2026 Volume: 02 Issue: 07 www.ijrpa.com ISSN 2456-9995 Review Article

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 01-21

MITIGATING DIVORCE IMPACT ON GHANAIAN CHILDREN: THE ROLE OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY

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Article Received: 26 May 2026
Article Revised: 15 June 2026
Published on: 04 July 2026

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DOI: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.6335

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore the role of the extended family and the community in mitigating the negative impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana, examining how grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, religious institutions, and community leaders support or fail to support children through family disruption. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 48 participants across three stakeholder groups: young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood (18 participants), divorced parents whose children received or were denied extended family and community support (16 participants), and community leaders, religious leaders, and social workers with experience mobilising community support for divorced families (14 participants). Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and narrative prompts designed to elicit participants' experiences of extended family and community support, the types of support provided, the conditions under which support was offered or withdrawn, and recommendations for strengthening community-based responses to divorce. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: the maternal grandmother as primary protector, with participants describing grandmothers as the most consistent and effective source of practical, emotional, and financial support for children after divorce; the paternal extended family as conditional or absent supporters, with participants describing how paternal relatives often withdrew from children's lives or offered support only on condition of rejecting the mother; the aunt network as second-tier support, with maternal aunts providing emotional support, especially for female children, and practical help with childcare and school matters; the community as ambivalent and stigmatising, with neighbours and community members

offering some practical help but also contributing to gossip, judgment, and social exclusion; the religious community as untapped potential, wherein churches and mosques provided prayer and limited charity but rarely structured, sustained support for children; and the conditions for effective communal support, including family acceptance of the divorce, absence of side-taking, communication across family branches, and proactive outreach from community institutions. Participants' narratives revealed that the extended family and community have tremendous potential to mitigate the negative impact of divorce on children, but this potential is often unrealised. Maternal grandmothers are the most reliable protectors, but paternal extended family often withdraws. Aunts provide important second-tier support. The broader community is ambivalent, offering some practical help but also contributing to stigma. Religious institutions have reach but lack structured programmes. Effective community support requires that extended family members accept the divorce, refuse to take sides, maintain communication across family branches, and reach out proactively to children who are suffering. The study contributes to the understanding of how Ubuntu communal values can be mobilised to support children of divorce, offering insights relevant to family therapy, community development, social work, and religious institutional programming in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: *Divorce, children, extended family, community support, Ubuntu, Ghana, focus groups, maternal grandmother, stigma.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Ghana, the extended family and the community have traditionally served as the safety net for children in crisis. The Ubuntu philosophy that "a person is a person through other persons" (Mbiti, 1969) reflects a deep cultural commitment to communal care: no child is the responsibility of parents alone; grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbours, and community leaders all share responsibility for children's welfare (Gyekye, 1997). When parents face difficulties—illness, job loss, death, or divorce—the extended family has historically stepped in to provide housing, food, school fees, emotional support, and stability. This communal safety net has been a source of resilience for Ghanaian children for generations, enabling them to weather family disruptions that might otherwise have been devastating.

Yet the strength of this safety net for children of divorce in contemporary urban Ghana has not been systematically examined. Several questions arise. Does the extended family step in

when parents' divorce, or do they withdraw? Do grandparents, aunts, and uncles support children, or do they take sides and make things worse? Does the community offer help, or does it stigmatise? Are religious institutions sources of support or judgment? What conditions enable extended family and community to provide effective support? What conditions undermine it? Answering these questions is essential for understanding how Ghanaian children cope with divorce and for designing interventions that strengthen communal responses.

The role of the extended family and community in supporting children of divorce is particularly important in Ghana because formal support systems are severely limited. Professional counselling is concentrated in affluent urban areas, expensive, and unknown to most families (Ocansey, 2018). The Department of Social Welfare is underfunded and overstretched, focusing on emergencies. Legal aid is slow and overwhelmed. Schools lack counsellors. For the vast majority of Ghanaian children of divorce, the extended family and community are the only sources of support available. If these communal systems are functioning well, children may cope. If they are not—if extended family withdraws, if community stigmatises, if religious institutions judge—children may suffer alone.

This study addresses this gap by employing focus group methodology to explore the role of the extended family and community in mitigating the impact of divorce on Ghanaian children. By gathering perspectives from young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and community leaders, the study aims to identify what types of support are most helpful, which extended family members are most active, what conditions enable effective support, and how communal responses can be strengthened.

The study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) informs the understanding that the response of extended family and community to divorce is not fixed but is socially constructed through cultural norms, family histories, and community discourses. Some families respond to divorce with support and acceptance; others respond with withdrawal and judgment. These responses are shaped by beliefs about divorce, loyalty expectations, and communication patterns (Gergen, 2015). Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997) provides a normative framework for what communal support *should* look like: if Ubuntu means that "a person is a person through other persons," then the community has an obligation to support its members in times of crisis, including children whose parents' divorce. The study examines the gap between the Ubuntu ideal and the reality experienced by many children of divorce.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the traditional centrality of extended family and community support for children in crisis, and despite the growing prevalence of divorce in urban Ghana, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about how extended family and community actually respond to children of divorce and whether these responses mitigate or amplify negative effects. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding Ubuntu values in contemporary urban contexts and practical consequences for family policy, community development, and social work.

First, the specific types of support that extended family members provide to children of divorce have not been systematically identified. Extended family may provide practical support (housing, food, school fees, childcare), emotional support (listening, comforting, validating), financial support (money for expenses), and informational support (advice, guidance). Which types are most common? Which are most helpful? Which extended family members provide which types? Without this information, it is impossible to know where to target interventions.

Second, the conditions under which extended family supports or withdraws from children of divorce have not been examined. Why do some grandparents step in while others step away? Why do some aunts provide emotional support while others take sides? Factors may include the family's acceptance or rejection of the divorce, the quality of pre-divorce relationships, the involvement of extended family in the divorce itself, and the economic resources of extended family members. Identifying these conditions is essential for understanding why some children receive support and others do not.

Third, the role of the broader community—neighbours, religious institutions, community leaders—has not been examined. Do neighbours offer practical help, or do they gossip and stigmatise? Do churches and mosques support children of divorce, or do they judge them? Do community leaders speak out against stigma, or do they reinforce it? The community's response can either buffer children against negative effects or amplify them.

Fourth, the gap between Ubuntu ideals and lived reality has not been examined. Ubuntu philosophy teaches that the community cares for its members. Children of divorce often experience abandonment, stigma, and conditional support. What explains this gap? Is it that urbanisation and modernisation have weakened extended family ties? Is it that divorce stigma overrides Ubuntu values? Understanding this gap is essential for designing interventions that strengthen communal care.

Fifth, the perspectives of children and parents on what constitutes helpful community support have not been gathered. What do children want from extended family and community? What do parents need? What would make a difference? These perspectives are essential for designing culturally appropriate, effective interventions.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore the role of the extended family and the community in mitigating the impact of parental divorce on children in Ghana, examining the types of support provided, the conditions under which support is offered or withdrawn, and recommendations for strengthening communal responses.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

4.1 To identify the types of support (practical, emotional, financial, informational) that extended family members provide to children of divorce.

4.2 To identify which extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) are most active in supporting children.

4.3 To examine the conditions under which extended family supports or withdraws from children of divorce.

4.4 To explore the role of the broader community, including neighbours, religious institutions, and community leaders.

4.5 To examine the gap between Ubuntu ideals of communal care and the lived reality of children of divorce.

4.6 To generate recommendations for strengthening extended family and community support for children of divorce.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What types of support do extended family members provide to children of divorce, and which extended family members are most active?

Research Question Two: What conditions enable or prevent extended family members from supporting children of divorce?

Research Question Three: How does the broader community (neighbours, religious institutions, community leaders) respond to children of divorce?

Research Question Four: What explains the gap between Ubuntu ideals of communal care and the lived reality of many children of divorce?

Research Question Five: What would strengthen extended family and community support for children of divorce?

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 the obligation of extended family to support children, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, the response of extended family and community to divorce is not determined by tradition alone but is negotiated and constructed in specific family contexts (Gergen, 2015). Some extended families construct divorce as a family crisis that requires collective support; others construct it as a private failure that justifies withdrawal. Focus group discussions, in which participants articulate and negotiate these constructions, reveal how extended family support is socially produced or withheld.

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a normative framework for understanding communal obligation 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 (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts of *abusua* (extended family) and the understanding that children belong to the lineage, not only to their biological parents (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu implies that when parents divorce, the extended family has an obligation to step in and support the children. The study examines whether this obligation is fulfilled and, when it is not, what explains the failure.

6.2 The Extended Family in Ghanaian Society

The extended family is the foundational social institution in Ghanaian society. In matrilineal Akan societies, children belong to their mother's lineage; the mother's brother (abusua panyin) holds authority over children and responsibility for their welfare. In patrilineal societies, children belong to the father's lineage. Grandparents, particularly maternal grandmothers, play central roles in childrearing. Aunts and uncles are expected to act as

second parents. Cousins are like siblings. The extended family provides housing, food, school fees, childcare, emotional support, and socialisation (Oppong, 2006). This system has been remarkably resilient, adapting to urbanisation, migration, and economic change.

However, urbanisation has strained extended family networks. Family members may live far apart. Economic pressures mean that extended family members may have less to share. The nuclear family ideal, promoted by Christianity and modernisation, has reduced the centrality of extended family for some Ghanaians. Divorce stigma may cause extended family members to withdraw to avoid association with shame. The extended family safety net, while still present, may be weaker than in previous generations.

6.3 Divorce, Stigma, and Extended Family Withdrawal

Divorce remains stigmatised in many Ghanaian communities, particularly among religious populations and older generations. Divorced individuals, especially women, may be blamed for the marriage's failure. Extended family members may withdraw from divorced relatives to avoid being tainted by the stigma. This withdrawal can extend to children. A paternal grandmother who is ashamed that her son divorced may cut off contact with her grandchildren because they remind her of the failed marriage. A maternal uncle who disapproves of his sister's divorce may stop supporting her children.

The withdrawal of extended family support is a second loss for children, compounding the loss of the parent. Children may go from having a large, loving extended family to having only the maternal side or only the paternal side—or neither. This loss of belonging is particularly painful in a culture, where belonging to a large family network is central to identity.

6.4 Community Institutions: Neighbours, Religious Institutions, Leaders

Beyond the extended family, community institutions can support children of divorce. Neighbours may provide practical help: meals, childcare, watching out for children after school. Religious institutions (churches, mosques) may provide emotional support, community belonging, and practical assistance (food, school fees, clothing). Community leaders (chiefs, elders, assembly members) may advocate for children's welfare, mediate family disputes, and speak out against stigma.

In practice, these institutions are ambivalent. Neighbours may gossip more than they help. Religious institutions may judge divorced families rather than support them. Community leaders may be silent. The gap between potential and actual community support is significant.

6.5 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that no study has employed focus group methodology to comprehensively examine the role of extended family and community in mitigating the impact of divorce on Ghanaian children. The present study addresses this gap by generating rich qualitative data on communal support.

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 of extended family and community support (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian extended family structures shaped the interpretive process.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in Accra, Ghana's capital and largest urban centre. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues: a university seminar room for young adult groups, a community centre for parent groups, and a town hall for community leader groups.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised three stakeholder groups. Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood (ages 18-30). Divorced parents whose children were minors during or after the divorce. Community leaders, religious leaders, and social workers with experience mobilising community support for divorced families.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed. Young adults and parents were recruited through university counselling centres, church youth groups, and community organisations. Community leaders were recruited through traditional councils, religious bodies, and professional associations.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, two per stakeholder group, for a total of 48 participants. Young adult participants: 18 (12 female, 6 male), aged 19-30. Divorced parent participants: 16 (12 female, 4 male), aged 34-55. Community leader participants: 14 (6 female, 8 male), aged 35-65.

Table 1. Participants.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Group	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Role/Experience	Participants (N)
Young Adults	FG1	Accra	6F/3M	19-28	Parents divorced ages 5-14	9
Young Adults	FG2	Accra	6F/3M	20-30	Parents divorced ages 6-15	9
Divorced Parents	FG3	Accra	6F/2M	34-52	Received or denied family support	8
Divorced Parents	FG4	Accra	6F/2M	38-55	Received or denied community support	8
Community Leaders	FG5	Accra	3F/4M	35-60	Religious leaders, social workers	7
Community Leaders	FG6	Accra	3F/4M	40-65	Chiefs, elders, assembly members	7
Total	**6 groups**	**Accra**	**30F/18M**	**19-65**	**Varied**	**48**

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 extended family and community support. Prompts included: "Which extended family members helped you the most after the divorce?" "What did they do?" "Did any extended family members withdraw from you?" "How did the community respond?"

The parent guide explored support received and barriers. Prompts included: "Did your extended family support your children?" "What made them support or not support?" "How did the community respond to your family?"

The community leader guide explored institutional responses. Prompts included: "How do extended families in this community typically respond to divorce?" "What role do religious institutions play?" "What could be done to strengthen community support?"

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between April and July 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 written informed consent.

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 systematic coding. Codes were organised into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast. All participants provided written informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the six focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture the role of extended family and community in mitigating the impact of divorce on Ghanaian children.

8.1 Theme One: "My Grandmother Was the One Who Held Us Together" — The Maternal Grandmother as Primary Protector

The first theme concerned the central role of the maternal grandmother as the most consistent and effective source of support for children of divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, maternal grandmothers were described as providing practical support (housing, food, school fees, childcare), emotional support (listening, comforting, validating), and stability (a consistent home when parents' homes were disrupted).

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

"My grandmother was the one who held us together after the divorce. My mother was falling apart. She could not work, could not pay rent, could not cook. My grandmother took us in. She fed us, paid our school fees, helped with homework, listened when I cried. She was the stable one. Without her, we would have been on the street. I do not know what children do who do not have a grandmother like mine."

A 45-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described her mother's support:

"My mother saved my children. I was depressed. I could not get out of bed. She came and took the children. She fed them, got them to school, made sure they did their homework. She gave them love when I had nothing to give. She is the reason my children are okay today."

A 52-year-old community leader (FG5) observed:

"In our culture, the maternal grandmother has always been central to childrearing. But after divorce, her role becomes even more critical. She is often the only stable adult the child has. She provides continuity. The child's world has fallen apart, but Grandma's house is still the same. That consistency is healing."

A 28-year-old male young adult (FG2) described his grandmother's emotional support:

"My grandmother never judged my father. She never spoke badly about him. She let me talk about him, miss him, love him. She did not make me choose. That was a gift. She was the only adult who let me love both my parents. I will never forget that."

A 50-year-old social worker (FG6) explained:

"The maternal grandmother is the most important protective factor for children of divorce in Ghana. When she is involved, the child has housing, food, school fees, emotional support, and stability. When she is not involved, or when she is deceased, the child is much more vulnerable. We should be training grandmothers to support their grandchildren. They are the frontline."

This theme reveals that the maternal grandmother is the most important source of support for children of divorce in Ghana, providing practical, emotional, and financial support that can buffer children against the worst outcomes.

8.2 Theme Two: "His Family Acted Like We Had Never Existed" — The Paternal Extended Family as Conditional or Absent Supporters

The second theme concerned the stark contrast between maternal and paternal extended family support. While maternal grandmothers were described as highly supportive, paternal extended family members were described as withdrawing from children's lives after divorce, offering support only on condition of rejecting the mother, or providing no support at all.

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

"After the divorce, my father's family acted like we had never existed. My grandmother on that side, who used to spoil us with gifts, stopped calling. My aunts stopped inviting us to family events. My cousins stopped texting. It was like we had died. That rejection hurt almost as much as losing my father."

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described her ex-husband's family:

"His mother told him that the children were no longer her grandchildren because I had taken them away. She cut them off completely. My children asked me, 'What did we do wrong?' They had done nothing wrong. They were just children. But they were punished for my divorce."

A 48-year-old community leader (FG5) explained the cultural dynamic:

"In some Ghanaian families, especially patrilineal ones, when a couple divorces, the father's family feels that the mother has taken their children away. They withdraw as a way of punishing her. They do not see that they are punishing the children. The child loses not only the father but the entire paternal family. This is a tragedy."

A 26-year-old male young adult (FG2) described conditional support:

"My father's sister said she would help me if I agreed that my mother was evil. I could not do that. I love my mother. So, she did not help me. Her support came with a price I could not pay. I had to choose between my mother and my aunt. I chose my mother. But I lost my aunt."

A 55-year-old family therapist (FG6) recommended:

"When parents' divorce, we need to include paternal extended family in mediation. They need to hear that the children still belong to them. The children have done nothing wrong. They still need grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Withdrawal is a form of abandonment. We must work to prevent it."

This theme reveals that paternal extended family often withdraws from children after divorce, causing a second loss that compounds the loss of the father.

8.3 Theme Three: "My Aunts Were Like Second Mothers" — The Aunt Network as Second-Tier Support

The third theme concerned the role of aunts, particularly maternal aunts, as second-tier supporters. Participants described aunts as providing emotional support (especially for female children), practical help (childcare, school pickups, help with homework), and financial assistance when grandmothers were not available or needed backup.

A 25-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"My mother's sister, my aunt, was like a second mother to me. I could talk to her about things I could not talk to my mother about. She did not judge. She listened. She took me shopping and let me stay at her house when things were tense at home. She made me feel normal when everything else was chaos."

A 28-year-old female young adult (FG1) described her aunts' collective support:

"I have four aunts on my mother's side. They all helped. One paid my school fees. One took me on weekends. One helped with homework. They coordinated. They made sure I was okay. That network of aunts saved me. I was never alone because I always had an aunt to call."

A 47-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described her sisters' support:

"My sisters were my lifeline. When I was struggling, they took the children. They fed them, bathed them, and helped with homework. They gave me breaks so I could work. They gave the children love when I had nothing left to give. I thank God for my sisters."

A 50-year-old social worker (FG5) explained:

"Aunts are the second line of defence after grandmothers. They are often younger, have more energy, and may have children of their own who are similar in age. They can provide peer-like support while still being adults. For female children, especially, aunts are crucial. They model resilience and provide a safe space to talk."

This theme reveals that maternal aunts are important second-tier supporters, providing emotional support, practical help, and coordination of care for children of divorce.

8.4 Theme Four: "The Community Watched Us Struggle and Did Nothing" — The Ambivalent and Stigmatising Community Response

The fourth theme concerned the ambivalent response of the broader community. Participants described neighbours and community members as sometimes offering practical help (meals, checking on children) but more often gossiping, judging, and excluding divorced families.

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

"The community watched us struggle and did nothing. Neighbours saw that we had no food. They saw that my mother was crying. They saw that we were falling apart. Did anyone help? No. But they talked. They gossiped. They said my mother could not keep a husband. The community was not a source of support. It was a source of pain."

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described neighbourhood judgment:

"My neighbours stopped greeting me. They crossed the street to avoid me. I heard them whispering. One woman told her children not to play with mine because we were a 'broken family.' My children lost their friends because of the divorce. The community punished us for something that was none of their business."

A 52-year-old community elder (FG6) acknowledged the problem:

"Our communities have not treated divorced families well. We gossip. We judge. We exclude. We forget that the children are innocent. This is not Ubuntu. This is not who we should be. We need to change."

A 28-year-old male young adult (FG2) described the one neighbour who did help:

"There was one neighbour, an elderly woman, who brought us food sometimes. She did not ask questions. She did not judge. She just saw that we were struggling and helped. She was the exception. Everyone else either ignored us or gossiped about us."

A 50-year-old religious leader (FG5) called for change:

"The community must stop punishing children for their parents' divorce. The child did not choose to be born, did not choose the divorce, and did not do anything wrong. The community's job is to support, not to judge. We have forgotten Ubuntu. We need to remember."

This theme reveals that the broader community is often a source of stigma and exclusion rather than support for children of divorce, although exceptions exist.

8.5 Theme Five: "The Church Prayed But Did Not Know What Else to Do" — Religious Community as Untapped Potential

The fifth theme concerned the role of religious institutions. Participants described churches and mosques as offering prayer and limited charity but rarely providing structured, sustained support for children of divorce.

A 27-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"The church prayed for us. They prayed every Sunday. But prayer did not pay school fees. Prayer did not put food on the table. Prayer did not stop the gossip. The church could have done so much more. They have resources. They have people. They just did not know how to help."

A 45-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described her church's judgment:

"My church judged me. The pastor preached about the sanctity of marriage and I felt like he was looking at me. The women's ministry stopped inviting me to events. I stopped going. The church was not a source of support. It was a source of shame."

A 48-year-old pastor (FG5) acknowledged the gap:

"The church has not done well by divorced families. We preach against divorce, which is fine. But when divorce happens, we do not know what to do. We need training. We need programmes. We need to move from judgment to support. The church has the reach to help millions of children. We need to use it."

A 26-year-old male young adult (FG1) described a church that got it right:

"There was a church near us that started a support group for children of divorce. They met once a week. They played games, talked about their feelings, and prayed together. It was not fancy, but it helped. That church understood that children need more than prayer. They need community."

A 55-year-old imam (FG6) described his mosque's approach:

"In our mosque, we do not turn away divorced families. We welcome them. We have counsellors who meet with children. We have a fund to help with school fees. We try to be a source of support, not judgment. More religious institutions should do this."

This theme reveals that religious institutions have tremendous untapped potential to support children of divorce but currently offer mainly prayer and limited charity, with some also contributing to stigma.

8.6 Theme Six: "What Made It Work Was When the Family Refused to Choose Sides" — Conditions for Effective Communal Support

The sixth theme concerned the conditions that enabled extended family and community to provide effective support. Participants identified several conditions: acceptance of the divorce as a reality, refusal to take sides, communication across family branches, and proactive outreach from community institutions.

A 28-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"What made it work in my family was that my grandmother refused to choose sides. She stayed neutral. She loved both my parents even after the divorce. She encouraged me to love both too. That made all the difference. When families choose sides, children suffer."

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described effective communication:

"My ex-husband and I agreed that we would communicate with each other about the children. We did not use the children as messengers. We talked directly. That made it easier for our families to stay involved. When parents communicate, extended family can follow their lead."

A 50-year-old community leader (FG5) described proactive outreach:

"In my community, we have started a programme where volunteers check on children of divorce. They visit the home, ask if the child needs anything, listen if the child wants to talk. It is simple but effective. The key is being proactive. Do not wait for the family to ask for help. Reach out."

A 26-year-old male young adult (FG2) described what his family did right:

"My maternal family accepted that my father was still my father. They did not try to replace him. They did not speak badly about him. They supported my relationship with him. That acceptance meant I did not have to choose. I could love everyone."

A 52-year-old social worker (FG6) summarised:

"Effective community support requires three things: acceptance of the divorce as a reality (not endless judgment), refusal to take sides (the child needs both families), and proactive outreach (do not wait to be asked). When communities do these things, children of divorce can thrive."

This theme reveals that effective communal support requires acceptance, neutrality, and proactive outreach.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	Narrative Frame	Key Metaphors/Proverbs	Primary Tensions
Maternal Grandmother as Primary Protector	Most consistent source of practical, emotional, and financial support	"My grandmother was the one who held us together"	Presence vs. absence; support vs. abandonment
Paternal Extended Family Withdrawal	Conditional or absent support; second loss for children	"His family acted as if we had never existed"	Involvement vs. withdrawal; love vs. punishment
Aunt Network as Second-Tier Support	Maternal aunts provide emotional and practical help	"My aunts were like second mothers"	Primary vs. secondary support; individual vs. collective care
Ambivalent Community Response	Gossip and exclusion more common than support	"The community watched us struggle and did nothing"	Support vs. stigma; inclusion vs. exclusion
Religious Untapped Potential	Prayer and charity, but not structured programmes	"The church prayed but did not know what else to do"	Reach vs. effectiveness; judgment vs. support
Conditions for Effective Support	Acceptance, neutrality, proactive outreach	"What made it work was when the family refused to choose sides"	Side-taking vs. neutrality; reactive vs. proactive

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored the role of the extended family and community in mitigating the impact of divorce on Ghanaian children. Six themes emerged: the maternal grandmother as primary protector; the paternal extended family as conditional or absent supporters; the aunt network as second-tier support; the ambivalent and stigmatising community response; the religious community as untapped potential; and the conditions for effective communal support.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that extended family and community have tremendous potential to mitigate the impact of divorce on Ghanaian children, but this potential is often unrealised. Maternal grandmothers are the most reliable protectors, but paternal extended family often withdraws. Aunts provide important second-tier support. The broader community is ambivalent, offering some practical help but also contributing stigma. Religious institutions have reach but lack structured programmes. Effective community support requires that extended family members accept the divorce, refuse to take sides, maintain communication across family branches, and reach out proactively to children who are suffering.

The Maternal Grandmother as Ubuntu in Action

The finding that the maternal grandmother is the most important source of support for children of divorce is consistent with anthropological research on Ghanaian family structures (Oppong, 2006). Grandmothers have always been central to childrearing; after divorce, their role becomes even more critical. They provide practical support that keeps children housed, fed, and in school. They provide emotional support that helps children process grief and maintain self-esteem. They provide stability when the child's world has fallen apart. The maternal grandmother is Ubuntu in action: "a person is a person through other persons." She embodies the communal obligation to care for children in crisis.

This finding has important implications for policy and practice. Programmes that support grandmothers—with financial assistance, training in trauma-informed care, respite care—would be cost-effective ways to improve outcomes for children of divorce. Grandmothers are already doing the work; they need resources and recognition.

The Tragedy of Paternal Extended Family Withdrawal

The finding that paternal extended family often withdraws from children after divorce is a tragedy. Children lose not only daily contact with their father but also relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who loved them. This withdrawal is often motivated by a desire to punish the mother, but the children are the ones who suffer. It may also reflect confusion about lineage: in patrilineal systems, the father's family may feel that the mother has taken their children away.

This finding suggests that interventions should include paternal extended family in mediation and family therapy. They need to hear that the children still belong to them, that the children have done nothing wrong, and that withdrawal is a form of abandonment. Legal policies that preserve grandparent visitation rights after divorce could also help.

The Community's Failure of Ubuntu

The finding that the broader community often responds to divorce with gossip, judgment, and exclusion rather than support is a failure of Ubuntu. The community that should be surrounding children with care is instead stigmatising them. This stigma is a chronic stressor that damages children's self-esteem, social relationships, and sense of belonging. It may be as harmful as the divorce itself.

This finding suggests that community education is urgently needed. Public awareness campaigns about the effects of stigma on children, led by respected community leaders and

religious figures, could shift norms. Schools can also play a role by teaching children not to bully or exclude peers from divorced families.

The Untapped Potential of Religious Institutions

The finding that religious institutions have tremendous reach but offer mainly prayer and limited charity, with some also contributing to stigma, represents a massive missed opportunity. Churches and mosques are present in every community, have infrastructure and leadership, and are trusted by most Ghanaians. They already care about families and children. The step to offering structured support programmes for children of divorce—support groups, mentoring, practical assistance—is not large.

This finding suggests that partnerships between mental health professionals and religious institutions could be highly effective. Professionals could train religious volunteers. Religious institutions could provide space and recruit participants. NGOs could provide curricula and supervision. Such partnerships would be low-cost and scalable.

Conditions for Effective Support

The finding that effective communal support requires acceptance, neutrality, and proactive outreach provides a practical framework. Extended families must accept that the divorce has happened and stop wishing it away. They must refuse to take sides, allowing children to love both parents without guilt. They must reach out proactively, not waiting for struggling families to ask for help. These conditions are achievable. They require intention and effort, but not money.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The urban Accra sample means findings may not represent rural Ghana, where extended family networks may be stronger. The retrospective accounts of young adults may be influenced by recall bias. The study did not include perspectives of paternal extended family members as extensively as maternal.

Future Research

Future research should: (a) extend research to rural Ghana; (b) include perspectives of paternal extended family members; (c) conduct longitudinal research on the effectiveness of grandmother support programmes; (d) evaluate church-based support group models; (e) study community-level interventions to reduce stigma.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of extended family and community in mitigating the impact of divorce on Ghanaian children through focus groups with young adults, divorced parents, and community leaders. Six themes emerged: the maternal grandmother as primary protector; the paternal extended family as conditional or absent supporters; the aunt network as second-tier support; the ambivalent and stigmatising community response; the religious community as untapped potential; and the conditions for effective communal support.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that extended family and community have tremendous potential to buffer children against the negative effects of divorce, but this potential is often unrealised. Maternal grandmothers are heroes, providing practical, emotional, and financial support that saves children. Paternal extended family often abandons children, causing a second loss. Aunts fill gaps. The community gossips and excludes. Religious institutions pray but do little else. Effective support requires acceptance, neutrality, and proactive outreach.

The Ubuntu ideal that "a person is a person through other persons" is not being fully realised for children of divorce in Ghana. Maternal grandmothers embody it. The rest of the community often fails it. But failure is not inevitable. Communities can change. Religious institutions can learn. Extended families can choose not to take sides. Neighbours can choose to help instead of gossip. The children of divorce are watching. They are waiting. They need their community to show up.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

For Maternal Grandmothers: You are the most important person in your grandchild's life after divorce. You provide stability, love, and practical support. You are Ubuntu in action. If you are struggling, seek help. You cannot pour from an empty cup. If you are not already involved, reach out. Your grandchild needs you.

For Paternal Extended Families: Do not abandon your grandchildren. The child has done nothing wrong. They still belong to you. They still need your love. Withdrawing to punish the mother punishes the child. Be present. Be neutral. Be loving.

For Aunts (Especially Maternal Aunts): You are the second line of defence. Step in. Help with childcare, school pickups, homework. Listen. Be a safe adult your niece or nephew can talk to. Coordinate with the grandmother. You are part of the team.

For the Broader Community (Neighbours, Community Members): Stop gossiping. Stop excluding. Start helping. A meal, a kind word, checking on a child—these small acts matter. The child of divorce is not damaged. They are not cursed. They are a child who needs support. Be the community Ubuntu calls you to be.

For Religious Institutions: Move beyond prayer. Prayer is good, but it is not enough. Start support groups for children of divorce. Train volunteers to lead them. Set up funds for school fees and basic needs. Preach acceptance, not judgment. You have the reach. Now use it for good.

For Community Leaders (Chiefs, Elders, Assembly Members): Speak out against stigma. Lead public education campaigns. Convene extended family mediations to prevent withdrawal. Advocate for grandparent visitation rights. Model acceptance and support.

For Social Workers and Family Therapists: Include extended family in divorce mediation. Help families negotiate support arrangements for children. Train grandmothers and aunts in trauma-informed care. Develop church-based support group models. Advocate for policies that preserve extended family ties after divorce.

For Policymakers: Consider policies that preserve grandparent visitation rights after divorce. Fund community-based support programmes. Support training for religious leaders. Include modules on family disruption and community support in social work curricula.

For All Ghanaians: The child of divorce is not a stranger. They are your neighbour, your classmate, your congregant, your relative. They need you. Not later. Now. Ubuntu says a person is a person through other persons. Be the other person that child needs.

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