

# Becoming a parent with the legacy of civil war

## Learning from a 22-year study on intergenerational impact in Sierra Leone

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**Twenty-two years have passed since the end of an 11-year, brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. Marked by horrific atrocities, those who survived the war as children are still dealing with the aftermath as they themselves become parents. Funded by the US National Institute of Mental Health, the Intergenerational Study of War-Affected Youth (ISWAY), led by Dr Theresa Betancourt of the Boston College School of Social Work, has followed a cohort of 529 young people and their families since the war ended. ISWAY has documented the pervasive effects of war, while also identifying risk and protective factors that impact health and wellbeing (Betancourt et al., 2010).**

Our research has revealed that for many of these people – who were on average just 14 years old when the study started in 2002 – the transition to parenthood can resurface old traumas and unhealthy coping mechanisms. In the absence of robust formal support from government and non-government organisations (NGOs), our findings show that new parents navigate the challenges of family life by relying on relationships with family, friends, and faith communities – networks that help them nurture hope

for the future and provide opportunities to process intergenerational trauma.

### **A community in need**

“Sia”, 36, was enrolled in ISWAY as a teenager. Now, she struggles to navigate the complexities of motherhood while coping with her traumatic past. As a young girl, she witnessed acts that left deep psychological wounds. As a mother of three, Sia strives to create a nurturing home, but the legacy of surviving a war often creeps up without warning. She experiences sudden moments of unpredictability and anger when her children misbehave, leading to disproportionate reactions. These reactions, she realises, are linked to the survival instincts she developed during the war. In those days, even a hint of “weakness” would put a target on one’s back.

*“When my heart is broken, I tell them that today I am in a bad mood, because they too know that when I am in a bad mood, I beat people.”*

**“Sia”, 36, mother of three**



↑ Group photo of the research team

### **Parents who experienced war as children need more support**

Immediately after the conflict, various external supports were established to assist families in the war-torn country, including parenting programmes and mental health services. NGOs and international organisations provided resources, counselling and training to help individuals cope with trauma and learn effective parenting skills. However, these services disappeared over time due to funding cuts or changes in donor priorities. Today, adults who were children during the war have little in the way of external support with the transition to becoming parents and the past traumas that re-emerge during this life-changing experience.

And these parents aren't just dealing with difficult memories from the war; the years since the end of the war have been highly challenging as well. Sierra Leone, one of the poorest countries in the world,

has also had to contend with a deadly outbreak of Ebola virus disease, Covid-19, and environmental disasters such as mudslides that killed hundreds of people and displaced thousands. These challenges have disrupted the social fabric of families, straining marriages and contributing to divorce rates and family separations.

In the absence of formal support, these persevering young adults pursue other avenues to seek help and find hope.

### **Religious community is a source of strength**

In these difficult circumstances, parents often turn to their religious faith to get through hard times. Islam and Christianity are prevalent in Sierra Leone and provide guidance for understanding adversity and coping with challenges. The belief in a higher power

also offers emotional comfort and a sense of hope. Many parents express that they feel they cannot achieve anything without the support of God, which instills a sense of purpose and perseverance.

*“Well ... if something makes me distressed, I will sit and think, and I hope to God because if it is about distress, as long as we are still existing in this world, you will encounter joyful moments, and you will also encounter sad moments; therefore, people should not be discouraged and behave as if it will be the end of your life. You should always remember that ... There may be times when you do not feel good but since you are with God, you will be able to manage all those things.”*

**“Binta”, 33, mother of five**

Religious leaders also offer parenting guidance – a valued resource given that many lost their own parents during the war.

*“I used to go to the mosque and learn the Quran, you will meet some Imams that preach well. They will tell you that children you are bringing up who are orphans do not have fathers or mothers. It is inside the Bible and the Quran that you have to care for them as your biological child ... So, I like Imams that advise people how to care for adopted children and children who have lost their parents. It makes me happy, even though I am a Christian. When I see my pastor in Bible class, I will ask him [how to care for my non-biological children].”*

**“Araphan”, 32, father of two**

### **Finding support through friends and family**

Even with limited resources, new parents do find support through personal connections.

Family support has traditionally played a significant role in parenting, especially in Sierra Leone’s communal culture. Relatives often stepped in to

help care for children, providing practical assistance and emotional support. Unfortunately, many families are now fragmented due to losses they experienced during the conflict, with fewer extended family members available to help new parents. However, even while family support is less prevalent overall, many still find emotional support from friends, elders in the community, and spouses. There is a widespread understanding that seeking such help is crucial for promoting resilience. Our research has found that the presence of reliable and empathetic friends and community members fosters a sense of belonging and validation, reducing feelings of isolation, and gives parents a chance to collectively problem solve and overall feel less alone in their struggles.

*“You might have someone in your life or your circle who is close to you and who you can talk to when there is a problem. Such a person can give you advice and you can find a way out of the situation or the mood. Sometimes I have problems between my wife and I. Such people mediate between us and give us valuable advice to resolve the matter between us. That is very important.”*

**“Ibrahim”, 38, father of three**

### **How children provide opportunities for hope**

Study findings show that children offer new parents comfort and hope for the future despite the challenges of parenting. In the moments when parents find themselves struggling, the children offer moments of levity, joy, silliness and warmth.

*“They ... encourage me and [have] a lot of fun with me and I will also laugh, just for me to forget about those moments.”*

**“Isatu”, 35, mother of five**

More practically, as children get older they are able to provide help with siblings or bring in a little money to help the family get by. Many parents encourage their children to stay in school, with the understanding that a good education will lead to

better opportunities in the future. Hoping for better days ahead gives parents a sense of resolve and an opportunity to feel some optimism, reinforcing their investment in the future.

Despite the numerous challenges they have faced, war-affected caregivers are committed to providing a loving upbringing for their children – often in stark contrast to their own childhoods. In fact, ISWAY has shown that many of the caregivers who experienced more violence during the war are significantly less likely to use violent discipline with their children (Alleyne-Green et al., 2019). These caregivers are often more astutely aware of their potential role in interrupting old patterns.

*“I was brought up [in a violent home], and normally when my uncle shouted, I would be scared. I promised myself that I would not raise my kids like that.”*

**“Maliki”, 31, father of three**

### **The power to overcome**

In one local refrain, some survivors of the war describe themselves as *borbor pain* (direct translation: “suffering child”), a phrase that is often used as a way to imply that they feel they can overcome anything. Indeed, for Sierra Leoneans, the formidable challenges they face are matched by their fortitude. While those who become parents struggle with inadequate formal support, they draw resilience from family, friends, religion and their children. These social networks often form the basis for community development efforts, especially in rural areas where service gaps far exceed the available workforce. In these communities, all hands must be on deck: Imams may provide informal education for children and experienced mothers may volunteer to lead community groups that promote infant nutrition and feeding practices or encourage vulnerable children to pursue education.

Formal mothers’ groups – perhaps a misnomer as fathers and other caregivers are often welcome – are also crucial for improving maternal and child health in Sierra Leone. One such initiative, “Mother-to-Mother Support Groups” (M2M), emerged from existing

community-led meetings, and were structurally supported by the federal government. These groups offer peer support, parenting-related skills-building, and education on nutrition, breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices, hygiene, and disease prevention. While funding for these activities ended, many of the more than 14,000 groups are still active thanks to the work of passionate volunteers demonstrating a widespread commitment to improving the lives of families with young children.

Although these grassroots efforts do not explicitly focus on healing from intergenerational trauma, they may ultimately help to promote it. The social capital enhanced by group participation can help caregivers connect with others with similar experiences and better cope with the challenges of parenting. In the longer term, these groups can play a key role in community development by providing scaffolding to leverage resources when formal support becomes available. Some groups, for example, manage Village Savings and Loans (VS&L) that provide a safety net for group members by enabling them to save, borrow, and access emergency funds. These community-centred, collective efforts have promoted income generation and improved living standards, especially for women in rural communities. The resulting economic empowerment has been linked to better maternal and child health, improved child nutrition and, crucially, more education for their children.

*“I am always hoping that [my children] will all become educated and do better things with long life and good health; let Allah do it for me ...”*

**“Aminata”, 32, mother of two**

### **The case for more formal support**

Scaffolding formal government and NGO programmes to improve conditions for Sierra Leonean families can go a long way towards sustainable change in the war-torn country.

Lessons learned from ISWAY have helped us develop interventions to improve mental health among at-risk youth (Betancourt et al., 2013). For example, the Youth Readiness Intervention uses evidence-based

practices to improve symptoms across a range of mental health disorders, ultimately improving school engagement and increasing employment opportunities for transitional-aged youth (15–24 years) (Freeman et al., 2024). We'd like to see more support for this programme and wider dissemination of it throughout the country.

Also, we are currently adapting an evidence-based intervention which was developed in post-conflict Rwanda (see the [article by Shauna Murray and colleagues on pages 126–128](#)), the Family Strengthening Intervention for Early Child Development and Violence Prevention, based on our findings from ISWAY (Betancourt et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2021; Desrosiers et al., 2024). This intervention would promote nurturing, responsive care; improve health, nutrition, and hygiene; and reduce family violence in hard-to-reach families with children up to 36 months. In Sierra Leone, where workforce

constraints are more severe, we are investigating potential delivery platforms such as digital tools, community health workers, and early childhood teachers. Doing this would allow us to reach a larger number of families, including those in rural areas.

Our research shows that familial, community, and faith-based support networks are helping families heal and move towards more hopeful futures. Yet, we can do so much more.



#### Note

For further information about the more than 22 years of the Intergenerational Study of War (ISWAY) in Sierra Leone, see: *Shadows Into Light: A Generation of Child Soldiers Comes of Age* by Theresa S. Betancourt, to be released by Harvard University Press on 21 January, 2025

➤ [Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2025-33](https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2025-33)

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