parental divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, participants identified academic decline as the most visible and measurable effect of divorce on children. Young adult participants described concentration difficulties, absenteeism, reduced educational aspirations, and, in some cases, school dropout.

A 22-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"Before the divorce, I was a good student. I was always in the top five. After the divorce, I could not concentrate. I would sit in class thinking about my parents fighting, about where I would sleep that night. My marks dropped. No one noticed. My mother was struggling. My father was gone. The teachers did not know what was happening at home. So, I just failed."

A 28-year-old male young adult (FG1) described how divorce affected his educational trajectory:

"I wanted to go to university. I had the grades. But after the divorce, money was tight. My father stopped paying school fees. My mother could not afford university on her own. So, I stopped school after senior secondary. I work in a shop now. I do not blame my parents exactly. But I wonder what my life would have been if they had stayed together."

Parents acknowledged the academic effects. A 42-year-old divorced mother (FG4) stated:

"My daughter's grades dropped after the divorce. I was so overwhelmed with work, with the legal stuff, with my own sadness, that I did not pay attention to her schoolwork. By the time I noticed, she had already fallen behind. I feel guilty about that."

Therapists noted that academic decline is often the first sign that a child is struggling. A 45-year-old female therapist (FG5) stated:

"When I work with divorced families, I ask teachers to monitor the child's grades. Academic decline often precedes emotional or behavioural problems that parents can see. But teachers are not trained to look for divorce-related distress. So many children slip through the cracks."

This theme reveals that academic effects are both highly significant (affecting long-term life trajectories) and often unnoticed until it is too late.

8.4 Theme Four: "People Talked About Us Like We Were Cursed" Social Stigmatisation and Peer Awareness

The fourth theme concerned the social stigma attached to children of divorce in urban Ghana. Across all groups, participants described intense social stigmatisation that intensified with age, particularly affecting adolescents and young adults.

A 26-year-old female young adult (FG1) described peer reactions:

"When my friends found out my parents were divorced, they treated me differently. Some stopped inviting me to their homes because their parents said I was a bad influence. Others whispered about me. People talked about us like we were cursed. I stopped telling people about my family. I lied and said my father was working abroad."

A 24-year-old male young adult (FG2) described concerns about marriageability:

"In our culture, when you want to marry, the families investigate the other family. They ask, 'Is there divorce in that family?' If there is, they may discourage the marriage. They say children of divorce do not know how to maintain a marriage. I am 24, and I worry about this. Will someone's family reject me because of what my parents did?"

Divorced parents described shielding their children from stigma. A 48-year-old divorced father (FG3) stated:

"I moved my children to a new school after the divorce. I did not want them to be known as the children of divorce. I told them not to discuss our family with friends. I know that is not healthy, but I was trying to protect them."

Therapists described stigma as a chronic stressor. A 55-year-old male therapist (FG6) stated:

"The divorce event is acute. The child experiences the separation, the conflict, the loss. But the stigma is chronic. It goes on for years. Every time someone asks about their family, they have to decide: tell the truth and risk judgment, or lie and feel shame. That decision, repeated hundreds of times, is exhausting."

This theme reveals that social stigma may be as damaging to children's well-being as the divorce itself, particularly in a cultural context where family reputation and marriageability are central to social identity.

8.5 Theme Five: "Daughters Suffer in Silence; Sons Act Out" Gender-Differentiated Effects

The fifth theme concerned gender differences in how children respond to parental divorce. Participants across all groups described consistent patterns: daughters experienced heightened emotional and domestic burden, often becoming "little mothers" to younger siblings, while sons exhibited externalising behaviours including aggression, truancy, and substance use.

A 27-year-old female young adult (FG2) described her role after the divorce:

"When my parents divorced, I was 12. I became the second mother to my younger siblings. My mother went to work, and I cooked, cleaned, helped with homework. I did not have time to be a child. I did not have time to process my own feelings. I just took care of everyone else. I still struggle with putting myself first."

A 25-year-old male young adult (FG1) described his brother's response:

"My brother was 14 when our parents divorced. He started fighting at school. He skipped class. He got into trouble with the police. My mother did not know what to do with him. He was angry and he did not know how to express it except through violence. The divorce affected him differently than it affected me. I turned inward; he turned outward."

Divorced parents confirmed these patterns. A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG4) stated:

"My daughter became withdrawn. She stopped talking, stopped eating. I was scared for her. My son became aggressive. He broke things in the house, talked back to me, refused to follow rules. Same divorce, same family, completely different reactions."

Therapists explained these patterns through gender socialization. A 50-year-old female therapist (FG5) stated:

"In Ghanaian culture, girls are socialised to be caregivers, to suppress their own needs, to maintain harmony. After a divorce, they often take on adult responsibilities and suppress their distress. Boys are socialized to express anger, not sadness. So, they act out. Both are suffering, but the suffering looks different. Parents may miss one because they are looking for the other."

This theme reveals that interventions for children of divorce must be gender-sensitive, recognizing that daughters and sons may need different forms of support and that behavioural presentations of distress differ by gender.

8.6 Theme Six: "Money Changes Everything" Post-Divorce Financial Precarity as Amplifying Factor

The sixth theme concerned the role of financial precarity in amplifying all other negative effects of divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, participants described how post-divorce economic decline was common in the first years after divorce, particularly for women and children intensified emotional, academic, and social difficulties.

A 26-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"After the divorce, my mother struggled. She lost the house. We moved to a smaller place in a worse neighbourhood. There was not always food. I could not afford school supplies. The financial stress was worse than the divorce itself. If my mother had been financially secure, I think I would have been okay. But money changes everything."

A 40-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described the financial precarity:

"My husband stopped paying child support. I had to work two jobs to feed my children. I was never home. I could not help with the homework. I could not attend parent-teacher conferences. The children were alone. They suffered because I was working. But if I did not work, we would starve. There was no good choice."

Therapists noted that financial precarity mediates many of the effects attributed to divorce. A 52-year-old male therapist (FG6) stated:

"In my clinical experience, it is not divorce per se that damages children. It is the poverty that often follows divorce, especially for women. Divorce disrupts the household economy. If the family can maintain financial stability, children often adjust well. If they fall into poverty, that is when you see the serious problems."

Participants described how financial precarity also affected access to extended family support. A 45-year-old female therapist (FG5) stated:

"When a divorced mother is struggling financially, extended family may help initially. But if the struggle continues, family members may withdraw. They have their own families to

support. The child loses not only the father's financial contribution but also the extended family support that might have buffered the loss."

This theme reveals that interventions for children of divorce must address economic security. Emotional and psychological support, while valuable, may be insufficient if the family is struggling to meet basic needs.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	Narrative Frame	Key Metaphors/Proverbs	Primary Tensions
Emotional Fragmentation and Double Loss	Loss of parents and extended family connections	"You lose not just your parents but your whole world"	Nuclear vs. extended family loss; belonging vs. exclusion
Ubuntu Resilience Paradox	The extended family both supports and stresses	"The family helped, but then the family became the problem"	Support vs. interference; protection vs. loyalty conflict
Academic Decline	Most visible and measurable effect	"My marks dropped, and no one noticed"	Distress vs. performance; need vs. unnoticed struggle
Social Stigmatization	Stigma intensifies with age; marriageability concerns	"People talked about us like we were cursed"	Shame vs. acceptance; truth vs. concealment
Gender-Differentiated Effects	Daughters internalise; sons externalise	"Daughters suffer in silence; sons act out"	Caregiving vs. acting out; suppression vs. expression
Financial Precarity	Economic decline amplifies all other effects	"Money changes everything"	Survival vs. development; work vs. parenting

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored the effects of parental divorce on the holistic development of children in urban Ghana from the perspectives of young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and family therapists and social workers. Six themes emerged: emotional fragmentation and the double loss; the Ubuntu resilience paradox; academic decline as the most visible effect; social stigmatization; gender-differentiated effects; and financial precarity as an amplifying factor.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is its demonstration that the effects of parental divorce on Ghanaian children cannot be understood through Western frameworks alone. While children in Ghana experience many of the same emotional, academic, and social

difficulties documented internationally, they also experience distinct challenges arising from extended family systems, cultural stigma, and the plural legal and normative frameworks that govern family life. The double loss, not only of the parental union but of extended family belonging, reflects the communal nature of Ghanaian family structures. The Ubuntu resilience paradox, extended family as both support and source of additional stress, captures a uniquely Ghanaian dynamic that has not been documented in Western divorce research.

The Ubuntu Resilience Paradox and Its Implications

The finding that extended family simultaneously protects and harms children of divorce is the study's most culturally specific contribution. International research emphasizes the protective role of extended family for children of divorce (Amato, 2010), assuming that more family support is always better. This study challenges that assumption. Extended family support in Ghana comes with conditions: loyalty to one side, acceptance of family narratives about the divorce, and conformity to family expectations about the child's relationships with both parents. Children who refuse to choose sides or who maintain relationships with both parents despite family pressure may lose extended family support. The protective effect of extended family is therefore conditional on the child's willingness to accept the family's version of the divorce narrative.

This finding has important implications for family therapy. Therapists working with divorced families in Ghana should not assume that extended family involvement is automatically beneficial. They should assess the quality of extended family relationships, the presence of loyalty conflicts, and the child's freedom to maintain relationships with both parents and both sides of the family without punishment. In some cases, limiting extended family involvement may be more protective than increasing it.

Stigma as a Chronic Stressor

The finding that social stigma attached to divorce may be as damaging as the divorce itself has significant implications. In Western contexts, where divorce is normalized and children of divorce are no longer broadly stigmatised, the primary stressors are family conflict and economic disruption (Amato, 2010). In Ghana, where divorce remains stigmatised, children face an additional stressor: social exclusion, gossip, and concerns about future marriageability. This stigma is chronic, lasting long after the acute distress of the divorce has subsided. It affects adolescents and young adults differently than younger children, intensifying as children become aware of social judgments and as marriage becomes relevant.

This finding suggests that interventions for children of divorce in Ghana must address stigma directly. Psychoeducation for communities, schools, and religious institutions about the effects of stigma on children could reduce negative attitudes. Support groups where children of divorce can share experiences without judgment could reduce isolation. For adolescents, pre-marital counselling that addresses family-of-origin concerns could help young people navigate stigma-related marriage anxiety.

Gender-Differentiated Effects and Cultural Socialization

The finding that daughters internalise distress (becoming withdrawn, taking on caregiving roles) while sons externalise (aggression, truancy, substance use) reflects broader patterns of gender socialization in Ghanaian society. Girls are socialized to be caregivers, to suppress their own needs for the sake of others, and to maintain harmony. After divorce, these tendencies are amplified, sometimes to the point of significant self-neglect. Boys are socialized to express anger, not sadness or vulnerability. After divorce, they may have no acceptable way to express grief, fear, or abandonment except through aggression.

This finding suggests that interventions should be gender-sensitive. For girls, interventions should focus on reducing caregiving burden, validating their own emotional needs, and giving permission to prioritize themselves. For boys, interventions should provide acceptable outlets for vulnerable emotions through safe adult relationships, expressive activities, or structured peer groups reducing the need to express distress through aggression.

Policy and Practice Implications

The finding that financial precarity amplifies all other effects suggests that divorce policy in Ghana should address economic security for single-parent households. Current child support enforcement is weak; many divorced fathers do not pay, and few are penalized. Strengthening child support enforcement, providing social protection for divorced mothers and their children, and ensuring access to affordable housing, healthcare, and education would reduce the economic stress that magnifies other divorce-related difficulties.

The finding that academic decline is often the first sign of distress but often goes unnoticed suggests that schools should be more actively involved in identifying and supporting children of divorce. Teacher training should include recognition of divorce-related distress. School counsellors should routinely ask about family changes when students present with academic or behavioural problems. Schools could offer support groups for children of divorce, normalizing the experience and providing coping skills.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The urban Accra sample means findings may not represent children of divorce in rural Ghana, where extended family systems are stronger, and divorce remains more stigmatised. The retrospective accounts of young adults may be influenced by recall bias and subsequent life experiences. The absence of younger children (under 18) from the sample means the study captures adult reflections, not contemporaneous child experiences. The focus group methodology may have discouraged some participants from sharing very painful experiences. The study did not include fathers' perspectives as extensively as mothers', potentially missing paternal perspectives on children's adjustment.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should: (a) include children and adolescents currently experiencing parental divorce to capture contemporaneous effects; (b) extend research to rural Ghana to examine urban-rural differences; (c) conduct longitudinal research tracking children's adjustment over time; (d) examine the effectiveness of interventions (support groups, school-based programmes, family therapy) in the Ghanaian context; (e) study the perspectives of extended family members to understand their decision-making about involvement; (f) examine how religious communities shape children's experiences of divorce, including both support and stigma.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored the effects of parental divorce on the holistic development of children in urban Ghana through focus groups with young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and family therapists and social workers. Six themes emerged: emotional fragmentation and the double loss; the Ubuntu resilience paradox; academic decline; social stigmatization; gender-differentiated effects; and financial precarity as an amplifying factor.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that parental divorce in Ghana affects children not only through the loss of the parental union but through the disruption of extended family belonging, the experience of cultural stigma, and the economic precarity that often follows divorce. The Ubuntu principle that "a person is a person through other persons" cuts both ways: children of divorce are profoundly affected by the loss of communal belonging, and their recovery depends on the quality of extended family and community support they receive. However, this support is not always beneficial; when

extended families take sides, impose loyalty expectations, or contest custody, they may harm rather than help.

Children of divorce in Ghana are caught between worlds: between traditional norms that stigmatise divorce and modern realities of family change; between extended family expectations and individual feelings; between love for both parents and pressure to choose sides. They navigate these tensions without adequate support, often suffering in silence while their academic performance declines and their social relationships fray. The findings of this study call for culturally adapted interventions that address the unique challenges Ghanaian children face: loss of extended family belonging, chronic stigma, gender-specific distress, and the economic precarity that makes all other problems worse.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For Family Therapists and Mental Health Practitioners: Assess extended family dynamics explicitly when working with children of divorce. Determine whether the child feels free to maintain relationships with both parents and both sides of the family. Identify loyalty conflicts and help children express their own feelings without guilt. Provide psychoeducation to extended family members about the importance of children maintaining relationships with both parents. For girls, assess caregiving burden and provide support for self-care. For boys, provide safe outlets for vulnerable emotions. Recognize that stigma may be a primary stressor; address it directly in therapy.

For Schools and Educators: Train teachers to recognize signs of divorce-related distress: academic decline, withdrawal, concentration difficulties, behavioural changes. Establish school counselling protocols that ask about family changes when students present with problems. Consider offering support groups for children of divorce where they can share experiences with peers. Ensure that school policies do not stigmatise children of divorce (e.g., forms that assume a two-parent household). Educate all students about family diversity to reduce peer stigma.

For Social Workers and Child Protection Services: Develop culturally appropriate assessment tools for children of divorce that include extended family relationships, stigma experiences, and gender-specific distress. Provide case management that addresses economic precarity, connecting single-parent households to social protection programmes, child support enforcement, housing assistance, and educational support. Train social workers in family therapy approaches that include extended family members.

For Legal and Policy Makers: Strengthen child support enforcement mechanisms so that divorced fathers who can pay are required to pay. Establish family courts with trained judges and counsellors who consider children's developmental needs in custody and visitation decisions. Develop social protection programmes specifically for single-parent households, including housing subsidies, school fee assistance, and healthcare coverage. Consider requiring divorce education programmes that include information about children's needs and available support services.

For Religious Institutions: Train clergy and religious counsellors to provide support to divorced families without stigmatizing children. Develop divorce support groups within churches and mosques that include programmes for children. Preach and teach about family diversity and the importance of supporting all families regardless of structure. Avoid language that implies children of divorce are damaged or cursed.

For Extended Family Members: If you are an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or other extended family member of a child whose parents are divorcing, consider: Are you taking sides? Are you expecting the child to choose? Are you allowing the child to maintain relationships with both parents? Are you providing practical support (childcare, school fees, emotional support) without imposing conditions? The child needs you to be a source of stability, not an additional stressor. Help without conditions. Love without sides.

For Future Research: Conduct longitudinal research tracking children's adjustment from divorce through young adulthood. Study children currently experiencing divorce to capture contemporaneous effects. Extend research to rural Ghana. Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (school support groups, family therapy, economic support programmes) in the Ghanaian context. Examine the perspectives of extended family members. Study how religious communities shape children's experiences of divorce, including both support and stigma.

REFERENCES

1. Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 650-666.
2. Amoateng, A. Y., & Boadi, P. (2019). Marital dissolution in Ghana: Patterns, correlates, and consequences. *Ghana Journal of Sociology*, 49(1), 45-68.
3. Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Doubleday.

4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.
6. Clark, G. (2010). *African market women: Seven life stories from Ghana*. Indiana University Press.
7. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
8. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
9. Gergen, K. J. (2015). *An invitation to social construction* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
10. Ghana Statistical Service. (2021). *Population and housing census 2021: Marital status report*. Government of Ghana.
11. Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford University Press.
12. Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
13. Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 97-128). Sage Publications.
14. Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.
15. Metz, T. (2011). Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11(2), 532-559.
16. Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
17. Oppong, C. (2006). *Marriage, family, and the Ghanaian woman*. Woeli Publishing Services.