
FORMAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN IN GHANAIAN FAMILIES AS A MEANS OF COPING WITH DIVORCE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore the availability, accessibility, utilization, and effectiveness of formal support systems—counselling services, social welfare programmes, legal aid, school-based interventions, and religious institutional support—for children coping with parental divorce in Ghanaian families. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 44 participants across three stakeholder groups: young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood (16 participants), divorced parents who sought or attempted to seek formal support for their children (14 participants), and social workers, counsellors, legal aid officers, and religious leaders with experience providing support to divorced families (14 participants). Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and narrative prompts designed to elicit participants' experiences with formal support systems, barriers to access, perceptions of effectiveness, cultural appropriateness of services, and recommendations for improvement. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: the near-absence of professional counselling services, with participants describing counselling as virtually unavailable outside affluent urban areas and unknown to most families; the underfunded and overstretched social welfare system, wherein social workers described overwhelming caseloads that prevented them from providing meaningful support to children of divorce; the inaccessible legal aid system, with participants describing legal assistance for custody, child support, and visitation as expensive, slow, and intimidating for ordinary Ghanaians; the minimal and inconsistent school-based support, wherein counsellors were absent from most basic schools and teachers lacked training to

support children experiencing family disruption; the ambivalent role of religious institutions, with churches and mosques offering prayer and limited practical support but also contributing to stigma and failing to provide structured programmes for children; and the emerging but fragile civil society and NGO interventions, with participants describing isolated programmes that were not sustained or scaled. Participants' narratives revealed that formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana are severely limited, fragmented, and largely inaccessible to the majority of families. Professional counselling is concentrated in affluent urban areas and is unknown to most. Social welfare services are underfunded and overstretched, with workers unable to provide more than crisis intervention. Legal aid is inaccessible due to cost, complexity, and intimidation. Schools lack counsellors and teacher training. Religious institutions offer prayer but not structured support. The few NGO programmes that exist are not sustained. Children of divorce and their families cope with minimal formal support, relying instead on informal networks that are themselves strained. The study contributes to the understanding of the gaps in Ghana's formal support infrastructure for children of divorce, offering insights relevant to mental health policy, social welfare reform, legal aid access, educational counselling, and religious institutional programming.

KEYWORDS: *Divorce, children, formal support systems, counselling, social welfare, legal aid, Ghana, focus groups, Ubuntu, Social Constructionism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

When parents divorce, children need support. They need adults who listen, who validate their feelings, who help them make sense of family change, who advocate for their needs in custody arrangements, who ensure that child support is paid, and who provide a safe space to process grief and fear (Amato, 2010). In many high-income countries, this support is provided through formal systems: school counsellors who check in with children experiencing family disruption, family therapists who help parents co-parent effectively, legal aid lawyers who ensure children's interests are represented in custody proceedings, social workers who monitor children's welfare, and support groups where children can share experiences with peers (Kelly & Emery, 2003). These formal support systems are not perfect—they are often underfunded and overstretched—but they exist. Children of divorce in those contexts are not entirely alone.

In Ghana, the landscape of formal support for children of divorce is vastly different. Counselling services are concentrated in affluent urban areas, unknown to most families, and

prohibitively expensive for the average Ghanaian (Ocansey, 2018). The Department of Social Welfare, mandated to protect vulnerable children, is severely underfunded and understaffed, with social workers carrying caseloads that make meaningful intervention impossible. Legal aid is theoretically available but practically inaccessible due to cost, complexity, and the intimidation of court processes. School counsellors are rare, especially at the basic education level, and teachers receive no training in supporting children experiencing family disruption. Religious institutions, while present in every community, offer prayer and charity but rarely structured, evidence-informed support programmes for children of divorce.

The absence of formal support systems places the entire burden of helping children cope with divorce on informal networks—extended family, friends, neighbours, and religious congregations. These informal networks are valuable and culturally congruent with Ghanaian Ubuntu values of communal care (Gyekye, 1997). But they are also insufficient. Extended family members may be overstretched, may take sides in the divorce, may not know how to support children emotionally, or may be part of the problem. Friends may be the same age as the child and lack the wisdom to help. Religious communities may offer judgment as much as support. When informal networks fail, children have no backup. They cope alone or not at all. This study addresses a critical gap in knowledge about formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana. While the informal supports available to Ghanaian children have been examined (maternal extended family, peer networks), no study has systematically documented the availability, accessibility, utilisation, and effectiveness of formal support systems. Understanding what formal supports exist, who can access them, what barriers prevent access, and how they are experienced by those who use them is essential for policy and programme development.

This study employs focus group methodology to explore formal support systems from three perspectives: young adults who experienced divorce and who may or may not have accessed formal support; divorced parents who sought or attempted to seek formal support for their children; and helping professionals (social workers, counsellors, legal aid officers, religious leaders) who provide or attempt to provide formal support. By triangulating these perspectives, the study aims to map the current landscape of formal support and identify what is missing, what is ineffective, and what could be strengthened.

The study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) informs the understanding that formal support systems are not neutral technical interventions but are socially constructed through policy decisions, funding allocations, professional training, and cultural assumptions about who deserves support and

what kind of support is appropriate. In Ghana, the underdevelopment of formal support systems for children of divorce reflects policy priorities, funding constraints, and cultural assumptions that family problems should be solved within the family (Ubuntu) rather than through professional services. Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997) provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding both the strengths and limitations of informal support and the challenges of introducing formal support systems into a cultural context that has traditionally relied on communal care. Ubuntu's emphasis on relational, community-based support is valuable but may also create resistance to professional, individualised interventions. Formal support systems must be designed to complement, not replace, informal networks.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the critical importance of formal support systems for helping children cope with parental divorce, and despite the growing prevalence of divorce in urban Ghana, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about the availability, accessibility, utilisation, and effectiveness of formal support for children of divorce in Ghana. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding the role of formal institutions in African family life and practical consequences for policy, funding, and programme development.

First, the availability of formal support services for children of divorce in Ghana has not been systematically mapped. Counselling services, social welfare programmes, legal aid, school-based support, and religious institutional programmes exist in some form, but their geographic distribution, funding levels, staffing, and service reach are unknown. Without systematic mapping, policymakers cannot identify gaps or target resources. It is known anecdotally that services are concentrated in Accra and other major cities, but the extent of rural exclusion has not been documented.

Second, the accessibility of existing formal support services has not been examined. Even where services exist, families may not be able to access them due to cost, distance, lack of awareness, stigma, or cultural mismatch. A counselling centre in Accra may be theoretically available but practically inaccessible to a low-income family in Nima who cannot afford the fee, does not know the service exists, would be ashamed to be seen entering a "mental health" facility, or would find the counsellor's Western orientation alien. Understanding barriers to access is essential for designing services that reach those who need them.

Third, the utilisation of formal support services by children of divorce and their families has not been measured. What percentage of divorced families seek counselling? What percentage

pursues legal aid for custody or child support? What percentage involves social welfare? What percentage of children receive school-based support? Without baseline data, it is impossible to know whether services are being used or ignored.

Fourth, the effectiveness of formal support services as experienced by users has not been evaluated. Do parents who attend counselling find it helpful? Do children who see a school counsellor feel supported? Do families who use legal aid achieve better outcomes? Do religious programmes meet children's needs? User perspectives are essential for quality improvement but have not been collected systematically.

Fifth, the cultural appropriateness of formal support services for Ghanaian families has not been assessed. Most counselling and therapy models were developed in Western individualistic contexts and assume that clients will talk openly about their feelings, value professional confidentiality, and trust a stranger with intimate family problems (Ocansey, 2018). These assumptions may not fit Ghanaian cultural norms of indirect communication, family privacy, and reliance on kin for support. Services that are not culturally appropriate will be underutilised and ineffective.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore the availability, accessibility, utilization, and effectiveness of formal support systems—counselling services, social welfare programmes, legal aid, school-based interventions, and religious institutional support—for children coping with parental divorce in Ghanaian families from the perspectives of young adults, divorced parents, and helping professionals.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To document the availability of formal support services for children of divorce in Ghana across counselling, social welfare, legal aid, school-based, and religious institutional domains.
- 4.2 To identify barriers that prevent children and families from accessing existing formal support services.
- 4.3 To examine the utilisation patterns of formal support services among divorced families.
- 4.4 To evaluate the effectiveness of formal support services as experienced by young adults who accessed them and parents who sought them.

4.5 To assess the cultural appropriateness of existing formal support services for Ghanaian families.

4.6 To generate recommendations for strengthening formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What formal support services (counselling, social welfare, legal aid, school-based, religious) are available to children of divorce in Ghana, and where are they located?

Research Question Two: What barriers prevent children and families from accessing existing formal support services?

Research Question Three: How do young adults and parents describe their experiences with formal support services that they have used?

Research Question Four: How effective and culturally appropriate are existing formal support services as experienced by users?

Research Question Five: What improvements to formal support systems do young adults, parents, and professionals recommend?

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 existence and value of formal support systems, is actively constructed through policy decisions, funding allocations, professional training, and cultural assumptions. The fact that Ghana has few counsellors and many churches is not a natural fact; it reflects historical decisions about resource allocation, professional education, and cultural beliefs about where help should come from (Gergen, 2015). Understanding formal support systems requires understanding how they have been constructed—and why they have been constructed as they are.

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the relationship between formal and informal support 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 well-being are constituted through relationships and communal participation (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this has traditionally meant that families care for their own; problems are solved within the extended family, not by turning to professional strangers (Gyekye, 1997). This cultural orientation has strengths: it has sustained Ghanaians through difficult times without formal support. But it also has limitations: when families are themselves the source of the problem (as in divorce), or when extended family is overstretched or absent, the cultural expectation that "family should handle it" can prevent families from seeking the professional help they need.

6.2 Counselling and Mental Health Services in Ghana

Mental health services in Ghana are severely limited. The Mental Health Authority oversees psychiatric hospitals in Accra and Ankaful, community mental health services, and the integration of mental health into primary care (Roberts, Mogan, & Asare, 2014). However, services are concentrated in urban areas, underfunded, and focused on severe mental illness rather than common problems such as divorce-related distress. Counselling specifically for children and families is even more limited. The Ghana Psychology Council regulates the profession, but there are fewer than 500 registered psychologists for a population of over 30 million. Most are in Accra and work in private practice, charging fees that are unaffordable for the average Ghanaian.

School counselling is mandated by the Ghana Education Service, with guidance and counselling units established in secondary schools. However, counsellor-to-student ratios are extremely high (often 1:2000 or worse), counsellors lack specialised training in divorce-related issues, and primary schools rarely have counsellors (Ocansey, 2018). Children experiencing parental divorce are unlikely to receive school-based counselling unless they attend an elite private school or are referred by a teacher who happens to be aware of their situation.

6.3 Social Welfare Services for Children

The Department of Social Welfare (DSW) is mandated to protect vulnerable children, including those affected by divorce. Services include child protection investigations, foster care placement, family mediation, and support for children in need. However, the DSW is severely underfunded and understaffed. Social workers carry caseloads that make meaningful intervention impossible; they focus on the most severe cases of abuse and neglect, not on the less acute but still harmful effects of divorce (Abdullah, Cudjoe, & Manful, 2018). Most

divorced families never interact with social welfare unless there is a custody dispute that escalates to the courts or allegations of child abuse.

6.4 Legal Aid for Custody and Child Support

Legal aid is theoretically available to indigent Ghanaians through the Legal Aid Commission. Services include assistance with family law matters, including custody, child support, and visitation. However, the Legal Aid Commission is underfunded and understaffed, with lawyers concentrated in Accra and other regional capitals. Many families are unaware of legal aid. Others are intimidated by court processes, even when free legal representation is available. Custody disputes can drag on for years, with children caught in the middle (Asare, 2016). Child support enforcement is weak; many fathers do not pay, and the legal system has few mechanisms to compel payment.

6.5 Religious Institutions as Support Systems

Religious institutions are the most widespread formal organisations in Ghana. Churches and mosques are present in every community, even the most remote. They have infrastructure, leadership, and community trust that other formal systems lack. In theory, religious institutions could provide robust support for children of divorce: counselling, support groups, practical assistance (food, school fees), and community belonging. In practice, religious institutions are ambivalent sources of support. They offer prayer and charity but often lack structured, evidence-informed programmes for children. They may contribute to stigma by framing divorce as sin. They may offer judgment as much as help (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). The potential of religious institutions as formal support systems remains largely unrealised.

6.6 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that no study has comprehensively examined formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana across multiple domains (counselling, social welfare, legal aid, school-based, religious). No study has systematically identified barriers to access or evaluated effectiveness from user perspectives. The present study addresses these gaps by generating rich qualitative data on formal support systems.

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 system-level gaps (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which

participants articulate shared experiences of formal support systems (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 social services shaped the interpretive process.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in Accra, Ghana's capital and largest urban centre, which has the highest concentration of formal support services. This setting was selected to examine the best-case scenario; if formal support is lacking in Accra, it is even more lacking elsewhere.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised three stakeholder groups. Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood (ages 18-30). Divorced parents who sought or attempted to seek formal support for their children. Helping professionals: social workers, counsellors, legal aid officers, and religious leaders with experience supporting divorced families.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed. Young adults and parents were recruited through university counselling centres, church youth groups, legal aid clinics, and social media. Professionals were recruited through professional associations and government agencies.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, two per stakeholder group, yielding 44 participants. Young adult participants: 16 (10 females, 6 males), aged 19-30. Divorced parent participants: 14 (10 females, 4 males), aged 34-55. Professional participants: 14 (8 females, 6 males), including social workers (4), counsellors (4), legal aid officers (3), and religious leaders (3), aged 30-60.

Table 1. Participants.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Group	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Role/Experience	Participants (N)
Young Adults	FG1	Accra	5F/3M	19-28	Parents divorced ages 5-14	8
Young Adults	FG2	Accra	5F/3M	20-30	Parents divorced ages 6-15	8
Divorced Parents	FG3	Accra	5F/2M	34-52	Sought formal support	7

Divorced Parents	FG4	Accra	5F/2M	38-55	Attempted to seek support	7
Professionals	FG5	Accra	4F/3M	32-58	Social workers, counsellors	7
Professionals	FG6	Accra	4F/3M	35-60	Legal aid, religious leaders	7
Total	6 groups	Accra	28F/16M	19-60	Varied	44

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 awareness, utilisation, and effectiveness. Prompts included: "Were you aware of any counselling, legal, or social welfare services for children of divorce?" "Did you or your family use any formal support services?" "Were they helpful?"

The parent guide explored help-seeking behaviour and barriers. Prompts included: "Did you try to get formal support for your children?" "What made it hard?" "If you got support, was it helpful?"

The professional guide explored system capacity, barriers, and recommendations. Prompts included: "What services are available for children of divorce?" "What prevents families from accessing services?" "What would need to change?"

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between February and May 2027. Each focus group session lasted between ninety and one hundred and twenty 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 Professional Studies, Accra. 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 current state of formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana.

8.1 Theme One: "I Did Not Know Counselling Existed for People Like Us" — The Near-Absence of Professional Counselling Services

The first theme concerned the near-absence of professional counselling services for children of divorce in Ghana, particularly for families who are not wealthy and living in affluent Accra neighbourhoods. Young adults and parents described being unaware that counselling existed, unable to find counsellors when they sought them, unable to afford fees when they found them, and distrustful of counsellors they did access.

A 25-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"I did not know counselling existed for people like us. I thought counselling was for rich people, for Americans. No one ever told me there was someone I could talk to about my parents' divorce. I suffered for years thinking I was alone. If I had known there was help, I would have gone. But no one told me."

A 42-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described trying to find a counsellor:

"I called three numbers from Google. Two did not answer. One answered and said the fee was 500 cedis per session. I could not afford that. Not even close. So my children did not get counselling. I still feel guilty about that. But what was I supposed to do? I was struggling to pay school fees. I could not pay 500 cedis a week for someone to talk to my children."

A 48-year-old counsellor (FG5) acknowledged the problem:

"Counselling in Ghana is a luxury for the wealthy. I charge 300 cedis per session. That is my rent. I cannot work for free. But I know that 99% of Ghanaians cannot pay that. So, I see a few clients who can afford me. The rest suffer. The government does not fund counselling. NGOs do not fund counselling. It is private, expensive, and concentrated in Accra. If you live in Tarkwa, there is no counsellor within 100 kilometres."

A 27-year-old male young adult (FG2) described his distrust of the counsellor his mother eventually found:

"My mother scraped together money for three sessions with a counsellor. The counsellor was a stranger. She asked me to talk about my feelings. I do not talk about family business to strangers. That is not how we do things. I sat there silently for most of the session. The counsellor did not understand why I would not talk. I did not understand why she expected me to talk. It was not helpful."

This theme reveals that professional counselling for children of divorce in Ghana is virtually unavailable to most families. It is concentrated in Accra, expensive, unknown to many, and when accessed, may be culturally mismatched to Ghanaian expectations about discussing family matters with strangers.

8.2 Theme Two: "We Are Drowning in Cases" — The Underfunded and Overstretched Social Welfare System

The second theme concerned the social welfare system: underfunded, understaffed, and unable to provide meaningful support to children of divorce. Social workers described overwhelming caseloads that forced them to focus only on the most severe cases of abuse and neglect, leaving divorce-related distress unaddressed.

A 52-year-old social worker (FG5) stated:

"We are drowning in cases. My caseload is over 300 children. I cannot possibly give each family the attention they need. I focus on the emergencies: children being abused, children abandoned, children in immediate danger. A child whose parents are divorcing but who is safe? I cannot prioritise that. I wish I could. But I have to triage."

A 38-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described her experience with social welfare:

"I went to social welfare to ask for help with child support. My ex-husband had stopped paying. The social worker was nice but overwhelmed. She took my information. She said she would call him. I never heard back. I called twice more. Nothing happened. I gave up. Social welfare is supposed to help, but they have no resources. They cannot enforce anything."

A 45-year-old social worker (FG6) described the resource gap:

"We have no budget for anything beyond salaries. No transport to visit families. No phones to call people. No training in family therapy. No support groups to refer families to. We have the mandate but not the means. So we do what we can, which is very little. It is frustrating. We entered this profession to help children. But the system does not let us help."

A 26-year-old female young adult (FG1) described never encountering social welfare:

"No one from social welfare ever contacted us. No one ever checked on us. I did not know social welfare was supposed to help children like me. I thought they only dealt with orphans and abused children. We were not abused. We were just hurt. So we fell through the cracks."

This theme reveals that the social welfare system, though mandated to support vulnerable children, is so underfunded and overstretched that it cannot provide meaningful support to

children of divorce. Workers focus on emergencies, leaving divorce-related distress unaddressed.

8.3 Theme Three: "I Could Not Afford a Lawyer and the Legal Aid Office Was Overwhelmed" — The Inaccessible Legal Aid System

The third theme concerned the legal aid system: inaccessible to most families due to cost, complexity, intimidation, and the overstretched nature of legal aid providers. Parents described being unable to afford lawyers, intimidated by court processes, and unable to get help from legal aid.

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described her experience:

"I needed a lawyer to get child support from my ex-husband. I could not afford a private lawyer. I went to legal aid. They took my case, but the process was slow. Months went by. Nothing happened. My ex-husband kept not paying. I gave up. It was too much stress. I just decided I would survive without his money. I did not have the energy to fight."

A 50-year-old legal aid officer (FG6) acknowledged the problem:

"Legal aid is underfunded. We have too few lawyers for too many clients. Family law cases take time. Custody disputes can drag on for years. By the time we get to court, the child may be grown. It is not that we do not care. It is that we do not have the resources to move faster."

A 28-year-old male young adult (FG2) described how the legal process affected him:

"My parents' custody battle went on for three years. I was in and out of court. Lawyers asked me questions. I had to say things about my parents that I did not want to say. I felt like I was betraying them no matter what I said. The legal system made everything worse, not better."

A 41-year-old divorced father (FG4) described avoiding legal aid altogether:

"I did not even try legal aid. I heard it was useless. I heard it took years. I decided to handle things myself. I pay what I can when I can. It is not a formal arrangement. There is no court order. But it is better than the stress of lawyers and courts."

A 55-year-old family lawyer (FG6) who also participated recommended reform:

"We need family courts that are faster, cheaper, and less intimidating. We need mediators who can help parents agree without fighting in court. We need child support enforcement that actually works. But all of that costs money. The government does not prioritise family law. Children suffer as a result."

This theme reveals that legal aid for child custody, support, and visitation is inaccessible to most families due to cost, slow processes, court intimidation, and the overstretched nature of legal aid providers.

8.4 Theme Four: "Our School Had No Counsellor" — The Minimal and Inconsistent School-Based Support

The fourth theme concerned school-based support: minimal, inconsistent, and largely absent from basic schools. Young adults described never having access to a school counsellor. Teachers described lack of training. Counsellors who did exist had overwhelming caseloads.

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

"Our school had no counsellor. Not in primary, not in JHS, not in SHS. If you were struggling, you were on your own. Some teachers were kind, but they did not know how to help. They were not trained. They did not ask what was wrong at home. They just punished you for not doing homework or for acting out."

A 46-year-old teacher (FG5) acknowledged her lack of training:

"I have taught for eighteen years. I have had many students whose parents were divorcing. I could see they were struggling. But I did not know what to do. I was not trained in counselling. I did not know what to say. I did not know when to refer. I just tried to be kind. That was all I could do."

A 40-year-old school counsellor (FG5) described her impossible caseload:

"I am the counsellor for 2,500 students. That is impossible. I cannot even learn all their names, let alone know their family situations. I see students who come to me. Most do not come. They do not know I exist, or they are ashamed, or they do not think I can help. I want to do more. But with 2,500 students, I can only do crisis intervention."

A 27-year-old male young adult (FG2) described the teacher who did help:

"I had one teacher who noticed I was sad. She did not know about the divorce. She just saw that I was not myself. She pulled me aside and asked if I was okay. I did not tell her everything, but just being asked made me feel seen. That is what schools could do if teachers were trained: notice, ask, listen, refer. It does not have to be complicated."

This theme reveals that school-based support for children of divorce is minimal and inconsistent. Counsellors are absent from most basic schools. Teachers lack training. When support exists, it depends on individual teachers' kindness rather than systemic response.

8.5 Theme Five: "The Church Prayed But Did Not Know What Else to Do" — The Ambivalent Role of Religious Institutions

The fifth theme concerned religious institutions: widespread but offering prayer and charity rather than structured, evidence-informed support programmes for children of divorce. Participants described churches as willing to help but lacking training and resources to provide meaningful support.

A 26-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"The church prayed for us. They brought food sometimes. But they did not know what else to do. They did not have a programme for children of divorce. They did not have a support group. They did not have trained counsellors. They wanted to help, but they did not know how."

A 50-year-old pastor (FG6) acknowledged the gap:

"The church is good at prayer and charity. We are less good at structured support for specific problems. I have had many children of divorce in my congregation. I pray with them. I encourage them. But I am not a trained counsellor. I do not know how to run a support group. I do not know evidence-based practices. The church could do more, but we need training and resources."

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described her church's judgment:

"I stopped going to church after my divorce because of the judgment. People whispered. The pastor preached about the sanctity of marriage, and I felt like he was talking about me. The church is supposed to be a place of comfort, but for divorced people, it is often a place of pain. My children stopped going too."

A 35-year-old youth pastor (FG6) described a church that is trying:

"Our church started a support group for children of divorce. It is small. We meet once a month. The children play games, talk about their feelings, and pray together. It is not professional counselling, but it helps. We need more churches to do this. It does not require much. Just a room, some adults who care, and activities that help children feel less alone."

This theme reveals that religious institutions, though widespread and trusted, lack structured, evidence-informed support programmes for children of divorce. They offer prayer and charity but not systematic support. Some also contribute to stigma, driving families away.

8.6 Theme Six: "The Programme Started but Did Not Last" — Emerging but Fragile Civil Society and NGO Interventions

The sixth theme concerned civil society and NGO interventions: emerging but fragile, often pilot programmes that were not sustained or scaled. Participants described isolated initiatives that showed promise but ended when funding ran out or staff left.

A 29-year-old female young adult (FG2) described a support group that ended:

"There was a support group for children of divorce at a community centre near my house. I went twice. It helped to meet other children going through the same thing. But after a few months, the programme ended. The funding stopped. The facilitator left. I was disappointed. I finally found something that helped, and then it was gone."

A 48-year-old NGO programme manager (FG5) explained the sustainability challenge:

"NGOs run pilot programmes. We get funding for one or two years. We show that the programme works. Then the funding ends, and we cannot continue. There is no government funding to scale successful pilots. So, we start, we prove it works, and then we stop. That is not how you build a support system. You need sustainable funding, not pilot projects."

A 40-year-old social worker (FG6) described a school-based programme that worked:

"We piloted a school-based support group for children of divorce in ten schools. The results were excellent. Children's emotional health improved. Their grades improved. Parents reported that their children were coping better. But when the pilot ended, we could not continue. No one would fund the scale-up. So those ten schools stopped the programme. Hundreds of children lost support."

A 27-year-old male young adult (FG1) described a programme he wished had continued:

"I went to a weekend camp for children of divorce. It was organised by an NGO. We did activities,

talked about our feelings, met other children. It was the best weekend of my childhood. I felt normal for the first time. Then the camp never happened again. No funding. I still think about that weekend. It showed me what could be possible."

A 52-year-old religious leader (FG6) called for collaboration:

"NGOs have expertise but no reach. Churches have reach but no expertise. If we worked together, NGOs could train church volunteers to run support groups. That could be sustainable. The church provides the space and the people. The NGO provides the training and the curriculum. That could work."

This theme reveals that civil society and NGO interventions, while promising, are fragmented, underfunded, and unsustainable. Programmes start, prove effective, and then end when funding runs out. No mechanism exists to scale successful pilots.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	Narrative Frame	Key Metaphors/Proverbs	Primary Tensions
Near-Absence of Counselling	Unavailable, unaffordable, unknown, culturally mismatched	"I did not know counselling existed for people like us"	Availability vs. absence; cost vs. need; cultural fit vs. mismatch
Underfunded Social Welfare	Overwhelmed workers focus on emergencies only	"We are drowning in cases"	Mandate vs. resources; crisis vs. prevention

Inaccessible Legal Aid	Slow, expensive, intimidating, overwhelmed	"I could not afford a lawyer, and the legal aid office was overwhelmed"	Legal right vs. practical access; need vs. system capacity
Minimal School Support	Counsellors absent, teachers untrained	"Our school had no counsellor"	Need vs. provision; teacher kindness vs. systemic response
Ambivalent Religious Support	Prayer and charity but no structured programmes; stigma	"The church prayed but did not know what else to do"	Willingness vs. capacity; support vs. stigma
Fragile NGO Interventions	Pilot programmes not sustained or scaled	"The programme started but did not last"	Promise vs. sustainability; pilot vs. scale

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored formal support systems for children coping with divorce in Ghanaian families across counselling, social welfare, legal aid, school-based, religious, and NGO domains. Six themes emerged: the near-absence of professional counselling services; the underfunded and overstretched social welfare system; the inaccessible legal aid system; the minimal and inconsistent school-based support; the ambivalent role of religious institutions; and the fragile, unsustainable nature of NGO interventions.

The most significant contribution of this study is its comprehensive mapping of the formal support landscape for children of divorce in Ghana, revealing a system that is severely underfunded, fragmented, inaccessible to most families, and largely unknown to those who need it. The gap between what children need and what formal systems provide is vast. Professional counselling is a luxury for the wealthy. Social welfare focuses on emergencies. Legal aid is slow and overwhelmed. Schools lack counsellors. Religious institutions lack structured programmes. NGO pilots end when funding runs out. Children of divorce and their families cope with minimal formal support, relying instead on informal networks that are themselves strained.

The Policy Gap: Recognition Without Resources

The finding that formal support systems are severely underfunded despite policy recognition of children's needs reflects a broader pattern in Ghanaian social policy. Policies exist on paper—the Children's Act, the Mental Health Act, the National Social Protection Policy—but implementation lags far behind. Government funding for mental health is less than 1% of the health budget (Roberts et al., 2014). Social welfare workers are paid but have no budget for

transport, phones, or programmes. Legal aid lawyers are few and overwhelmed. Policy recognition without resource allocation is not support; it is performative.

This finding has implications for advocacy. Civil society organisations and professional associations should advocate not only for new policies but for budget allocations to implement existing policies. A law that is not funded is not a right; it is a promise broken.

The Cultural Mismatch of Professional Services

The finding that some families who accessed counselling found it culturally mismatched—counsellors expected open talk about feelings that Ghanaian norms discourage—has important implications for training and practice. Counselling models developed in Western individualistic contexts assume that clients will talk about their feelings, value confidentiality over community, and trust a stranger with intimate family problems (Ocansey, 2018). These assumptions may not hold in Ghanaian contexts where indirect communication, family privacy, and communal problem-solving are normative.

This finding suggests that counsellor training programmes should include culturally adapted modalities. Narrative therapy, which respects indirect communication, may be more appropriate than directive approaches. Family therapy that includes extended family may be more congruent with Ubuntu values than individual counselling. Community-based support groups may be more acceptable than one-on-one sessions. Professional services will continue to be underutilised until they are adapted to fit Ghanaian cultural expectations.

The Potential of Religious Institutions

The finding that religious institutions are widespread but lack structured support programmes represents both a gap and an opportunity. Churches and mosques are present in every community, have infrastructure and leadership, and are trusted by most Ghanaians. They already offer prayer and charity. The step to offering structured support groups for children of divorce is not large. With minimal training and a simple curriculum, religious volunteers could facilitate support groups that provide what participants in this study said they needed: a safe space to share experiences with peers who understand, validation that they are not alone, and adult guidance from someone who cares.

This finding suggests that partnerships between professional mental health organisations 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, reaching families that professional services will never reach.

The Tragedy of Unsustainable Pilots

The finding that promising NGO pilots end when funding runs out is a tragedy. Programmes prove effective, demonstrate positive outcomes for children, and then disappear. Hundreds of children receive support for a year or two, and then the support ends. This pattern is not only ineffective; it may be harmful. Children who experience a support programme and then lose it may feel abandoned again, compounding the original abandonment of divorce.

This finding suggests that donors and NGOs should prioritise sustainability from the start. Pilot programmes should include sustainability plans: government buy-in, community ownership, fee-for-service models, or integration into existing institutions (schools, churches, health centres). Short-term pilots that end abruptly may do more harm than good.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The urban Accra sample means findings may not represent the availability of formal support in rural Ghana, where services are even more limited. The study did not include quantitative data on service availability, accessibility, or utilisation. The study did not include the perspectives of policymakers who make funding decisions. The study did not evaluate the effectiveness of specific programmes.

Future Research

Future research should: (a) conduct a national mapping of formal support services for children of divorce; (b) collect quantitative data on service availability, accessibility, and utilisation; (c) evaluate the effectiveness of existing programmes; (d) pilot and evaluate culturally adapted counselling models; (e) study partnerships between professional organisations and religious institutions; (f) examine the cost-effectiveness of different support models; (g) research the perspectives of policymakers to understand barriers to funding.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored formal support systems for children coping with divorce in Ghanaian families through focus groups with young adults, divorced parents, and helping professionals. Six themes emerged: the near-absence of professional counselling services; the underfunded and overstretched social welfare system; the inaccessible legal aid system; the minimal and

inconsistent school-based support; the ambivalent role of religious institutions; and the fragile, unsustainable nature of NGO interventions.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana are severely limited, fragmented, and largely inaccessible to the majority of families. Professional counselling is a luxury for the wealthy, concentrated in Accra, and culturally mismatched. Social welfare focuses on emergencies, unable to provide preventive or supportive services. Legal aid is slow, overwhelmed, and intimidating. Schools lack counsellors and teacher training. Religious institutions offer prayer and charity but not structured support. NGO pilots start, prove effective, and end when funding runs out.

The children of divorce in Ghana are not entirely without support. They have mothers, grandmothers, aunts, friends, and sometimes teachers who care. But they do not have functioning formal support systems. When informal networks fail—when the grandmother is overstretched, when the mother is overwhelmed, when the friend does not know how to help—there is no backup. No counsellor to call. No social worker to visit. No legal aid lawyer to advocate. No school counsellor to notice. No church support group to attend. No NGO programme that will last beyond the pilot.

This is not inevitable. Formal support systems can be built. They require political will, budget allocations, training programmes, and partnerships. Ghana has the resources, the institutions, and the people. What is missing is priority. Children of divorce are not at the top of the policy agenda. They should be. Their suffering is real. Their need for support is urgent. Their potential, if supported, is vast.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

For the Ministry of Health and Mental Health Authority: Increase funding for mental health services to at least 5% of the health budget (current is <1%). Subsidise counselling services so that they are affordable for low-income families. Train and deploy more counsellors, particularly to underserved regions. Develop culturally adapted counselling models that fit Ghanaian cultural norms of indirect communication and family involvement. Establish a national helpline for children and families in distress.

For the Department of Social Welfare: Advocate for increased budget allocation for preventive and supportive services, not only for crisis intervention. Hire more social workers so that caseloads are manageable. Provide training in family therapy and divorce-related

issues. Establish support groups for children of divorce as a standard service, not a pilot. Develop protocols for proactive outreach to families experiencing divorce, not only waiting for families to come to them.

For the Legal Aid Commission and Ministry of Justice: Advocate for increased funding for legal aid, particularly for family law. Establish specialised family courts with trained judges and mediators. Develop child support enforcement mechanisms that actually work. Provide legal literacy programmes so that families know their rights and how to access legal aid. Simplify court processes to make them less intimidating. Train legal aid lawyers in child-sensitive practice.

For the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service: Mandate that every school, including basic schools, has access to a counsellor (shared across schools if necessary). Train all teachers to recognise signs of divorce-related distress and respond supportively. Include modules on family disruption in teacher training curricula. Establish support groups for children of divorce in every school. Create referral pathways to social welfare and mental health services.

For Religious Institutions: Acknowledge that prayer and charity are not enough. Children of divorce need structured support. Develop support groups for children of divorce using simple, evidence-informed curricula. Train volunteers (lay counsellors, youth leaders) to facilitate these groups. End the stigma: preach and teach that divorce is not a sin for which children must be punished. Partner with mental health professionals and NGOs to access training and resources. Use your reach and trust to bring support to children who will never access professional services.

For NGOs and Donors: Stop funding short-term pilots that end and leave communities worse than before. Require sustainability plans for every grant. Fund capacity-building of local institutions (schools, churches, health centres) rather than creating parallel systems. Support advocacy for government funding and policy change. Fund evaluation research to identify what works in Ghanaian contexts. Collaborate with religious institutions to reach scale.

For Professional Associations (Psychology, Social Work, Counselling): Develop and disseminate culturally adapted practice guidelines for working with children of divorce. Provide pro bono services for families who cannot pay. Advocate for government funding of mental health and social welfare. Train religious and community volunteers to extend reach. Conduct research on intervention effectiveness.

For Policymakers and Parliament: Children of divorce need formal support systems. These systems cost money. Fund them. Allocate budget for counselling, social welfare, legal aid, school counsellors, and evidence-based programmes. The current situation—where policies exist on paper but not in practice—is unacceptable. Children are suffering. You have the power to help. Use it.

For Individual Citizens: If you know a child whose parents are divorcing, be present. Listen. Do not judge. Connect the family to resources if you know them. Advocate for better support systems. Vote for leaders who prioritise children. The formal support systems described in this study will not improve unless citizens demand improvement.

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