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Ghana: A Case Study of Effutu Municipality, Ghana**



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Influence of Paternal Absence on Adolescents' Moral Conduct in Ghana: A Case Study of Effutu Municipality, Ghana

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Abstract

Purpose: This article explores the influence of paternal absence on adolescents' moral conduct in Ghana's Effutu Municipality, drawing on a qualitative study that examined the broader impact of father absence on adolescent identity formation.

Methodology: Using a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussion with 15 purposively selected participants comprising 12 adolescents (7 boys, 5 girls) and 3 single mothers, the study employed thematic analysis guided by Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Social Identity Theory.

Findings: Findings reveal that paternal absence significantly disrupts moral supervision and discipline, leading to diminished behavioural control, emotional distress, and moral confusion among adolescents. However, compensatory mechanisms, including maternal and extended family support, religious engagement, and educational mentorship, partially mitigate these adverse effects.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The study underscores the critical role of fathers in moral socialization and highlights adolescents' resilience within supportive community structures. Recommendations include strengthening family reconciliation programs, establishing school-based mentorship initiatives, and promoting community awareness of responsible fatherhood. These findings contribute to understanding adolescent moral development in single-parent households within sub-Saharan African contexts.

Keywords: *Paternal Absence, Moral Conduct, Adolescents, Single Motherhood*

Background

The family remains the foundational institution for moral socialization, with parents serving as primary agents in transmitting values, norms, and behavioural expectations to children (Maccoby, 2000). Within this framework, fathers occupy a distinct and irreplaceable role in shaping children's moral compass, providing both disciplinary structure and ethical modelling. However, contemporary family structures across sub-Saharan Africa have witnessed increasing rates of paternal absence, driven by factors including marital dissolution, economic migration, death, and cultural practices that normalize male disengagement from child-rearing responsibilities (Freeks, 2024; Petersen et al., 2013).

Adolescence represents a particularly vulnerable developmental period during which individuals navigate the critical psychosocial task of identity formation (Erikson, 1968). This stage, characterized by exploration of values, beliefs, and social roles, requires stable guidance and consistent moral reference points. The absence of a father during this formative period potentially disrupts the acquisition of moral reasoning, emotional regulation, and prosocial behaviour (Branje et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that children raised in father-absent households face elevated risks of behavioural problems, including delinquency, aggression, and academic underachievement (McLanahan et al., 2013; King et al., 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention to father absence globally, significant gaps remain in understanding how this phenomenon specifically influences moral conduct among adolescents in Ghanaian communities. Much existing literature originates from Western contexts, with limited exploration of how African family systems, extended kinship networks, and cultural values moderate the effects of paternal absence (Branje et al., 2021). The Effutu Municipality in Ghana's Central Region, characterized by fishing-dependent livelihoods and distinct socio-cultural practices, presents a unique setting for examining these dynamics.

This article addresses the objective of a broader study investigating paternal absence and adolescent identity formation: to explore the influence of paternal absence on adolescents' moral conduct. By centring adolescent voices and experiences, this research illuminates the mechanisms through which father absence shapes moral decision-making, behavioural regulation, and ethical development within this specific socio-cultural context.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST) and Social Identity Theory (SIT).

Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Bowen's Family Systems Theory conceptualizes the family as an interconnected emotional unit wherein each member's functioning influences and is influenced by every other member (Kerr &

Bowen, 1988). According to this framework, the family operates as a system striving for equilibrium, with each member, particularly parents, playing essential roles in maintaining emotional and behavioural stability (Haefner, 2014). The father constitutes a critical subsystem whose presence contributes to the family's optimal functioning through the provision of structure, authority, and emotional regulation. When a father becomes absent, the family system experiences disequilibrium. The remaining members, typically mothers and children, must adapt through role redistribution, often resulting in emotional fusion, over-functioning, or emotional cutoff (Bowen, 1978). For adolescents, this systemic disruption manifests in weakened supervision, diminished moral guidance, and potential behavioural dysregulation. The theory's concept of the "nuclear family emotional system" explains how anxiety and dysfunction in one part of the family (paternal absence) generate compensatory behaviours and emotional responses throughout the system (Papero, 2014). BFST further posits that patterns of emotional functioning are transmitted across generations (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Consequently, adolescents who experience paternal absence may internalize dysfunctional relationship patterns and moral frameworks that perpetuate cycles of family instability. Understanding paternal absence through this systemic lens highlights the need for interventions addressing the entire family unit rather than focusing solely on individual adolescents.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides additional insight into how paternal absence affects adolescents' moral self-concept and social behaviour. According to SIT, individuals derive significant portions of their identity from membership in social groups, engaging in social comparison processes that shape self-evaluation and behaviour. For adolescents, the family constitutes a primary identity-relevant group, with parents serving as key referents for internalizing values and behavioural norms. Father's absence can disrupt this identity-formation process in several ways. First, adolescents may experience diminished positive distinctiveness when comparing their family structure to two-parent households, leading to lowered self-esteem and increased vulnerability to negative peer influences (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Second, the absence of paternal identification may drive adolescents to seek alternative group memberships, including deviant peer groups, to fulfil identity needs. Third, the moral values and behavioural expectations associated with the "in-group" of the intact family become less accessible, potentially resulting in moral ambiguity or drift. Together, BFST and SIT provide a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted effects of paternal absence on adolescent moral conduct, addressing both intrafamilial dynamics and broader social identity processes.

The Father's Role in Moral Development

Fathers contribute uniquely to children's moral socialization through multiple pathways. Unlike mothers, who typically emphasize nurturing and emotional support, fathers more frequently engage in disciplinary interactions that establish behavioural boundaries and consequences (Lamb,

2010). Through rough-and-tumble play, rule enforcement, and challenging interactions, fathers teach children impulse control, risk assessment, and respect for authority (Paquette, 2004). Studies show that paternal involvement correlates positively with children's moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour. Amato and Keith (1991), in their seminal meta-analysis, found that children with involved fathers exhibited greater moral maturity, lower rates of delinquency, and stronger internalization of ethical standards compared to peers from father-absent homes. These effects persist even when controlling for socioeconomic status and maternal involvement, suggesting a unique paternal contribution to moral development. Fathers also serve as critical role models for ethical behaviour, particularly for male adolescents navigating masculine identity formation (Jeynes, 2016). Through observation of paternal conduct, boys learn appropriate expressions of masculinity that integrate strength with responsibility and emotional regulation. Girls, conversely, develop templates for male-female relationships and expectations of male behaviour through paternal interactions (Ellis et al., 2003). The absence of this modelling may predispose adolescents to distorted relationship expectations and moral frameworks.

Paternal Absence and Behavioural Outcomes

A substantial body of literature documents associations between father absence and adverse behavioural outcomes. McLanahan et al. (2013), utilizing longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, found that adolescents from father-absent homes exhibited significantly higher rates of externalizing behaviours, including aggression, rule-breaking, and conduct problems. These effects were partially mediated by reduced parental supervision and economic hardship but persisted after controlling for these factors. In African contexts, research has similarly identified paternal absence as a risk factor for moral and behavioural difficulties. Owusu (2024), studying Ghanaian communities, found that father absence significantly reduced adolescents' internalization of societal norms and values, particularly in communities where fathers traditionally serve as primary moral instructors. Amoateng et al. (2018) documented elevated rates of truancy, substance use, and delinquent behaviour among Ghanaian adolescents from father-absent households. However, research also highlights significant variability in outcomes, with many adolescents demonstrating remarkable resilience despite paternal absence. Protective factors include strong maternal relationships, extended family support, positive peer influences, and engagement with religious institutions (Bamishigbin et al., 2017). This resilience perspective emphasizes the need to understand both risk mechanisms and compensatory processes in examining moral development among father-absent adolescents.

Gendered Dimensions of Moral Conduct

The influence of paternal absence on moral conduct appears to manifest differently for male and female adolescents. Boys from father-absent homes more frequently exhibit externalizing behaviours, aggression, defiance, and delinquency, reflecting the loss of paternal authority and discipline (Johnson, 2017). Without a male role model demonstrating prosocial masculine

behaviour, boys may adopt hypermasculine postures characterized by aggression and emotional suppression (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018). Girls, conversely, tend to internalize the emotional consequences of paternal absence, exhibiting higher rates of depression, anxiety, and relational difficulties (Mandara et al., 2005). However, these internalizing symptoms may indirectly influence moral conduct through increased susceptibility to peer pressure, early sexual activity, and compromised decision-making (Ellis et al., 2003). The absence of paternal affirmation and protection may lead girls to seek validation through maladaptive relationships or risk-taking behaviours.

The Ghanaian Context

Understanding paternal absence in Ghana requires attention to specific socio-cultural dynamics. Ghanaian family structures have undergone significant transformation over recent decades, with urbanization, economic pressures, and changing gender roles contributing to increased family instability (Adjei, 2019). Traditional extended family systems, which historically provided alternative sources of moral guidance and support, have weakened in many communities, leaving single mothers to shoulder parenting responsibilities with limited resources (Boakye-Boateng, 2010). In fishing communities like Effutu Municipality, seasonal migration patterns and economic precarity further destabilize family structures. Fathers may be physically absent for extended periods due to fishing expeditions or labour migration, evolving from temporary separation to permanent emotional disengagement. Cultural norms that define fatherhood primarily through financial provision rather than emotional nurturance may normalize such absence, reducing social pressure for paternal involvement (Ratele, Shefer, & Clowes, 2012). These contextual factors underscore the importance of locally grounded research that captures the lived experiences of Ghanaian adolescents navigating moral development in the absence of fathers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing a case study design to investigate the influence of paternal absence on adolescent moral conduct in Effutu Municipality. The study population comprised adolescents aged 13-19 years in senior high schools within the Effutu Municipality who had experienced paternal absence. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select 15 participants (7 adolescent boys, 5 adolescent girls, and 3 single mothers) for the study. The inclusion of single mothers provided triangulation of perspectives, enabling comparison between adolescent self-reports and maternal observations. The sample size was determined by data saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion (FGD). Semi-structured interviews, lasting 20-30 minutes, allowed flexibility to explore emergent themes while maintaining focus on the research objectives. An interview guide addressing background information, experiences of paternal absence, moral conduct, coping mechanisms, and perceived effects was utilized. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for

themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis was iterative, involving constant comparison within and across transcripts to identify patterns and variations in participants' experiences. Triangulation was achieved through integration of multiple data sources (adolescent interviews, FGD, maternal interviews) and methods (interviews, field notes), enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of findings.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of participant responses revealed five major themes regarding the influence of paternal absence on adolescents' moral conduct: (1) Loss of Moral Supervision and Guidance, (2) Emotional Consequences and Moral Confusion, (3) Maternal and Extended Family Substitution, (4) Moral Independence and Self-Regulation, and (5) Role of Religion and Education.

Loss of Moral Supervision and Guidance

The most pervasive theme across interviews was the loss of direct moral control and behavioural monitoring traditionally provided by fathers. Participants consistently described how paternal absence resulted in weakened discipline, greater behavioural freedom, and, in some cases, engagement in deviant activities.

A 17-year-old male participant articulated this clearly:

"When my father was around, he always told me what was right and wrong. Now that he is not here, no one corrects me when I do wrong. This makes me feel that I still need a disciplinarian around me because, as an adolescent, I might be doing something wrong, my father is around, and he corrects me with force to ensure I do not repeat that mistake."

Another male adolescent (16 years) emphasized the differential effectiveness of maternal versus paternal discipline:

"Since my father left, my mother can't control me like he used to. I sometimes come home late because no one will punish me. This is not because I don't respect my mother, but because she is also busy with other things like work and her personal stuff, which gives me the freedom to be out with friends returning in sometimes ungodly hours."

Female participants similarly acknowledged the disciplinary void created by paternal absence. A 15-year-old female noted:

"Hmmm, my father was strict. He never allowed me to go out at night. Now I go anywhere because my mother is soft. Sometimes, it's like she doesn't want me to feel bad, or she's treating me badly following the passing of my father. So, I also take advantage of that to do things I want to do."

These accounts illustrate the father's unique disciplinary function characterized by authority, consistency, and enforcement that mothers, despite their best efforts, often struggle to replicate.

The absence of this paternal control mechanism creates space for behavioural experimentation and moral drift during a developmental period when external regulation remains essential.

Emotional Consequences and Moral Confusion

Beyond behavioural control, participants described how paternal absence generated emotional struggles that indirectly influenced moral choices. Feelings of sadness, abandonment, anger, and diminished self-worth were common and appeared to impair moral reasoning and decision-making.

A 16-year-old female participant expressed:

"Sometimes I feel useless when I see my friends with their fathers. I get angry easily and sometimes do wrong things."

A 15-year-old male described a similar pattern:

"I feel lonely, and no one talks to me about life. Sometimes I do what comes to mind. If it turns out to be wrong and negative, I take it like that."

Another male participant (15 years) linked emotional distress directly to behavioural dysregulation:

"I feel a constant anger inside me. Why did he leave? What is so wrong with us? Sometimes I take that anger out on my younger siblings or by being rude to teachers. I know it's wrong, but the feeling is too strong."

A 17-year-old female participant described the demotivating effect of paternal absence on academic engagement, which she connected to moral conduct:

"When I remember that my father is not here, I lose interest in school and misbehave. I do that because who's the father to even cater for my educational needs?"

These responses demonstrate the interconnection between emotional well-being and moral functioning. The unresolved grief, anger, and shame associated with paternal absence create emotional volatility that undermines self-regulation and increases susceptibility to impulsive or retaliatory behaviour. The cognitive resources required for moral reasoning become compromised when adolescents are preoccupied with managing painful emotions.

Maternal and Extended Family Substitution

Despite the challenges posed by paternal absence, most participants identified mothers, grandmothers, uncles, and other relatives as alternative sources of moral guidance and supervision. This compensatory mechanism reflects the resilience of extended family structures within Effutu's communal context.

A 16-year-old female participant explained.

"My mother and grandmother always correct me when I misbehave. They don't allow me to spoil. My grandma will always say, 'Don't think your father is not around, so you can't be disciplined.'"

A 17-year-old male participant described his uncle's role:

"My uncle advises me not to join bad friends. He tells me the results or consequences of engaging in juvenile delinquency, which will end me, like prison. He acts like a father to me."

Another female participant (15 years) highlighted her mother's dual role:

"Even though my father is not around, my mother always tells me to respect people and stay in school. She has become my biggest support system, who does everything for me now. Adding to the fatherly role to ensure I get the best life possible she can afford."

A 15-year-old female participant described how her older brother assumed paternal responsibilities:

"My senior brother is now my father. With the work he is doing, he does his best to provide for me, especially my education, because when my dad was around, he was keen about our education. Even though my mother is around, my senior brother has stepped up to fill that gap as a father in my life and that of my other siblings."

These narratives demonstrate the adaptability of family systems in response to paternal absence. Extended kin networks and even older siblings mobilize to provide the moral instruction and supervision that absent fathers cannot. However, some participants acknowledged that these substitutes, while valuable, could not fully replicate paternal authority or emotional connection.

Moral Independence and Self-Regulation

A subset of adolescents demonstrated moral resilience and maturity despite paternal absence, emphasizing self-discipline and internalized values as guiding principles. These participants appeared to have developed autonomous moral frameworks independent of direct paternal A 17-year-old male expressed supervision.

A 16-year-old female stated:

"Even though my father left, I still behave well because I know what is right."

Similar self-reliance:

"My father's absence made me strong. I don't need someone to tell me before I do what is right."

Another male participant (18 years) described learning from others' negative examples:

"I saw what happened to my cousin when his father left. He dropped out of school. I used that as a lesson. I decided his story would not be my story."

A 16-year-old female participant articulated a conscious process of self-guidance:

"I have to be my own father now. I ask myself, 'What would a good father tell his daughter to do?' Then I try to do that. It's hard, but it keeps me on the right path."

These responses indicate that paternal absence does not inevitably result in moral deterioration. Some adolescents internalize moral standards and develop personal responsibility, drawing strength from adversity. This moral autonomy may arise from prior paternal instruction before absence occurred, from alternative role models, or from cognitive maturation that enables abstract moral reasoning.

Role of Religion and Education

Schools and churches emerged as crucial alternative sources of moral direction for many participants. Teachers, pastors, and religious teachings provided ethical guidance and behavioural reinforcement that partially compensated for absent paternal influence.

A 15-year-old female participant explained:

"My teacher always tells us to be disciplined and work hard. I see him like a father."

A 16-year-old female described the stabilizing influence of the church:

"The church has helped me to be obedient. The pastor advises me not to follow bad friends."

A 17-year-old female participant found guidance in scripture:

"The Bible has become my father's voice. When I am confused, I read it. The verses in Proverbs feel like direct advice he would have given me."

A 15-year-old male participant described school as a sanctuary:

"My school is my sanctuary. The structure, the rules, the teachers who care, it's the only place where I feel a sense of order and purpose. At home, it's just... emptiness."

A 17-year-old male noted the influence of religious media:

"I listen to preaching on the radio, and it helps me to behave well even without my father."

These accounts highlight the critical compensatory function of educational and religious institutions within the community. They provide structured environments, consistent adult mentorship, and explicit moral instruction that reinforce prosocial behaviour and ethical decision-making among father-absent adolescents.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted ways in which paternal absence shapes adolescent moral conduct in Effutu Municipality, Ghana. Consistent with prior research (Amato, 2010; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013), participants reported diminished moral supervision and behavioural control following paternal departure, resulting in increased behavioural freedom and, in some cases, engagement in problematic conduct. However, the findings also reveal significant variability in outcomes, with protective factors including maternal resilience, extended family support, religious engagement, and personal agency moderating the effects of paternal absence.

Theoretical Implications

The findings align closely with Bowen's Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), which conceptualizes the family as an interconnected emotional unit wherein disruption to one member reverberates throughout the system. Participants' descriptions of maternal over-functioning, role redistribution among siblings and extended family, and the emotional dysregulation accompanying paternal absence exemplify the systemic adaptation processes Bowen described. The father's absence creates disequilibrium that the family system must address through compensatory mechanisms—some functional (maternal discipline, extended family mentorship) and some potentially dysfunctional (emotional cutoff, behavioural acting out). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) further illuminates how paternal absence affects adolescents' moral self-concept. Participants' discomfort when peers discussed fathers, their sense of being “different” or “less than” two-parent families, and their gravitation toward alternative identity-affirming groups (religious communities, peer groups) reflect the social comparison and identity processes central to SIT. The diminished positive distinctiveness associated with father-absent family identity may drive some adolescents toward deviant peer groups that offer alternative sources of belonging and validation, potentially explaining the elevated delinquency rates documented in previous research (Chen et al., 2021).

The Unique Paternal Contribution to Moral Development

A key finding concerns the distinct nature of paternal moral influence. Participants consistently distinguished between maternal and paternal discipline, characterizing fathers as stricter, more authoritative, and more effective in enforcing behavioural boundaries. This aligns with Lamb's (2010) observation that fathers and mothers typically adopt different parenting styles, with fathers more frequently engaging in challenging interactions that teach impulse control and respect for authority. The finding that adolescents perceived maternal discipline as less effective—not due to maternal inadequacy but rather to differential relational dynamics—has important implications. It suggests that interventions aimed at supporting single mothers should not simply encourage stricter discipline but rather should help mothers develop strategies that leverage their relational strengths

while connecting adolescents with male mentors who can provide complementary forms of guidance and accountability.

Resilience and Protective Factors

Perhaps the most encouraging finding concerns the resilience demonstrated by many participants. Despite the challenges of paternal absence, adolescents who maintained strong connections with mothers, extended family, religious communities, and schools exhibited better moral outcomes than those lacking such supports. This finding resonates with the broader resilience literature, which emphasizes that adverse experiences need not determine developmental trajectories when protective factors are present (Masten, 2014).

The role of religious institutions as sources of moral guidance and emotional support is particularly noteworthy in the Ghanaian context. Churches and mosques function not merely as places of worship but as extended families that provide mentorship, structure, and belonging. The finding that some adolescents described scripture as “my father’s voice” illustrates how religious engagement can provide a symbolic paternal presence and moral framework even in biological absence. Similarly, the finding that schools serve as “sanctuaries” of order and purpose for father-absent adolescents underscores the critical importance of educational institutions in communities with high rates of family instability. Teachers who provide consistent care, high expectations, and moral instruction can significantly mitigate the effects of paternal absence.

Gendered Patterns

The findings reveal subtle gendered differences in how paternal absence affects moral conduct. Male adolescents more frequently described behavioural externalization, acting out, aggression, and defiance, reflecting the loss of paternal authority and masculine role modelling. Female adolescents more frequently described emotional internalization, sadness, loneliness, and insecurity, which indirectly influenced moral choices through compromised self-worth and relational vulnerability. These patterns align with Suen et al.'s (2020) observation that father absence affects gender identity and behaviour differently. For boys, the absence of a male model demonstrating prosocial masculinity may lead to either hypermasculine compensation or confusion regarding appropriate male behaviour. For girls, the absence of paternal affirmation may create vulnerabilities in self-esteem and relationship expectations that manifest in moral domains through increased susceptibility to peer pressure or early sexual activity.

Cultural Context and Implications

The findings must be understood within the specific socio-cultural context of Effutu Municipality. The prevalence of fishing livelihoods, with associated patterns of seasonal migration and economic precarity, creates structural conditions conducive to paternal absence. Cultural norms that define fatherhood primarily through financial provision may normalize physical and emotional distance, reducing social pressure for paternal engagement. However, the same cultural context also

provides resources for resilience. The extended family system, though weakened by modernization, remains sufficiently robust in many communities to provide alternative sources of moral guidance and support. The strong religious infrastructure offers accessible mentorship and moral community. Schools, though resource-constrained, provide structure and caring adult relationships. Interventions to address paternal absence and its effects on adolescent moral conduct must therefore work with rather than against these cultural resources. Strengthening extended family networks, partnering with religious institutions to provide mentorship programs, and equipping teachers to support father-absent students represent culturally congruent approaches that leverage existing community strengths.

This study demonstrates that paternal absence exerts a remarkable influence on adolescent moral conduct in Effutu Municipality through multiple mechanisms: diminished supervision and discipline, emotional distress that impairs moral reasoning, and disruption of identity formation processes. However, the findings also reveal remarkable resilience among adolescents who benefit from strong maternal relationships, extended family support, religious engagement, and educational mentorship.

Recommendations

1. Single mothers should be supported in developing disciplinary strategies that balance nurturance with appropriate behavioural expectations, recognizing the unique challenges of solo parenting.
2. Extended family members should be encouraged and equipped to serve as active moral mentors for father-absent adolescents, providing consistent guidance and accountability.
3. School-based mentorship programs should be established or strengthened, connecting father-absent adolescents with caring adult mentors who can provide guidance and support.
4. Churches and mosques should formalize mentorship initiatives that pair father-absent adolescents with responsible adult congregants.
5. Community awareness campaigns should promote responsible fatherhood, emphasizing that paternal involvement extends beyond financial provision to include emotional nurturance and moral guidance.

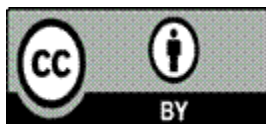
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