The Social Navigation of Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood in Adonkia, Sierra Leone

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Danish Abstract

I Sierra Leone bliver teenagegraviditet ofte fremstillet som et folkesundhedsproblem, der fører til dårlige sundheds- og livsvilkår for gravide piger og unge mødre. Problemstillingen i denne afhandling tager udgangspunkt i, hvordan unge piger navigerer følelsen af uvished og modgang under graviditet og moderskab. Når graviditet blandt unge piger præges af social forandring, fattigdom og religiøse normer, rækker konsekvenserne ofte ud over de sundhedsfaglige, uddannelsesmæssige og økonomiske forhold, der belyses i folkesundhedsvidenskabelig forskning. Selvom graviditet og moderskab blandt unge piger er et velforsket emne inden for folkesundhed i Sierra Leone og andre vestafrikanske lande, er der tydelige begrænsninger i forskningsområdet, der sjældent inddrager det kulturelle sammenspil mellem teenagegraviditet og familierelationer.

Denne etnografi er baseret på 11 måneders feltarbejde i Adonkia, et mindre lokalsamfund i Sierra Leones vestlige landsområde. Feltstudiet består af 14 teenagemødres livshistorier, observationsstudier samt interviews med pårørende og andre nøglepersoner fra lokale religiøse og sundhedsfaglige institutioner.

De empiriske fund analyseres ud fra begrebet *reproductive misfortune,* som afspejler drivkraften og begrænsningerne for unge mødres fremtidsmuligheder, og hvordan de forholder sig til de sociale, økonomiske og sundhedsmæssige udfordringer. Ligeledes den selvrealiseringsproces der opsøges gennem uddannelsestilknytning for at opnå social status og respekt. Begrebet afspejler også de pårørende og deres øvrige sociale relationers moralske, samt religiøse, fortolkningsproces af pigers graviditet.

Etnografien undersøger tre livsfaser: den tidlige graviditetsfase, selve graviditeten og moderskabsfasen. Den første fase diskuterer de sociale dynamikker, der sættes i spil, når familier skal forholde sig til nyheden om graviditet. Jeg hævder, at religiøse og moralske fortolkninger og værdisæt er afgørende for pårørendes støtte af graviditetsforløbet. I den anden livsfase er pigers erfaring knyttet til forskellige religiøse, kulturelle tiltag og copingstrategier, der reducerer følelsen af uvished under graviditeten. Begrebet *Kønnets performativitet* anvendes for at afdække, hvorledes seksualitet og sociale normer påvirker seksuelle relationer og pigers selvopfattelse i forhold til sociale forventninger og moralske kønsdiskurser. Gennem den traditionelle praksis af faderskabserklæringer kan unge mødre og deres familier tilskrive mænd et ansvar, der reducerer familiens økonomiske byrde.

I den sidste livsfase beskriver jeg, hvordan begrebet *social navigation* retter analysen imod de handlingsmuligheder og overvejelser unge mødre foretager sig under uvisse og omskiftlige sociale og samfundsmæssige rammer. Ligeledes undersøges hvordan unge piger navigerer moderskab med

deres skolegang og der illustreres hvordan de sociale familieforpligtelser og forhandlinger pigerne indgår i og praktiserer for at realisere de akademiske samt sociale ambitioner for fremtiden.

Afhandlingen udfordrer den lokale samt globale folkesundhedsdiskurs, der ofte negligerer de familierelationer, kulturelle og religiøse normer, der påvirker oplevelsen af graviditet og moderskab blandt unge piger. En omfattende forståelse af pigers familierelationer bidrager til tilsvarende diskurser om familie- og identitetsdannelse.

Afhandlingen indskriver sig i den tværfaglige debat om teenagegraviditet, seksualitet og moderskab i Subsaharisk Afrika inden for antropologi, afrikastudier, folkesundhedsvidenskab og udviklingsstudier.

Abstract

In much of the research in sub-Saharan Africa, teenage pregnancy is depicted as a stumbling block to education and as a social and public health concern, often leading to moral panic. While public health and development research on teenage pregnancy in contemporary Sierra Leone is well established, a gap persists in understanding how families process, manage and resolve the uncertainty associated with these concerns in the context of moral, religious and cultural value systems set against a backdrop of poverty and social change.

This thesis is based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Adonkia, a semi-urban community in Sierra Leone's Western Rural Area, where I collected the life-history narratives of 14 girls experiencing early pregnancy and motherhood and carried out participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the girls, their families, and healthcare workers, religious leaders and NGO workers.

Drawing on Whyte's (1997) understanding that misfortune is rooted in uncertainty, I frame the public health concerns and the process of social reproduction as these relate to teenage pregnancy outside marriage as 'reproductive misfortune' to explore how individuals respond to, navigate and make sense of unexpected pregnancy among teenage girls and the contingencies and challenges that arise at various stages of their pregnancy and motherhood.

This lens reveals that these concerns are locally interpreted and managed through flexible cultural practices and religious value systems associated with kinship support and social relations. I use the concept of social navigation to consider how the girls process internal and external perceptions and expectations as they strive towards social reproduction and respectability through 'good' mothering and to fulfil their educational aspirations in a context of uncertainty.

I also employ the concept of gendered performativity to examine how the girls navigate, negotiate and express their femininities and sexual expectations in relation to social gender norms and sexual relationships as they transition to motherhood and adulthood.

The central findings of this thesis offer an in-depth understanding of the three temporal stages: early pregnancy, during pregnancy and motherhood. The early stages of pregnancy reveal the religious and social interpretations and the fears attached to reproductive misfortune, which determine how their families choose to support their young pregnant daughters. I argue that during pregnancy and the subsequent stages of motherhood, uncertainty and reproductive misfortune are mitigated through various means of negotiation, coping and social navigation. The girls overcome uncertainty in their pursuit of a better life for themselves and their children by relying on kinship support, holding

men accountable, finding divine purpose and meaning in adversity, and striving to fulfil their aspirations for the future.

This thesis challenges the public health narrative on teenage pregnancy centred around negative health and socio-economic outcomes by exploring the phenomenon from an anthropological perspective. It draws attention to the importance of kinship support and the complexities girls experience as the navigate competing discourses about their sexuality, age and identity as young mothers while striving to complete their education.

The thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on teenage pregnancy and motherhood across sub-Saharan Africa into the fields of anthropology, African studies, public health, and development studies.

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Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Introduction

1.1. Kadi's story

My interest in the topic of teenage pregnancy began in 2016 as I was following the news about the Ebola outbreak and conducting public health research focusing on the health-seeking behaviours of teenage mothers who were pregnant during the Ebola outbreak. My project increased my curiosity regarding the cultural factors and discourses that affected the lives and experiences of pregnant girls and teenage mothers, although this was beyond the scope of my small-scale master's research. While I had a clear understanding of the 'problem' of teenage pregnancy I gradually became aware of the cultural norms and religious influences that are frequently overlooked in public health research and discourse in Sierra Leone.

When I arrived in Sierra Leone in October 2021, I knew I wanted to address some of the enquiries I had been pondering after my master's thesis. Now that the Ebola outbreak was no longer a factor I was curious to know what happened to girls after they became mothers and how their pregnancy affected their relationships with their families and other community members.

The Adonkia community seemed like a suitable place to conduct such research. The community shared similarities with Waterloo, the semi-urban area where I conducted my master's research. Familial ties and the urban development that had occurred in recent decades – with the establishment of several schools, clinics and churches – had transformed the local community and physical landscape.

During my first few months in the community it became evident that intergenerational teenage pregnancy was quite common; many of the women I spoke to had their first child in their teenage years, which was similar to their mothers and grandmothers. I soon came to understand that teenage pregnancy was perceived as morally unacceptable in the community, yet it was a socially accommodated reality for many families, illustrating the nexus between moral ideals and practical adaptability to everyday life. This observation became more evident as I engaged with teenage mothers in the community.

One sunny afternoon a few months into my research I met Kadi, who was sitting on a plastic chair under a large tree outside the local clinic in Adonkia. Depending on the time of the day the clinic was either extremely quiet or extremely busy. At lunchtime the shouts of the children playing in the school compound opposite the clinic and the construction work on the main road and neighbouring buildings made the area unusually noisy. Unless it was raining, most people preferred to sit on wooden benches

in the open waiting area outside, where the dusty air and cool breeze were preferable to the dark and humid waiting room inside the clinic, which smelled of a mixture of antibiotics and chlorine.

As we began speaking, Kadi shared that she had become pregnant at the age of 16 and that she had recently resumed her education after not attending school for almost a year after giving birth.

Coming from a devout Muslim background in Kenema District in the Eastern Province, Kadi was the oldest of six children and the only daughter. Her mother had died when she was eight years old, which led to her and her siblings staying with extended relatives in Kenema for a season while her father relocated to Adonkia, located outside of Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown.

Kadi's father was a respected imam in the community who also worked as a janitor at one of the local hospitals. When her siblings eventually moved to Adonkia after their father remarried, Kadi decided to stay in the village in Kenema with the relatives who had been looking after her, because she and her stepmother did not get along.

Her father decided that she would finish primary school in Kenema and start secondary school in Adonkia. According to Kadi, it was common for girls to fall pregnant during their teenage years, and girls in Kenema were known for being 'frisky', which locally referred to promiscuous behaviour. Fearing that her peers would be a negative influence, her father made the deliberate decision that she was to relocate and attend secondary school in Freetown. He believed that village girls were more inclined to get distracted by men, diverting attention from their studies, which often led to pregnancy.

Kadi explained that when she started at secondary school in Adonkia her relatives constantly policed her sexuality. Her Temne stepmother believed in clinical virginity testing, which is a common practice among people in this ethnic group. Her sexual behaviour became a topic of discussion when her grandmother suspected that she was sexually active. Instead of having a direct conversation with Kadi about contraceptive use, she discussed the matter with her father. Kadi shared that her grandmother supported girls' use of contraceptives to avoid teenage pregnancy and their dropping out of school; in contrast, her father strongly opposed it due to his Islamic convictions regarding premarital sex.

Eventually, Kadi began engaging in unprotected sex with her boyfriend, who lived in the neighbourhood and was a few years older than her. She did not anticipate getting pregnant so quickly after becoming sexually active, and was terrified of telling her relatives. As the daughter of an imam, the family's reputation was also at stake. She anticipated being forced to leave her father's house after revealing her pregnancy. When she eventually told him, the conflict with her father led to her moving in with the father of the child. During her pregnancy her feelings of uncertainty increased. She was

undecided about whether she should terminate the pregnancy to prevent it from affecting her education.

Her relationship with the genitor and her family were both fragmented. She eventually moved out of her boyfriend's house when she realised that her heart was not in the relationship and moved in with her grandmother, who expressed immense disappointment and frequently made remarks that caused Kadi to feel overwhelmed by regret; 'My grandmother always tells me "If you had prevented you never would have got pregnant."' After her daughter was born things slowly fell into place. Her father and grandmother forgave her and the genitor contributed financially to the welfare of their daughter, although the two were no longer in a relationship. She explained 'For now, he is only responsible for his child. Whenever the child gets sick or needs anything, my grandmother will call him'. Kadi seemed pleased with this arrangement, as she was trying to better her future and follow her aspirations, balancing motherhood with schooling at this stage.

1.2. Background

This thesis is about a group of unmarried teenage mothers in a semi-urban community in Adonkia, Sierra Leone. I began with a vignette of Kadi's story because it encapsulates the kinship involvement and management of teenage sexuality and pregnancy, which highlights the tension between religious norms, gender expectations and personal aspirations.

The global discourse and framing of teenage pregnancy are associated with adverse health outcomes, educational disruption and the effects on girls' developmental potential (Pot 2009). Kadi's pregnancy was also perceived as an act of sexual defiance leading to future 'misfortune' in a conservative setting that is known for one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy and maternal mortality in the world.[1]

Kadi's narrative sets the stage for exploring how teenage girls navigate pregnancy and motherhood in a community where patriarchal norms and institutional structures reinforce and shape girls' situated concerns about kinship ties, social status and educational continuity. The vignette foreshadows the central tensions that the analysis explores: the negotiation of kinship relations and sexuality; the influence of gender norms and religious value systems; and the navigation of motherhood, kinship support and educational aspirations at various stages of pregnancy and motherhood.

[1] According to the National Demographic Health Survey, in 2019 21 per cent of teenagers aged 15–19 were pregnant or mothers, and the maternal mortality ratio was 717 per 100,000 live births (SLDH 2019).

Because of my public health background, I had detailed knowledge of the epidemiological literature on teenage pregnancy, but questions gradually emerged as I traced the disconnect between my academic understanding and the insightful ethnographic encounters and conversations that unfolded in the field. My overarching research question about how teenage girls navigate feelings of misfortune and uncertainty at different stages of pregnancy and motherhood (see Chapter 4) led to multiple new ways of comprehending how this 'public health concern' is situated in the reality of everyday life.

As seen above, families may initially express anger or disappointment at the news of their daughter's pregnancy; the support, empathy and care they give or choose to withhold determine the future trajectories of these teenage mothers and their children.

This ethnography provides a better understanding of the pathway from pregnancy to motherhood, questioning how Kadi and other girls approach family ties, and moral and religious tensions while navigating their sexuality and reflecting on how they perceive themselves, how others perceive them, and who they aspire to be.

The thesis demonstrates how the misfortune of teenage pregnancy can be reinterpreted in the context of uncertainty. The central argument challenges the public health discourse and portrayal of girls as passive victims defined by the 'misfortune' or uncertainty of their pregnancy. Instead, their pregnancy becomes an opportunity to strive towards social mobility and reproduction as they grapple with moral impositions and cultural norms regarding their past experiences, present conditions, and future aspirations.

This thesis makes significant contributions to the fields of anthropology, public health, development, and African studies, offering a Sierra Leonean case study that re-evaluates the public health discourse and its cultural adaptations and interpretations in the context of kinship, poverty and religious and moral tensions.

1.3. Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is an interesting place to study teenage pregnancy because of the country's history, which is deeply rooted in political and patriarchal structures and inequalities. The civil war (1991-2002), the Ebola outbreak (2014-2016) and other historical events have significantly disrupted gender relations, inevitably shaping the experiences of uncertainty and the navigation of teenage pregnancy and motherhood in contemporary Adonkia and the rest of the country. Globally, Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, with 102 live births per 1000 teenagers aged 15-19. Public

health initiatives have reduced the rate of teenage pregnancy from one-third of girls in 2013 to one in five girls giving birth before reaching the age 18 in 2019 (SLDH 2019). It is estimated that 40 per cent of maternal deaths occur among teenagers (Bash-Taqi et al. 2020). These factors along with other indicators such as early marriage and lack of access to contraceptive services and education, have been drawn upon as evidence by national policymakers, international organisations, NGOs and civil society actors to frame the poor social conditions facing teenage girls in Sierra Leone. The national public health framing became particularly pronounced during and after the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2016 (Streifel 2015; Kostelny et al. 2016; Denney et al. 2017).

The rise in teenage pregnancies during the national quarantine was strongly associated with increased rates of sexual abuse and gender-based violence during the outbreak. Because teenage pregnancy has historically been prevalent in Sierra Leone due to early marriage, critics argued that the political agenda deliberately framed the issue as a public health crisis to attract international funding, especially after other development projects related to gender equality lost momentum during the Ebola outbreak (Menzel 2019). After the Ebola outbreak the political focus on teenage pregnancy also fueled moral panic, which quickly infiltrated religious discourse and media outlets that referred to teenage pregnancy as an 'uncontrolled' and 'obnoxious problem' (Cocorioko 2015). The dominant local framing and moralisation of teenage pregnancy is problematic because it fails to account for the diversity of value systems and behaviours, which results in a singular narrative that blames and marginalises girls for their pregnancy. Globally, similar patterns reveal how teenage pregnancy is positioned as a moralised and social public health concern associated with poverty, schooling and reproductive health challenges (WHO 2006; UNFPA 2018).

After spending almost a year conducting ethnographic fieldwork with pregnant girls and mothers in Adonkia, I agree with other anthropologists that research on teenage pregnancy and sexuality should include a more holistic approach to include cultural, familial and social factors (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993). The following section presents an overview of the literature and the broad scholarly debates that underpin my analysis and situates its contribution.

1.4. Addressing Teenage Pregnancy from an Anthropological Lens

This thesis draws on literature from Sierra Leonean and other African and non-African scholarship that relates to 'a wide range of outcomes that affect not only the young mother and her child but also other family members and society at large' (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993, 142). This approach has been applied in the sub-Saharan African context where several scholars have examined adult women's

sexuality and their experience of motherhood (Bledsoe 1999; Touray 2006; J. Cole 2010; Oyěwùmí 2016; Sijpt 2018). In recent decades scholars have critiqued the lack of literature examining girls' experience of teenage pregnancy and motherhood in the West African context from a holistic perspective (Bledsoe 1990; Bratton 2010; Amakor 2018; Oluseye 2021).

This is particularly conspicuous in comparison to the number of ethnographies focusing on gender, sexuality, reproductive health, kinship and education. It also contrasts with the attention given to public health discourses affecting teenagers' lived experience of pregnancy and motherhood in the UK and the US (Phoenix 1996; Kaplan 1997; Roberts 1997; Macleod 2010; Stapleton 2010; Fouquier 2011; Collins 2021).

However, the body of contemporary research that embraces a holistic approach is growing across sub-Saharan Africa. The increasing trend is evident in South Africa, where scholars have addressed key issues such as the constitution and formation of kinship and social relationships and the intersections of care, motherhood, education and sexuality in different communities (Salo 2004; Mkhwanazi 2010; Chili and Pranitha 2017; Nkani 2017; Moodley 2021).

Globally, the notion of teenage pregnancy being a social problem or public health concern can be traced back to social policy and media debates in the US and UK that influenced public discourses in the 1970s and 1980s (Phoenix 1996; Macleod 2010). Over the following decades this notion has influenced the advocacy strategies of international development organisations in relation to girls' educational and reproductive challenges in Sierra Leone and other developing countries (United Nations 1994; UNFPA 2018).

In Sierra Leone these discourses frame teenage pregnancy as lost economic potential trapped in the cycle of poverty or as a reproductive health risk for the mother and her baby, who are equally at risk of illness and mortality (United Nations 1994; Denney et al. 2017; November and Sandall 2018; UNFPA 2020). The biomedical approach using quantitative data to identify challenges related to adverse socioeconomic consequences has played a central role in shaping national public health discourse in the country. National development reports also depict teenage pregnancy as a social concern associated with lack of progress, intergenerational poverty and educational disruption (De Koning 2014; Bash-Taqi et al. 2020).

Scholars highlight how these dominant framings often pathologise the individual experience of teenage pregnancy, reinforcing stigmatisation and social ridicule (Wenham 2016; Pot 2019; Moodley 2021). While public health and development frameworks are essential for raising awareness and informing policy on wider reproductive health issues and structural challenges related to teenage

pregnancy, anthropologists have questioned the limitations of these frameworks, which frequently fail to fully capture the social, relational and moral complexities (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Bratton 2010; Mkhwanazi 2010).

Highlighting the importance of kinship care and support during a challenging life transition and adjustment to social responsibilities, Kaye (2008) posits that supportive families in Uganda alleviate girls' mental and physical health risks during pregnancy and after childbirth. These factors are often ignored in public health discourse in Sierra Leone, where teenage pregnancy is rarely framed as a collective experience affecting the entire family. Instead, the experience of pregnancy is individualised, relating to girls' physical immaturity, religious immorality and the intersecting structural and economic disadvantages. Cross-cultural insights reveal that social and religious interpretations of pregnancy may lead to kinship support and social tolerance as families come to terms with the pregnancy of a teenage girl (Kaplan 1996; Johnson-Hanks 2002a; Salo 2004; R. Blake 2017). These findings reveal how cultural and social adaptation to teenage pregnancy may improve the navigation of the structural circumstances and health risks mentioned above.

Anthropologists argue that kinship ties and religious practice may influence the meaning and consequences of teenage pregnancy and reproductive decision-making both positively and negatively (Bledsoe 1990; Johnson-Hanks 2002; Ringsted 2008). In many African countries religious practice represents a moral compass and a way of finding meaning and guidance in the context of hardship, misfortune and uncertainty in everyday life (Bledsoe 1999; Haram and Yamba 2009; J. Cole 2010; Taqi 2010; Steele 2011).

Like the anthropologists referenced above, I question the reductionist and narrow public health approach and the dominant discourse in Sierra Leone, which fails to acknowledge how structural factors shape local interpretations of and responses to teenage reproduction. My ethnographic focus highlights the significance of understanding the lived realities of girls and families in Adonkia. This approach provides deeper insight into the lived realities of teenage pregnancy. This thesis contributes to emphasising the importance of religion as individuals process, negotiate and interpret misfortune and uncertainty in relation to an unexpected teenage pregnancy.

Next, I discuss how teenage pregnancy is associated with gender and religion.

1.5. The Intersecting Discourses on Teenage Pregnancy

Public health narratives in sub-Saharan Africa rarely circulate in isolation but coexist with discourses on gender, religious value systems and education. Gender inequality and structural economic challenges influence public health discourse. Earlier studies from Sierra Leone have drawn attention to the dichotomy between transactional sex and education as girls secure economic support in the context of structural inequality to complete their education (Bledsoe 1990b). Some scholars argue that girls choose to engage in sexual relationships to overcome economic disparities (Ringsted 2008; J. Cole 2010; Salvi 2019), while others question girls' bodily autonomy in sexual relationships (Nkani 2012; Pincock 2017).

Cole (2010) highlights how young women in Madagascar grapple with sexual and transactional relationships to overcome suffering and economic hardship. She draws attention to the impact of globalisation and media that have shaped the aspirations of youth, sexual practices and the social understanding of modern love. While the genuine concerns and the association between sexual coercion, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy are commonly acknowledged, the development narrative that positions Sierra Leonean girls as sexually passive victims has been strongly critiqued for its broad generalisation (Blake 2021). Such discourse has led girls to internalise the stigmatisation, shame and self-condemnation associated with teenage pregnancy and motherhood (Bhana 2016; Ababio and Salifu Yendork 2017).

In development and public health agendas, the nexus between schooling, access to contraceptives and sex education is framed as complementary interventions to prevent teenage pregnancy and promote schooling (UNFPA 2020; S. Blake 2021). For instance, in Brazil, priests have become more progressive and embracive towards the public health initiatives that promote contraceptive use to reduce teenage pregnancy rates and prevent school dropouts (Steele 2011).

However, in Sierra Leone and other conservative West African countries the cultural emphasis on abstinence is perceived as the best safeguarding measure to ensure teenage girls' education and their prosperous future (Touray 2006; Eerdewijk 2009; Bratton 2010; S. Blake 2021). For instance, although reproductive health campaigns in Senegal have promoted abstinence and other interventions to reduce the rates of sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy, girls still grapple with competing messaging about being sexually informed and local moral messaging about abstinence and respectability (Eerdewijk 2009).

Conservative settings may reinforce and perpetuate social judgment by associating teenage pregnancy with moral failure and promiscuous behaviour. Ringsted's (2008) research on teenage

pregnancy in Tanzania suggests that teenage girls' sexual behaviour affects not only their own but also the school's reputation if they become pregnant, resulting in restrictive and controlling messaging related to girls' sexuality. Insights reveal how African parents and teachers fear that discussions about sex education could potentially arouse curiosity, encourage premature sexual activity or inadvertently undermine parental influence by disrupting traditional and religious values (de Haas 2017; Blake 2021).

The abstinence messaging has been critiqued for its gendered bias and moral expectations, which emphasise girls' need for sexual self-control and restraint while reinforcing or ignoring male sexuality (Bratton 2010; Bhana 2016; de Haas 2017). In her research on young fatherhood in Sierra Leone, McLean (2019) highlights how excluding young men from public health messaging may reinforce rather than challenge gender biases. These gendered frameworks are not exclusive to Sierra Leone.

In Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania, research has found that educational institutions and policies have historically applied punitive and exclusionary measures as a means of controlling schoolgirls' sexual behaviour, resulting in the marginalisation, stigmatisation and stereotypical narratives associated with poverty and promiscuity (Ringsted 2008; Salvi 2019; Pot 2019).

These insights highlight the broad social discourse and structural biases as they relate to gender and notions of sexual morality among teenage girls. These intersecting themes have been addressed in Christian communities in sub-Saharan Africa (G. Amakor 2018; Oluseye 2021) and the US (Kaplan 1996). I explore these intersecting factors in the Sierra Leonean context, a setting that remains underrepresented in contemporary scholarship. A central theme in this thesis questions the moral and religious interpretations of teenage pregnancy, drawing attention to how gender norms are navigated alongside the temporal trajectories and understanding of misfortune and mutual interpretations of Islam and Christianity in Adonkia.

1.6. Challenging the Binary: Education and Teenage Motherhood

Both globally and nationally, the binary relationship between teenage motherhood and schooling points to teenage pregnancy being the main cause of educational disruption in development research (United Nations 1994; Denney et al. 2017). There is growing recognition of teenage mothers navigating the tension of schooling and motherhood while rejecting the social ambiguities that present pregnancy and schooling as mutually exclusive, as they fear being labelled dropouts or moral failures (Bledsoe 1990b; Luttrell 1996; Kaplan 1997; Salo 2004). These scholars highlight how education

cultivates an identity that goes beyond the physical degree, especially for teenage mothers who perceive their return to school as a driving force towards a better future for themselves and their child.

Ethnographic insights demonstrate how an educated identity symbolises respectability, social restoration, modern womanhood, security and survival in the context of uncertainty (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Bratton 2010). In development research girls' education is associated with economic empowerment, improved nutrition and reduced rates of child and maternal mortality (De Koning 2014). In recent decades this messaging positioning education as a tool for social change and individual progression has been particularly pronounced.

Various ethnographic studies carried out among schoolgirls show the political and local marginalisation and discrimination against pregnant girls and mothers, who are deemed unworthy of completing their education because of their pregnancy (Salvi 2019; Moodley 2021). These studies, demonstrate how discriminatory tendencies in educational institutions perpetuate patriarchal structures and place external and internal expectations on girls to choose between schooling and motherhood.

This thesis is situated within these debates to explore the polarising perceptions regarding gender, motherhood and education. I unpack how the discourse related educated pathways (De Koning 2014) becomes entangled with kinship demands, moral expectations and social negotiations as girls position themselves as mothers and students as they reconstruct their social identity (see chapter 7).

1.7. Research Focus

This thesis analyses the experience of teenage pregnancy and motherhood in Adonkia, a community that has developed rapidly since the civil war due to development projects and a political focus on reproductive health issues.

I build on anthropological critiques of the reductionist public health framing that often ignores the relational and moral complexities that shape girls' lived experiences (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Bratton 2010). I explore these critiques using anthropological concepts of misfortune and social navigation to situate the analysis within a local framework where kinship ties, moral and religious value systems are intertwined. I conceptualise how moral tensions translate to gender expectations, using the concept of gender performativity.

In Adonkia, teenage girls are forced to reckon with social change and the contradictions between traditional practices and contemporary value systems. This results in a complex, intersecting and

sometimes contradicting landscape of discourses and interpretations of the cause, meaning and management of their pregnancy. The findings above highlight the need for a nuanced exploration centred on the structural and socioeconomic challenges that affect teenage girls' choices and vulnerabilities.

The objective of this thesis is not to disregard the development and public health discourses but rather to fill the specific gap by situating the anthropological research in interdisciplinary streams of scholarship to address this phenomenon from an ethnographic perspective. Researching the public health phenomenon through a cultural lens contributes to a deeper understanding of how structural factors shape cultural and religious interpretations of misfortune that go beyond biomedical research. I situate the experiences of teenage pregnancy and motherhood within global conversations about uncertainty, gender, sexuality, kinship, education and futurity.

1.8. Summary of Chapters

The thesis is organised into seven chapters: this introduction, the Sierra Leonean context, the methodology used, three empirical chapters and a conclusion. The introduction has given a brief justification and overview of the research topic and the aim of the thesis, and has situated my research by identifying the existing gaps in research on teenage pregnancy and motherhood.

Chapter 2 explains the key concepts I use in the thesis: *misfortune* and *uncertainty*, which I link to the notion of *reproductive misfortune* to address the specific concerns related to teenage pregnancy; *gender performativity* – how girls choose to express their sexuality and femininity according to the social expectations attached to their age – and *social navigation*, defined as the analysis of an individual's positioning and movement in a context of social change.

Chapter 3 presents a contextual background of the history of Sierra Leone, focusing on the country's political, colonial and social history as well as the gender-based challenges that young women in the country have been facing in recent decades.

Chapter 4 discusses the methodology and the justification behind my ethnographic approach, positionality and ethical disposition at various stages of my fieldwork. It describes the specific fieldsite in Adonkia and offers demographic details about my interlocutors, as well as individuals from their social networks that I gained access to and recruited.

Chapter 5, Discovering Pregnancy, addresses the early stages of my interlocutors' pregnancy[2]. It illustrates the initial response and subsequent concerns associated with the news of a teenage pregnancy. I discuss how girls and their relatives process uncertainty and deal with moral interpretations of reproductive misfortune.

Chapter 6, Being Pregnant, analyses the moral discourses associated with girls' sexual relationships. This includes an exploration of how the girls, their relatives and religious leaders consider and navigate these discourses during pregnancy. A key issue that I explore is how families seek security and moral restoration through the cultural practice of holding genitors accountable for impregnating teenage girls.

Chapter 7, Motherhood and Life After Childbirth, explores the educational aspirations of teenage mothers as they seek to restore their social positioning, and analyses their social navigation as they transition from teenager to mother and adult. This chapter includes descriptions of different family dynamics and cultural practices that encourage fostering and family support, enabling the girls to pursue their education.

Chapter 8 summarises the key findings and contributions related to the research questions and the existing literature on teenage reproduction, and offers recommendations for further research.

[2] The term interlocutors specifically refer to the teenage girls throughout the thesis. All other participants are referred to as informants or key informants.

2. Concepts

2.1. Introduction

While the previous chapters situated the thesis and identified the gaps in the literature related to teenage pregnancy, this chapter introduces the main concepts used to guide the analysis in the three empirical chapters and understand how girls in Adonkia navigate their experience of teenage pregnancy.

An interdisciplinary approach was employed to engage feminist and anthropological concepts, highlighting the central themes in the thesis associated with the girls' temporal trajectories and experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. While the concepts of 'misfortune' and 'uncertainty' are used to analyse the earlier stages of pregnancy, 'gender performativity' and 'social navigation' help to conceptualise the young girls' social transition into motherhood and adulthood as well as their future trajectories as teenage mothers.

To conceptualise the girls' lived experiences of uncertainty I use the term 'reproductive misfortune' to demonstrate how the disruption and concerns related to an unexpected pregnancy can lead to strategic and adaptive frameworks to navigate uncertainty.

I discuss how these concepts have been used in anthropological research focusing on reproductive health issues in sub-Saharan Africa. The chapter highlights how the multidimensional challenge of teenage pregnancy can be conceptualised anthropologically by looking at cultural meanings and interpretations in Adonkia. I refer to the concept of gender performativity to question social expectations related to masculinity and femininity, consider girls' navigation of various gender norms and discourses and discuss the application of this framework in Sierra Leone, taking previous critiques about Western gender theories into account.

Finally, I present the notion of social navigation, linking this concept to ideals about being and becoming and fluid constructs in relation to life transitions, kinship structures and education and using it to reflect upon young girls' strategic pathways when striving towards respectability and social reproduction in a time of social change and uncertainty.

2.2. Defining Misfortune in Adonkia

In Adonkia girls and their families describe teenage pregnancies as *mistakes*, *accidents* or *burdens*. However, as time progresses, they use local and religious frameworks to reinterpret these same pregnancies as *blessings* and *gifts from God*. Throughout the empirical chapters I conceptualise this shift and the process of reinterpreting misfortune and uncertainty to gain a better understanding of how teenage pregnancy is navigated.

According to Whyte (1997), concepts of uncertainty and misfortune both deal with unpredictability and are therefore closely related. In her ethnography on the Nyole people in eastern Uganda, Whyte explores how they process misfortunes such as death, illness, infertility, financial problems and marital issues. She categorises these as failures of health, prosperity and gender. Drawing on the works of John Dewey's philosophical understanding of pragmatism, she notes that the Nyole peoples respond to misfortune and face uncertainty with pragmatic action, seeking security but not necessarily certainty in a relatively unstable and morally ambiguous social world.

In Adonkia these intersecting categories of misfortune also emerged alongside the public health discourse:

> Motherhood at a very young age entails a risk of maternal death that is much greater than average and the children of young mothers have higher degrees of morbidity and mortality. Early childbearing continues to be an impediment to improvements in the educational, economic and social status of women in all parts of the world. Overall for young women, early marriage and early motherhood can severely curtail educational and employment opportunities and are likely to have a long-term, adverse impact on their and their children's quality of life. (United Nations 1994, 49)

The *failures of health* during pregnancy and childbirth reflected the primary misfortune expressed among girls and community members. In societies with high rates of maternal mortality the experience of pregnancy and childbirth is exacerbated by the country's inadequate healthcare infrastructure and the girls' limited access to health clinics, increasing the risk of unsafe abortion, sickness and maternal mortality. In the context of poverty, vulnerability and uncertainty may go together, situating individuals in a position of constant adaptation as they adjust to both poverty and the health system's weakness (De Koning et al. 2014).

Failures of prosperity included the disruption of educational trajectories due to pregnancy. Within the local framework education was regarded as a fundamental pathway towards attaining success and

economic stability. The termination of schooling undermined parents' anticipated returns in the form of future employment opportunities and financial security. The girls themselves were also affected by these concerns.

The final category of misfortune *failures of gender* was grounded in family honour, which was intrinsically linked to the sexual transgressions of teenage pregnancy and the violation of sexual scripts. In Adonkia, families do not passively endure these intersecting categories of misfortune; rather, they 'consider consequences, doubt, reconsider, revise purpose, hope, and try again.' (1997, 224).

A central argument in this thesis is that misfortune in Adonkia is neither fixed nor purely negative. In the context of teenage pregnancy the experience of misfortune becomes an adaptive and reproductive category open to production, negotiation and reframing. Through social and intergenerational support pregnant girls and teenage mothers can successfully mitigate many of the intersecting categories of misfortune.

I use the term 'reproductive misfortune' to capture not only the varying degrees of concern that girls and their families deal with during different stages of the pregnancy, but also the strategic and adaptive responses they set in motion to manage their uncertainty. This notion builds on Whyte's argument and conceptualisation of misfortune: 'Dealing with misfortune is a process of apprehending uncertainty, questioning experience, considering terms of action, implementing ideas, and looking to the results […] you may never achieve certainty, though you may gain some degree of security' (1997, 224). The pragmatic approach aligns with the way girls in Adonkia negotiate with parents, genitors and others in their social network amidst the intersecting categories of misfortune.

The dual framing of reproduction points to the apparent vulnerabilities and redemptive possibilities associated with restoration of kinship relations, social status and personal aspirations. Drawing from the local narratives in the introduction, Kadi's experience of teenage pregnancy illustrates this duality. After the initial experience of condemnation and shame, she eventually reconciled with members of her family as they adapted to the misfortunes regarding her health, prosperity and gender.

By attending to this dual framing the analysis goes beyond the public health narrative depicting girls as passive victims of structural forces. This understanding of reproduction as it relates to misfortune is also influenced by Vigh's (2009, 420) concept of social navigation, which captures 'how people move and manage within situations of social flux and change' while adapting to uncertainty and moving social structures in their family, community and society. The experience of reproductive misfortune in Adonkia occurs within a complicated web of uncertainty.

2.3. Navigating Uncertainty and Reproductive Misfortune

Steffen et al. (2005) contend that uncertainty extends beyond a momentary crisis, representing a constant human experience throughout one's life, especially regarding matters of health, reproduction and social belonging. The notion of uncertainty used throughout the thesis is twofold, referring to the uncertainty caused by a personal crisis – in this case an unexpected pregnancy – and the uncertainty caused by the fragility and unpredictability of societal structures and social landscapes. The thesis looks analytically at overlapping experiences of uncertainty, highlighting the actors' plans and trajectories towards security that require strategic yet flexible action to process current and future concerns associated with the pregnancy. The temporal element of the navigation process also leaves room for conceptualising the uncertainties and flexibility of life stages and transitions related to social status, mothering and schooling (see section 2.4).

Bledsoe's (1999) research on Gambian women managing uncertainties about fertility and marriage using social negotiations further demonstrates how uncertainty is reflected through proximity, as one person's actions may have consequences for others, leading to collective experiences of misfortune and uncertainty as families deal with the repercussions of their daughter's actions.

In the same vein the thesis shows the link between misfortune and social relations as families, in most cases, deal with the repercussions of an unexpected teenage pregnancy. The empirical chapters capture the fragility and restorative patterns that emerge in kinship and other social relationships, questioning the reasoning and interpretations behind different pragmatic and moral actions taken during pregnancy and the subsequent stages of motherhood.

Anthropologists have demonstrated the meaningful ways in which sub-Saharan African women have used traditional healing, religious practices and spiritual divination to manage and seek clarity and interpret misfortunes related to reproductive issues such as miscarriage and infertility (Bledsoe 1999; Sijpt 2018). Conversations with religious leaders and women from the community revealed how pregnancy, infertility, miscarriage and other reproductive issues were interpreted through a spiritual and religious lens. For instance many believed infertility or miscarriage to be associated with generational curses or evil spirits, especially if these issues had affected several women in the same family. Prayer and other spiritual indigenous practices were crucial strategies for managing the intersecting categories of misfortune.

The centrality of religion throughout the thesis does not focus on specific Christian or Islamic concepts or doctrines. Instead, the analysis explores the intertwined nature of religion and culture in Adonkia, focusing on the experiences, contestations and considerations associated with moral interpretations and religious value systems and practices. The analytical lens illustrates how religion and faith in a higher being influence interpretations of misfortune, affecting individuals' strategic decision-making processes as they weigh up the spiritual and social consequences of their actions. The analysis illustrates how individuals in Adonkia look for meaning and explanations as they strategically plan, navigate and cope with the consequences of an unexpected pregnancy.

Borrowing from Bledsoe's (1999) argument, I illustrate how, rather than dwelling in uncertainty, girls actively develop plans to deal with their unexpected pregnancy (see Chapter 5). These plans 'calibrate a trajectory by assessing the present and reflecting on past experience' (ibid., 24) to move forward in anticipation of future trajectories, which links with social navigation as they strategically plan their future. The thesis captures their unfolding experiences of uncertainty related to parental support, paternal acknowledgement and their educational trajectories at various stages of pregnancy and after childbirth. Like other scholars, I look at the kinds of future that the girls imagine, hope for and fear and how these motivate their actions as they navigate through uncertainty towards their desired trajectory (Bledsoe 1999; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Sijpt 2018).

While studies have already demonstrated how adult women face similar critical decisions and challenges regarding their choices about their future life during and after pregnancy (Bledsoe 1980; 1999; Cole 2010), the analytical lens is used to show the particular vulnerabilities of teenage girls connected to their social relations, age, gender and sexuality as they fall between childhood and adulthood. In the context of their uncertainty, I use these interrelated concepts of misfortune and uncertainty to gain a deeper understanding of the management of reproductive misfortune and subsequent conjunctures that influence the girls' planning and approach to the future.

I seek to conceptualise a solid basis for the temporal and strategic management of reproductive misfortune and uncertainty as girls confront these moral interpretations, interrelated tensions and future pathways. Below I continue this discussion, considering how gender and sexuality complement the concepts of uncertainty and reproductive misfortune.

2.4. Gender Performativity

Gender is a central lens through which the experience of reproductive misfortune in Adonkia must be understood. In the previous section, I unpacked how misfortune and uncertainty relate to the

vulnerabilities and concerns linked to unexpected pregnancy among teenage girls. As shown in the literature review, the discourses relating to teenage pregnancy in most sub-Saharan African contexts are highly gendered, with strong cultural biases against girls and women while excusing or ignoring men's sexual behaviour. For this reason gender is a significant theme in this thesis because it highlights how social expectations and moral discourses shape the perception and judgment of the actions, bodies and future trajectories of pregnant girls and teenage mothers. This section turns to the concept of gender to illuminate the spectrum of masculinity and femininity and how sexuality is constructed, performed and regulated in a patriarchal context.

When it comes to gender norms, both men and women manage misfortune and uncertainty based on gendered expectations. Several scholars have discussed this theme in relation to the structural and economic challenges associated with the gendered tendencies that shape the coping mechanisms people use to navigate their uncertainties and vulnerabilities (Christensen 2009; Cole 2012; Eisenstein 2021).

I question how gender is navigated alongside social inequalities and the uncertainties and expectations related to girls' age and sexuality. Although I mainly focus on conceptualising femininity and sexuality, I also discuss aspects of masculinity regarding men's proximity to teenage girls as it relates to sexual relationships, pregnancy and fatherhood.

The thesis uses the feminist philosopher Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity to conceptualise gender and sexuality. She introduces this concept in her essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', referring to the social construction of behaviour and expressions embedded in socially constituted norms. Her main argument is that feminine and masculine identities are not innate or based on a neutral biological reality. Instead, she asserts that gender is socially constituted through performativity and reinforced by repeated actions that are based on social expectations. In other words for something to be performative it must have a series of effects. This concept can be misunderstood if one fails to distinguish between performance and performativity. Butler (2009, 11) suggests that the norms are 'acting on us before we have a chance to act', referring to the idea that we are born into societies with pre-existing expectations of gender and stereotypical behaviour that are usually imposed on us from birth (2009, 11).

An example of this in the Sierra Leonean context is the traditional practice of initiation rites (see section 3.2.1.), which inherently subjected both men and women to repeated actions that aligned with the socially ascribed definitions of masculinity and femininity. Through cultural rituals, girls embrace feminine attributes associated with motherhood, marriage and womanhood. In contrast, men were

equally taught about manhood, the social expressions of masculinity and how to provide for and protect their families. The initiation rites demonstrate how 'being' comes about through the process of 'becoming'.

Given the gradual decline of this traditional practice, it was evident that interpretations and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity were shifting.

In Adonkia, where the expressions and understanding of femininity have changed in response to economic and social circumstances, women carried multiple burdens and appeared to be hyper-independent and less reliant on men than they have been in the past. This behaviour contributed to the cultural perception that deemed most Sierra Leonean men as irresponsible and unreliable fathers. The analysis must take social change into account, as crises, political instability and economic changes influence sexual dynamics and gendered power structures.

Sub-Saharan African women elsewhere see transactional sex as a tool to overcome uncertainty, adversity and economic hardship. Sex and love have been strategic tools used to optimise future aspirations linked to education, modernity, social mobility and survival (Coulter 2009; Hawkins, Price and Mussá 2009; Cole 2010; Hunter 2010). However, the argument may be more complex, especially in the case of teenage pregnancy, where the girls may seem more sexually vulnerable because of their age. It is important to understand the various sexual interactions and the gendered power relations at play by exploring the motives and negotiations associated with sexual and gendered expression.

Rubin (2006) advocates for explicitly examining gender, as the understanding of femininity influences power relations and the interpretation of appropriate and inappropriate expressions, which privileges some social groups' sexual liberty in a society or institution while marginalising and discriminating against those deviating from the norm, such as unmarried teenage mothers.

In Sierra Leonean culture masculinity is privileged with sexual freedom whereas the expectations regarding femininity, especially that of young women, are associated with sexual restraint and chastity. Susan Pickard notes that patriarchy is broader than gender as the dimension of age is a significant aspect of the patriarchal system and 'whatever disadvantage the female gender imposes, age further deepens' (2018, 18). Based on this argument, the thesis suggests that teenage girls are not only disadvantaged because of their female status but also because of their age, which may lead to a heightened sense of uncertainty and misfortune in comparison to those that men and older women experience. Because teenage girls fall between childhood and adulthood the possibility that they possess any agency regarding their sexuality is often questioned or disregarded (Blake 2021). I used

the concept of gender performativity to question agency and assertions about sexuality that frequently presume that teenage girls should express innocence and sexual passivity until they are married.

The concept of gender performativity is useful as an analytical lens for understanding kinship structures and social relations. For instance, most West African families have different expectations for their daughters and for their sons, especially with regard to their sexual conduct, because the sexuality of girls is closely attached to family honour (Koster 2003; Eerdewijk 2007). Hunter (2010) argues that the economic and transactional nature of heterosexual relationships has always been contingent upon socially constructed, historically situated notions of love and gender norms in South Africa and other sub-Saharan African contexts. He notes that the expression of masculinity and love is subject to men's ability to provide financially through bridewealth and other traditional practices. This leads us to question how expectations associated with performative actions have been shaped and how uncertainty is managed and mitigated when girls and men challenge or fail to reinforce these social ideals.

Performative femininity should be understood as a shifting and context-dependent construct. For instance the expression or performance of femininity in religious settings may emphasise modesty or sexual propriety, while girls may express the opposite behaviour in a different social environment. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) argue that femininity is a plural term, with various emerging expressions in response to situational and relational dynamics.

Due to the moral discourse on teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, girls may find themselves in a compromising position, outwardly performing obedience to messaging about 'moral' and 'immoral' behaviour to protect their own or their family's social image while discreetly engaging in sexual activity. The concept of gender performativity encourages a closer look at the passive and active ways that girls express, conform to or resist social constructs of acceptable femininity and sexuality, by highlighting the dissonances between external cultural expectations and internal expressions of desire, ambivalence and shame.

Western gender theories such as that of Butler have been questioned by non-Western scholars, as feminist issues related to sexuality are often imposed, generalised and oversimplified interpretations of patriarchy, minimising expressions of female agency and resistance and varied sociopolitical and sociocultural factors. The Indian anthropologist Mohanty (1988) posits that Western academic interpretations of gender have resulted in a monolithic depiction of the 'third-world woman', while African feminists have emphasised the importance of broadening the singular narrative beyond colonial and patriarchal portrayals of subordination and victimhood (Sudarkasa 1986; Oyěwùmí

1997). Feminist issues related to kinship, economic roles and sexuality are often imposed and conceptualised through a Eurocentric perspective.

When Western gender theories are not applied critically it leads to misinterpretations of gender structures in sub-Saharan African societies. Such theories may overemphasise Western feminist issues while undermining African women's concerns and evolving roles in local African societies (Sudarkasa 1986; Oyěwùmí 1997). Oyěwùmí's (2016) critique of Western feminist theories about nuclear family and gender hierarchy aligns with my observations from the fieldwork, where families stress the importance of age and seniority over gender. In Adonkia the age and status of a teenage mother within a household had more to do with her subordination to older women in the family than her actual gender.

The Western emphasis on the nuclear family structure fails to encompass other forms of kinship structures and interpretations of gender common to sub-Saharan African societies. Silva (1996) argues that different kinship structures determine the language used to describe single motherhood. A 'female-headed household' outside the nuclear family framework carries positive connotations of power and responsibility in non-Western societies, where understanding the state of 'single motherhood' carries connotations of abandonment and loneliness.

These examples demonstrate the importance of avoiding misinterpretation by understanding the diverse gender and cultural norms in non-Western societies that may differ significantly from Western realities. With this criticism in mind, I align with scholars who have employed Western theories as a starting point from which to critically reinterpret and analyse femininities in sub-Saharan African societies (Nkani 2012; Bhana 2016; Amakor 2018). By adapting performed gender to reflect local interpretations of gender, lived realities, cultural practices and historical context, this thesis generates new insights and understandings about gender in Sierra Leone. To fully illustrate the interconnection between gender and motherhood, the following section details how girls socially navigate these intersections as they transition to the role of motherhood.

2.5. Navigating Social Transitions: Being and Becoming

The previous sections have outlined the importance of understanding how girls and their relatives interpret reproductive misfortune, define situated concerns and navigate their sexuality in a patriarchal society. As discussed, teenage girls fall between two social categories: childhood and adulthood. Given their gender, age and social condition, they may be particularly vulnerable as they

navigate the multiple and often conflicting sexual norms and social expectations related to pregnancy, motherhood and schooling. This section conceptualises the transitional process and how girls manage uncertainty after becoming mothers.

I draw from Vigh's (2006) concept of social navigation as he demonstrates how young men in Guinea-Bissau navigate political conflict and social instability by strategically joining the militia to achieve status and gain financial and physical security. By looking at the intersections between agency, social forces and change, social navigation considers individuals' movements in changing and unsettling social environments and is useful for understanding the simultaneous acts of praxis and planning as pregnant teenage girls adjust to their predicament and the dual motion of moving among life's uncertainties in a moving environment. In other words, while they are navigating their social identity as schoolgirls and teenage mothers they are also moving through a landscape of shifting institutional structures, societal expectations and economic and political structural challenges.

Inspired by Vigh, Sijpt (2018) adapts the notion of navigation to shed light on women's reproductive decision-making in Cameroon. She argues:

> Reproductive decision-making is not simply a matter of either structural dependency and social interconnectedness or individual autonomy. It can encompass both; for the Gbigbil, one does not exclude the other. Women can be intrinsically tied to social others and at the same time enact forms of individuality that are rooted in, and even encouraged by, that same social order. It is this very duality that informs the notion of 'navigation': it starts from the assumption that 'social structures' and 'individuals' are not dichotomous, but always dynamically related to each other. Reproductive navigation happens at the intersection of changing landscapes and moving persons. By zooming in on the intricacies of this navigation […], we can come closer to the everyday lived experiences of women who carry, avoid and lose pregnancies within the local world that surrounds and constitutes them. (2018, 190)

Although Vigh's understanding of social navigation as it relates to young men's strategic approach to surviving conflict and war was developed to explore broader social and political structures of uncertainty, Sijpt demonstrates the adaptability of this concept by focusing specifically on women's difficulties in the area of reproduction and family life. Thematically, the application of navigation in this thesis aligns with her understanding of reproductive decision-making, structural dependency and social interconnectedness. However, given the younger demographic investigated in my thesis, the understanding of navigation is centred around the process of the present reality and imagined futures at two intersecting moments: the transition from teenager to adult and the transition from pregnancy to motherhood. The concept of navigation adds to the understanding of the chronological and social

transitions that are heavily influenced by kinship structures and the girls' social environment, which require constant negotiation and assessment of the opportunities available and the social limitations.

Anthropologists have argued against conceptualising youth in a framework of fixed life stages because depending on their context and social position, most youth across Africa are subject to multiple trajectories and transitions rather than a linear path of predefined life stages. The general anthropological critique is that while the life-stage model offers a unidimensional perspective in public health and other fields of study, it fails to consider the stages in between, where processes of transition take place (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006; Vigh 2006; Lipton 2017). Therefore it is important to refrain from analytically 'freezing' teenage girls in categories or social positions that they themselves consider fluid (Christiansen et al. 2006, 15). I use the concept of social navigation to gain insight into the meaningful ways girls navigate socially; that is, 'inhabit, escape, or move within' generational dynamics and kinship structures (Christiansen et al. 2006, 11).

Adding to this navigation process, Honwana (2014) argues that 'waithood', defined as waiting to enter adulthood, is another central aspect of such life transitions. To make sense of the dual transition, the thesis connects the notion of social navigation to the process of 'social being', 'becoming' and in-between stages of 'waiting'. I explore how girls are situated (social being) and may be required to pause (wait) along the way as they journey through pregnancy, life transitions and uncertainties in the process of striving towards self-realisation and future aspirations (social becoming) (Vigh 2006; Honwana 2014).

During my fieldwork period only a few interlocutors were employed, but none were financially independent. Some relied on their partner but most were dependent on their parents, older siblings, aunts, or grandparents. The focus on generational dynamics will enable a deeper understanding of the social change and interrelated dependency required for girls and their families to overcome uncertainty as they strive towards social becoming. This dependency highlights how motherhood and mothering are social constructs based on collective effort in West African societies (Bledsoe 1999; Oyěwùmí 2016). In this context young people commonly rely on financial assistance or additional support from fictive kinship; that is, social relations such as neighbours, religious leaders and school teachers (McLean 2019).

In Sierra Leone and other parts of Africa, girls are socialised to aspire to motherhood from a young age and infertility is therefore more stigmatised than being unmarried (Bledsoe 1999). However, Johnson-Hanks (2002b) suggests that the role and status of motherhood can be separated from the fixed biological role. In her research among Beti women in Cameroon, she writes:

> Rather than a clear threshold into female adulthood, here motherhood is a loosely bounded, fluid status. Contrary both to folk intuition and the assumptions of a life cycle framework, Beti motherhood is not a stable status. Beti women who have borne children are not necessarily mothers, at least not all the time. Motherhood, instead, constitutes a temporary social status, an agent position that can be inhabited in specific forms of social action. (2002b, 865)

This illustration shows that the fluid constructs of motherhood and mothering are situational, meaning that female relatives or women in the community care for non-biological children in ways that differ from the nuclear family structure. The fluidity of mothering and collective responsibility aligns with Mielle Chandler's understanding; drawing on Butler's idea of performative gender mentioned in the previous section, she notes that mothering is equally performed, stating 'It is my position that "mother" is best understood as a verb, as something one does, a practice which creates one's identity as intertwined, interconnected and in-relation' (2007, 531). Being perceived as a 'good' mother in the process of social becoming entails consistently reenacting the cultural values that align with motherhood. Motherhood, like femininity, exists within a societal framework that both reinforces and challenges recognised gendered ideals within familial and societal constructs. To fully sketch the social role of teenage mothers and the interconnectedness between motherhood and schooling, the empirical analysis explores their positioning as it relates to traditional kinship frameworks rooted in family obligations and sacrificial investment. Viewing motherhood as a fluid and performative construct further allows an exploration of personal agency as girls enact, repeat, appropriate, refuse and redefine mothering as they navigate their identity and their trajectory towards social reproduction. Because femininity and motherhood are embedded in social constructs of gender it is important to consider how agency is exercised, changing meaning and leaving room for transformation within rather than outside social constraints and institutional power structures (Butler 1988).

Christiansen et al. argue (2006) that the transition from childhood to adulthood emphasises positions of social status and respectability. Throughout the thesis, respectability is defined as the social validation that girls strive towards as they (re)align themselves with sociocultural norms and expectations. Respectability is a central aspect of social navigation and positioning that goes beyond moral behaviour: to be seen as respectable girls must demonstrate maturity and social stability, which were qualities that were practiced in the past during initiation rites as they prepared for marriage and

motherhood. Johnson-Hanks notes that 'to be respectable is to have achieved specific milestones relevant to a particular interaction' (2005, 80).

As mentioned, the repercussions of teenage pregnancy are seen as a collective rather than an individual responsibility; the social status of the respectability or misfortune that teenage mothers experience reflects onto their family background as the mother's respectability is tied to that of her teenage daughter (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Blake 2017; Mkhwanazi and Bhana 2017; Amakor 2018). Bledsoe and Cohen (1993) note that in the past motherhood was considered a rite of passage to adulthood, making a girl's status as a mother incompatible with schooling in Sierra Leonean society:

> Children who wear school uniforms are regarded with a mixture of respect and fear because of their potential for achievement in the 'civilized' world, with its esoteric mysteries and fearful powers. A girl's school uniform suggests that she is being prepared for marriage to a man of importance and as such should be treated with respect. More important, the symbolism attached to school uniforms, like attire worn by Sande society initiates, marks her as sexually unavailable. (1993, 94)

This quote illustrates the gendered symbolism and cultural expectations associated with the social status of schoolgirls. Although nowadays more girls are encouraged to return to school after giving birth, the sentiments in this quote are deeply embedded in Sierra Leonean culture. The parallel between schooling and initiation rites illustrates how both practices carry and reproduce cultural meanings associated with aspirational femininity. Both practices also promise social value and respectability when girls align themselves with attributes that perpetuate patriarchal norms such as sexual regulation, innocence and marriageability. The disruption that occurs when girls fail to adhere to the social order is a central focus throughout the thesis. By exploring how girls perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, it offers a better understanding of the social change and dichotomy related to schooling and motherhood. I demonstrate how girls are expected to uphold, 'do' and 'perform' certain values in order to be perceived as good mothers or respectable women.

While marriageability is considered a respectable and secure milestone by women across Africa from which to navigate life's uncertainties (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Cole 2010), I argue that teenage mothers in Adonkia prioritise alternative routes to social reproduction. As I demonstrate throughout the thesis, formal education is a central pursuit in which certain types of becoming are both encouraged and imagined. The prioritisation of motherhood and schooling does not mean that girls do not desire marriage eventually; however they base their immediate and tactical response to

uncertainty on reconstructing their actions to meet shifting norms in order to mitigate others' judgemental perceptions and their own feelings of misfortune. Kinship ties into this process through the support teenage mothers receive from extended family members and the perception of family obligation as a sacrificial investment requiring financial and emotional commitment to teenage mothers (Ringsted 2008; Amakor 2018).

2.6. Conclusion

The concepts discussed above highlight the themes discussed in the thesis. I argue that they are complementary and intrinsically related to our understanding of girls' journey through unexpected pregnancy and motherhood. Social navigation allows analysis of how girls 'move and manage within situations of social flux and change' (Vigh 2019, 420) and the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability that emerge once they become pregnant. Although both men and women are susceptible to experiences of uncertainty, their responses, interpretations and actions in the face of adversity may fall along gendered lines. The thesis draws attention to gendered aspects of uncertainty in cases of pregnancy and motherhood, which are associated with gendered expectations and experiences informed by social norms.

The significance and conceptual framing of kinship support is highlighted to demonstrate the contingent nature of kinship structures and how the misfortune of teenage pregnancy becomes a collective responsibility among relatives. Thinking about femininity as an act of 'doing' also highlights how teenage girls either conform to or fail to meet social expectations in a patriarchal context where their sexuality is often taboo. Focusing on their intersecting roles as teenagers, mothers, daughters and students offers an opportunity to move beyond fixed conceptualisations, leaving room for flexible interpretation of how teenage girls navigate the process of social transition as they strive towards financial security and respectability while restoring their social image. For a better understanding of how these concepts fit into life in Adonkia the next chapter presents an overview and discussion of past and current sociocultural and political structures that have influenced the Sierra Leonean landscape.

3. Contextual Background

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the concepts that this thesis uses to unpack the navigation of pregnancy and motherhood in Sierra Leone. I have defined 'reproductive misfortune' as an unexpected pregnancy and as a motivating force towards social navigation and mobility. I also discussed the individual and collective patterns employed to manage uncertainty related to reproduction, addressing the importance of contextualising gender, age, sexuality and motherhood to better understand the social expectations attached to these factors in Adonkia.

This chapter outlines a historical thread that resonates with the ethnographic data discussed in the empirical chapters. When most people think of the history of Sierra Leone, subjects such as the recent Ebola outbreak, the eleven-year civil conflict, child soldiers, and the exploitative use of diamonds and other natural resources to fund conflict and perpetuate violence, commonly called "blood diamonds" may come to mind. Although a comprehensive recounting of contemporary Sierra Leone is beyond the scope of this thesis, this chapter is organised into five central periods: pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, civil war and post-civil war. Using this chronological structure I focus on the key themes of youth, gender, family structure and marriage to highlight the country's historical disruptions and the evolution and coexistence of institutional and cultural frameworks that remain in constant flux in response to social change.

While Chapter 4 presents a detailed description of the fieldsite and local neighbourhood, the purpose of this chapter is to contextualise and connect the central themes above to the country's social, economic and political history and the structural patterns of sexual abuse, coercion and exploitation that have affected the lives of Sierra Leonean girls and women.

I begin the chapter by describing the central social structures during the pre-colonial period and how some of these were questioned during the colonial era, when British missionaries sought to introduce Indigenous Sierra Leoneans and formerly enslaved people to 'civilised' ways of life through education and the nuclear kinship structure. The chapter discusses how political challenges during the post-colonial period laid the foundation for the Civil War in 1991 and ends with an evaluation of how the long-term effects of these historical injustices and misfortunes have informed current perceptions of sexuality, respectability and modernity, as well as national policy and discourse regarding girls' education and sexual and reproductive health issues.

Figure 1: Regional Map of Sierra Leone
(Source: Sierra Leone DHS 2019)

3.2. The Precolonial Period

Long before the colonial period, the area that constitutes present-day Sierra Leone was occupied by different ethnic groups, some of which had migrated from the Sahel region over the centuries. In each region the dominant Mende and Temne groups — neither of which were indigenous to Sierra Leone — were organised by chiefdoms and kinship structures alongside other ethnic groups.

The Islamic influence was introduced to Sierra Leone in the eighteenth century by Fula Jihad, who occupied the coastal areas adjacent to Adonkia and the region that subsequently developed to become the Freetown colonial area. The influx of Fula, Mandingo and Susu ethnic groups led to Islamic settlement across Sierra Leone and other countries in the subregion, which explains the similarities among certain cultural and traditional practices across West Africa (Cole 2013).

The political organisation led by the paramount chiefs usually entailed consultation with councils and leaders of secret societies. These secret societies were considered a spiritual counterbalance to the chief's secular authority as they followed traditional laws associated with ancestral worship and

spiritual practices. To ensure their successful rulership, paramount chiefs chose local leaders from the female (Bondo) and male (Poro) secret societies as sub-chiefs to assist with community matters regarding the distribution of communal land and other spiritual, legal and administrative matters. Succession and inheritance were mainly patrilineal but among the Mende and the Sherbro women were entitled to chieftaincy titles in their communities. The female leaders used Bondo law to protect all women from male offences, which commonly included spiritual curses that were believed to cause physical misfortune such as illness or death (Hoffer 2011; Beoku-Betts and M'Cormack-Hale 2022).

3.2.1. Secret Societies and Initiation Rites

The female secret society leaders had a strong influence in the community as they fostered strategic alliances by arranging marriages for girls from prominent family backgrounds. Initiating young people into adulthood through secret societies was central to the community's social life and its organisational structure; it maintained the social and moral order and strengthened social bonds and regional alliances, ensuring lifelong solidarity with other secret society members (Hoffer 2011). While Poro society taught men essential livelihood skills such as hunting, farming and building in preparation for marriage, the function of the Bondo society was to oversee puberty rituals during which young girls transitioned from child to bride. As Phillips writes: 'Before she enters into the Sande bush, a candidate is a child; after being taken to the Sande enclosure, the "child" translates into a "novice." After clitoridectomy, a girl is known as [a virgin and] at the end of the initiation period, she emerges as a bride' [3](1995, 81).

The transition into adulthood was consolidated through marriage rather than at puberty. The initiation rites were beneficial on several levels: first, it prevented girls from bearing children outside marriage, ensuring that they were in an economically secure union and were morally upright members of their ethnic community, and second, girls learned practical skills essential for personal hygiene, childbearing, childrearing and marriage. They were also taught about indigenous remedies and spiritual practices.

However, Bledsoe notes that 'contrary to previous belief, Sande [female society] leaders hide more than they teach about reproduction, and midwives try to keep the knowledge of childbearing secret. Many girls, I am convinced, do not find out how babies are born until the very moment their children emerge from the womb' (1980, 73).

[3]Sande is the Mende term for Bondo or secret society.

The initiation process entailed female circumcision, in which the clitoris and part of the labia are removed. When circumcision resulted in death and misfortune due to severe bleeding or other health complications, community members accused the girl of being involved in witchcraft. Those who survived were revered for their 'stoicism' and 'bravery', believing that the endurance of physical pain during circumcision enhanced their tolerance of pain during childbirth (Ahmadu 2010).

After the initiation rites the girls' parents sought financial security through marital arrangements that included large sums of money, cattle, food and ceramic pots. Bridewealth was negotiated and determined by several factors such as the girl's physical appearance, family background and sexual propriety. Once girls had access to formal education their level of education also became a central part of the marriage negotiations. These factors reflected the young bride's respectability and the honour and stability she would bring to the groom and to both families (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Hoffer 2011).

Since the pre-colonial period Sierra Leone has been a predominantly polygynous society in which older men subscribed to early marriage by marrying young wives after they had been initiated.[4] Families and co-wives protected young brides from full sexual exposure when they married into a polygynous household, allowing their bodies to develop for a few years before they engaged in reproduction (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993).

In Adonkia polygyny was widely accepted following Islamic and indigenous beliefs. It was a means of acquiring respectability such as becoming an elder or accumulating wealth; however because financial success was difficult to attain and eldership status required great wisdom that developed over time, most men settled for attaining social status through polygyny. Having multiple wives and children was also a strategic and advantageous way for farmers to acquire wealth because this kinship structure provided a stable workforce in a labour-intensive economy. After the husband, the senior wife had the most authority over the other wives and oversaw decision-making and delegated domestic tasks. Senior co-wives often monitored junior wives, especially around other

[4] By 'early marriage' I refer the marriage of girls below 18 years of age. UN and other human rights organisations have played a significant role in defining the practice as child marriage in development discourses. Locally, the practice was never distinguished by a separate term until development discourse used the word 'child' to highlight the violation against children's human rights. However, this term may be misleading given that the practice was culturally and traditionally accepted as a rite of passage for girls to transition into womanhood in Sierra Leone. In other words, girls who married under the age of 18 were not considered children, and therefore the term 'early marriage' seems more appropriate and neutral when discussing the practice in a social and historical context. I use the term 'child marriage' when referencing human rights or development discourse.

young men, to observe flirtatious behaviour and ensure their fidelity to their marital union (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Rogers 2011).

I was informed that initiation rites were fairly prevalent in Adonkia until the early 2000s, when the Civil War ended. Many in the community believed that the discontinuation of this practice has led to the increase in teenage pregnancy and other societal problems. Elders in Adonkia often argued that the pragmatic cultural logic and precolonial systems ensured economic and social security, which protected women against sexual exploitation and marginalisation. On the other hand one may argue that this form of 'protection' reinforces social control of female sexuality, which mostly aligns with patriarchal interests. The practice of the initiation rites helps us to understand why teenage pregnancy was neither a social problem nor a significant concern in precolonial times, as most girls were already married and culturally perceived as adults prior to becoming mothers. In the next section I discuss the traditional system that holds men accountable when unmarried girls become pregnant.

3.2.2. Ansa Belle: Denying and Accepting Paternity

Since the precolonial period *ansa belle,* which translates as 'answering the stomach' (the pregnancy) has been a widely recognised practice that destigmatises pregnancy outside marriage to restore the family's honour (Bledsoe and Gage 1994; Schneider 2019a). In Sierra Leone, the acknowledgment of paternity plays a crucial role in determining access to inheritance, financial security and social identity, as children are granted the paternal surname once the paternal family steps in to legitimise and claim paternity (Sijpt 2018). The practice typically entails the genitor and a few of his family members paying a visit to the girl's family to claim the child, preferably before it is born or shortly after the family has become aware of the pregnancy. The two families then negotiate and discuss practical matters regarding the child's welfare. Unfortunately, this does not always produce a positive outcome, as some families refuse to accept the genitor's efforts towards reconciliation. Even though the negotiations are an essential part of the process, the significance of *ansa belle* in Sierra Leone is that it demonstrates that the man respects and honours the girl's family.

Ansa belle attempts to deal with the immediate issue of paternity while supporting broader societal norms and values related to gender and sexuality aligned with the notion that girls' sexuality is attached to their family honour. During the precolonial period premarital pregnancy was more justifiable if the genitor had already begun paying bridewealth and was willing to acknowledge the child and enter into marriage because of the pregnancy. When men engaged sexually with girls

outside the context of bridewealth, engagement or marriage, genitors were expected to take accountability for sexually violating or 'reducing' the girl's marital value (Touray 2006; Nkani 2017). Those who failed to acknowledge paternity during the precolonial period were reported to the local chief or community leader for help with resolving the issue.

Historically, people in Adonkia believed that misfortune followed men who failed to acknowledge their paternity, as a family could put a curse on a genitor who abandoned his responsibility and brought disgrace upon the girl's family. A woman from Adonkia shared an incident in which a young boy had fathered a child with her teenage daughter. He initially acknowledged the pregnancy but failed to live up to his promise of financial provision and subsequently fled to Nigeria. Over time he encountered a series of business failures and an overall lack of success, leading him to believe the family had cursed him to 'block his way' and ruin his future. As a result he had recently returned to seek the family's forgiveness and financially support his now-10-year-old daughter. The woman denied these accusations. As a devout Christian she believed that the consequence of his actions was between him and God. I heard similar stories during my fieldwork period from both men and women, who emphasised the significance of *ansa belle* and how acknowledging paternity was a means of acquiring blessings and preventing spiritual and physical misfortune. In Chapter 6 I discuss how this practice has evolved in contemporary Sierra Leone. In the next section I discuss the social inequalities that emerged during the colonial period.

3.3. The Colonial Period

The British created a significant part of Sierra Leone's colonial legacy. The country was the oldest British Colony in West Africa. Because of its easily accessible port, the British chose Freetown as the place of settlement for formerly enslaved people after the abolition of the slave trade between 1787 and 1840. Many formerly enslaved people who arrived in Freetown came from the Americas and the Black Poor in the UK.[5] Some had fought alongside the British during the Napoleonic War and in the American War of Independence. The descendants of the liberated American, the British and Afro-Caribbean slaves gradually became the Creole ethnic group and were predominantly settled in Freetown and in other parts of the western area, including Adonkia (Mackenzie 2012; Lipton 2017).

[5] The *Black Poor* were a population of formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans living in London in the 18th-century.The former slaves came from Nova Scotia, plantations in Virginia and South Carolina and Jamaican Maroons. After the British abolished slavery many of the black people in the UK were living in marginalised conditions, and Freetown was consider an ideal settlement area for the *Black Poor* (Fyfe 1962).

The Shebro, who historically occupied much of Adonkia, intermarried with Creoles and assimilated their ways, creating a bilateral form of kinship and other cultural and faith practices. Because of their colonial history many Creoles subscribed to British ideologies and established a culture embedded in both Sierra Leonean and British values. Some of their customs and values were aligned with those of the Indigenous people; however, as they strived towards 'civilisation' they also denounced indigenous practices that they perceived as primitive and uncivilised. While some Creoles had converted to Christianity as slaves, others had maintained their Islamic faith or had no affiliation with Christianity before arriving in Freetown (Harrell-Bond 1975; Steady 2006; Ménard 2023).

Freetown became an official British crown colony in 1808, while the interior of the country only came under British rule in 1896, and then only as a Protectorate. The British introduced a new form of colonial governance based on indirect rule. Under this colonial structure, the interior of the country was divided into districts which had their own British commissioner and administration. These districts were further divided into chiefdoms ruled by paramount chiefs, who were locally established and under the control of the British administration. The land chiefs, overseeing lower-tier town and village chiefs, were offered financial incentives by the British authorities. This style of governance allowed the British to focus on their efforts in the colony, leaving the Protectorate to the chiefs (McLean 2019).

According to Gberie, Freetown was regarded as a missionary field for the British to experiment with 'conversionism' (2005, 18). Once missionaries settled in Freetown they sought to reshape and regulate the indigenous frameworks for marriage practices, education and gender relations.

3.3.1. The Colonial Project

The missionaries believed that colonial subjects were in dire need of religious and social transformation and Freetown became a colonial project in which the British sought to develop and 'civilise' them by introducing Western education systems and Christianity as an alternative to the long-established Islamic faith and other indigenous religions and practices (Cole 2013). Formal education was promoted as a tool for conversion and social control and played a significant role in the development of urban and rural communities. Berman (1975) observed that the missionaries mainly disseminated formal education to spread the gospel:

> Missionaries established schools because education was deemed indispensable to the main purpose of the Christian denominations—spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Missionaries recognized that the school was, in the words of one commentator, 'the nursery of the infant Church'. The school was used as an inducement to lure Africans into the missionary orbit. Africans were no less averse to using missionaries for their own purposes than the missionaries were for theirs. African reasons for attending mission schools varied, but most were related to well-defined political, social, or economic goals. The recent studies reveal that few Africans attended mission schools for the sake of their eschatological message. (xi)

Many Muslim students in Sierra Leone felt pressured to convert to Christianity in order to advance their education (Harrell-Bond 1975). In response the Islamic Ahmadiyya missionaries established the first Muslim primary schools for boys and girls in 1938, promoting an Islamic curriculum and combining Western and Arabic education.[6] The British colonial administration supported the building of educational and healthcare institutions across West Africa (Langewiesche 2020). The Church Missionary Society (CMS) ensured that formerly enslaved people had access to formal education. They built primary and secondary schools in the Western area, and in 1827 they established Fourah Bay College, the first higher education institution in West Africa. Although the university was initially founded for individuals interested in becoming priests and African missionaries, the university eventually became known as the Athens of West Africa because several of its graduates became prominent political leaders and key figures across West Africa's anti-colonial movement. Historically, the university represented the emergence of educated West African youth determined to develop their countries.

In Sierra Leone Creole men constituted the upper stratum of the colony's African population. Because the established schools were located in Freetown they had a significant advantage over other ethnic groups in relation to access to formal education and employment opportunities.

Muslims and non-Christians were excluded from mainstream colonial society and relegated to the lower stratum of society. In the same vein the educational system did not prioritise women and reinforced British patriarchal systems.

Many local families from the provinces engaged in fostering agreements with Creoles living in Adonkia and other urban communities because they wanted their children to benefit from the

[6] The Ahmadiyya community's Islamic movement was founded in 1889 by Muslim missionaries from British India. These missionaries arrived in British colonies (Nigeria, Gold Coast, Gambia and Sierra Leone) in the 1910s and subsequently traveled to franglophone colonies in West Africa (Langewiesche 2020). Since their arrival to Sierra Leone the Ahmadiyya community has built 1,400 mosques and 300 schools across the country.

privileges and success that a Creole household would afford them. Through Creole fostering, children could assimilate more easily in Freetown and gain access to employment and primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. In some instances individuals strategically assumed the English surname of their Creole foster-parents and took on Christian names in order to obtain employment after completing their education (Harrell-Bond 1975; G. Cole 2013).

A central colonial objective was to promote a nuclear family structure based on Christian values while eradicating female circumcision and regulating indigenous marriage practices. By exerting their perceived moral superiority the British believed that imposing their understanding of marriage was another way of 'civilising' the population by replacing their traditional and customary structures with legally defined marital union. Ernest Ingham, a British missionary, summarised his concerns about the polygamous and 'loveless' nature of marital unions in Sierra Leone:

> The great desideratum in the social life of the colony is the sanctity of the marriage relationship, and the creation and maintenance of home and family life. There are plain signs here and there of the beginnings of this; but the comparative absence of the ideas of love and fellowship from the marriage tie, utterly wrong views about the relative duties of husband and wife, tend to encourage concubinage, and this degrades woman from her true place, becomes the fruitful source of strife and disunion, and children dragged up under these circumstances are apt to see and hear much that is most unfortunate. (1894, 316)

Ingham's quote reflects the missionaries' mentality and moral Christian framework. His judgmental and biased claims about their marriage ideals and gender norms illustrate how the missionaries conflated opposing cultural value systems with immorality and uncivilised behaviour, making monogamous marriage became a central issue for them.

During the colonial period three marriage systems were recognised in law to accommodate the diverse population in the country: the British introduced civil marriage in 1867; the Islamic Marriage Act in 1912; and customary marriage governed by the Protectorate Court in 1931.[7] Western-educated Sierra Leoneans and Christian converts from the Western Area mainly adopted civil marriage. Outside the Western Area customary and Islamic marriages were and continue to be the predominant marital practice among the provinces. Civil marriage became a marker of modernity and respectability for urban youth. Despite the legal recognition of customary marriage, considerable

[7] The Protectorate Court allowed British administration of indirect rule over the interior of the country by financially incentivising paramount chiefs to collaborate in the control of established systems (McLean 2019).

discrepancies exist as civil marriage is the only form of marriage certified by a government institution, thereby legally ensuring wives' claims to property inheritance.

In Islamic polygynous marriage husbands are not permitted to have more than four wives. While some believe that only the first wife is entitled to inherit from the husband, others subscribe to the inheritance being divided equally among the wives, which often results in significant household disputes after the husband dies (Harrell-Bond 1975).

Bledsoe (1990b) notes that pregnancy, marriage and schooling were closely intertwined in Sierra Leone, especially in Mende culture. The impact of formal education led to parents questioning the value of educating their daughters because employment opportunities requiring formal education were mainly assigned to men. The few who saw the value in female education included the bride's school fees as part of the bridewealth negotiations. Once a girl was initiated and the pursuer began paying her school fees or supporting her relatives financially they allowed her to engage in a sexual relationship with him before the final marriage ceremony. If the relationship resulted in pregnancy before the girl completed her education, she typically dropped out of school to marry the child's father. Most families prioritised educating the eldest son due to the misconception that educated men did not necessarily seek educated women, as uneducated girls were often perceived as more submissive and agreeable than their literate counterparts; however, it became evident to parents that educated girls were more likely to reject traditional norms or renegotiate the marital agreement to their advantage, often creating tension between generations (ibid.).

Another colonial objective was to regulate the sexuality of women due to ethical concerns about public nudity and prostitution. The depiction of Africans as hypersexualised and lacking moral restraint informed the moral biases of the colonial mission (Bosire, 2012). Mama (1997) posits that colonialism was a system that exacerbated and perpetuated pre-existing gender inequalities that exposed women to various forms of gender-based violence and argues that the misogynistic European gender ideologies resulting in the 'oppression of women within Europe had a direct bearing on the treatment of women in colonies' (1997, 47). Her argument points to a central contradiction as the colonial powers moralised and institutionalised the sexuality of young women by reinforcing Christian ideals. The dichotomy between ruling officials and oppressed women also led to sexual exploitation through rape and prostitution. The colonial system punished the victims while ignoring or protecting the behaviour of colonial perpetrators. In the following sections I demonstrate how the patterns of gender inequality and exploitation continued beyond Sierra Leone's independence and throughout its history.

3.4. The Post-colonial Period

Sierra Leone became an independent state on April 27th, 1961. Political tension between the Temnes and Mendes shaped the early post-colonial years. The first prime minister, Milton Margai, was accused of tribalism as he promoted fellow Mendes to civil service jobs for which other ethnic groups were more qualified. He led the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), while Siaka Stevens led the opposing Temne party All-People's Congress (APC), which won the general election in 1967. Stevens' presidency was characterised by tribalism, corruption, political instability, student protest movements and a failing economy (Gberie 2005; J. Bangura 2009). Stevens went from prime minister to head of state in 1971. By instituting a one-party state under the APC government in 1978, he became the longest-serving head of government and head of state in the history of Sierra Leone before handing over power to Joseph Saidu Momoh (Gberie 2005).

During Stevens' regime the country received approximately 55 million dollars or 34 per cent of its total revenue from foreign aid institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Politicians allocated these funds to self-serving projects and failed to invest in education, healthcare and infrastructure, lowering the standard of living and socio-economic disparity in rural and urban areas. The misuse of the funds led to the IMF imposing regulated measures on the national budget as a condition of receiving loans. This initiative resulted in national inflation, increased unemployment as many civil servants were dismissed from their jobs across the nation, and widespread youth disenfranchisement in urban areas (Paracka 2004; McLean 2019).

The post-colonial period also influenced gender relations and changing sociopolitical structures. The country's adaptation of the British parliamentary system resulted in male-dominated structures limiting women's political influence. Although the acceptance of female education was emerging as a path towards social reproduction in urban settings, most women were still defined by marriage and fertility (Bledsoe 1990b; Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Beoku-Betts and M'Cormack-Hale 2022).

President Momoh continued the patterns of neo-patrimonial governance, exacerbating the economic crisis and failing to restore the public's trust in governance. These factors contributed to the civil conflict that emerged in 1991, marking the end of the post-colonial period and ushering in a tumultuous era shaped by conflict and social destruction.

3.5. The Civil War (1991–2001)

In Adonkia, the decade-long civil war was often referenced as an explanation for the country's regression, economic deterioration and infrastructure challenges. What began in 1991 as an anti-government rebel movement progressed to become a decade-long conflict motivated by the illicit trade in diamonds and resentment towards the corrupt political system that had failed to deliver on its promises of free education and healthcare (Peters 2011).

In 1992, Captain Valentine Strasser and the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) overthrew the government as their frustration with the political powers turned into brutal violence. The political instability and greed for diamonds resulted in instability and weakened state control. Strasser's regime failed to stabilise the country which resulted in another military coup led by fellow member, Julius Maada Bio in 1996[8]. The second coup facilitated a return to civilian rule, as public opinion favoured elections, bringing President Alhaji Ahmed Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People's Party to power.

Despite these transitions the war continued for several more years. The rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), took advantage of the political instability by attacking the southeast near the Liberian border and within five years they were occupying most of the country and more than 15,000 people had been killed and 3 million displaced. An estimated 75 per cent of school-aged children were not in school, as most educational facilities in the country had been destroyed. By 1996 the few functioning healthcare facilities were located in Freetown, the last area to be occupied, and over time Freetown's commercial buildings and hospitals were also destroyed (Gberie 2005).

The conflict officially ended in 2002 after the United Nations and the British military intervention sent a military force into the country to help enforce peace.

During the war women and girls were subjected to sexual abuse, gang rape, murder, abduction, amputations and displacement. Participating in the war was a survival strategy for many women and girls, who were forced into roles as military combatants, 'wives', spies, cooks in the rebel camps and child soldiers. Young girls perceived to be virgins were primarily abducted, leading to many cases of teenage pregnancy and the emergence of 'war babies' (Coulter 2009, 232; Beoku-Betts and M'Cormack-Hale 2022). Lahai (2023, 136) contends that the main difference between the violence committed against women before and after the war lay in the patterns and rationale behind such violence. As discussed, social control and gender-based violence against women during the

[8] Maada Bio was elected into office in 2018 and is currently the President of Sierra Leone, representing the SLPP.

precolonial era was governed by traditional frameworks, while in contrast, the colonial violence was motivated by racialised power, oppression and exploitation. In a country such as Sierra Leone where sexual abuse carries a stigma, the rebels weaponised rape intentionally and systematically, often sexually violating women and girls in front of their families before abducting them, in order to cause maximum emotional destruction and humiliation.

Parental loss and displacement resulted in broken family structures during the war and left many children vulnerable to recruitment and abduction at a young age. Thousands of boys were abducted, recruited as child soldiers and forced to participate in the conflict. As children became orphans after losing one or both parents they were forced to grow up early and take on adult responsibilities. Loss of parents also affected young people economically and psychologically as they struggled to provide for themselves while coping with the psychological fears and horrors that they had endured or witnessed during the war. Coulter (2009, 6) writes that the war caused 'ruptures in the social relations of both families and communities, from the clearly visible scars of war inscribed on the bodies of those mutilated to more subtle processes of how one becomes an adult in the absence of kin and community in times of great social stress'.

The war left deep scars on youth and set the stage for the breakdown of social structures and youth disenfranchisement in post-colonial Sierra Leone. Honwana (2006) notes that the social spaces that emerged during the war reshaped cultural notions and social constructs of social relations, gender, childhood, and acts of violence. Although my interlocutors were born several years after the conflict, their parents' childhood and youth coincided with the conflict, which inevitably influenced their parental expectations and how they raised their teenage daughters.

3.6. The Post-Civil War Period

After the war the country faced the challenge of reconstructing broken development infrastructure and reintegrating child soldiers and others who had experienced constant exploitation during the war. The UN, the British Department for International Development and other international donors provided external assistance in the form of million-dollar grants and loans for various health and development projects, which resulted in the country's economy and humanitarian projects being driven by foreign aid. These humanitarian interventions focused on supporting internally displaced persons, disarmament, demobilization, and the reintegration of girls and women who faced rejection from their families having been abducted, raped, and forced into marriage with RUF rebels. Funds also went to rebuild health services and schools. Apart from funding and services, these initiatives also promoted development discourse that shaped legal reforms, introducing foreign notions of human rights, equality and women's empowerment (Coulter 2009; McLean 2019; Dumbuya 2022).

The post-conflict initiatives in Adonkia and other parts of the country resulted in an influx of NGOs with projects promoting women's rights and their reintegration into society. To empower girls economically, grassroots programmes offered vocational training for teenage mothers and vulnerable women.

In 2007 President Ernest Bai Koroma's regime introduced a movement towards reproductive health policies and equality. Providing free healthcare for girls and women throughout their pregnancy and after delivery was a significant achievement for Koroma's administration. The Free Health Care Initiative (FHCI) aimed to empower girls and women to access family planning, antenatal care, and delivery and emergency services without having to rely on their husbands or relatives for financial assistance. International donor support made it possible for the government to also offer adolescent and youth-friendly services, including access to family planning and free contraceptives (Government of Sierra Leone 2018).

However, an evaluation of the recent report from the FHCI revealed that several government officials believed that offering free reproductive health services including free contraceptives might cultivate an environment that encourages premarital sex. These officials argued that the provision of free health services had the potential to reduce the fear of facing the consequences related to teenage pregnancies (Witter et al. 2018).

At the clinics in Adonkia, feelings about the FHCI were ambivalent, as many healthcare centres were understaffed and the personnel were overworked. Although most medical treatments were free of charge, pregnant women and girls were asked to pay for drugs and bring their own gloves and

other medical necessities due to insufficient supplies at the clinics. The challenges associated with the FHCI stemmed from its mismanagement and the lack of sustainable funding and resources (Witter et al. 2018). Healthcare workers in the community regularly engaged in community outreach programmes promoting family planning and contraceptive use at various schools.[9] Because of the cultural misconceptions and taboos related to sex and contraception, many schoolgirls were not keen to attend the local health clinics in Adonkia, and by the time most of them sought assistance they had contracted a sexually transmitted disease, become pregnant, or were experiencing mild or severe complications from an attempted abortion. Embarrassment, fear and shame had kept them from attending the clinic. Maintaining sexual discretion was key, especially in a small community where relatives might know healthcare workers. In Sierra Leone the legal age of consent is eighteen, and many girls below this age choose not to reveal how old they were when seeking care at the clinic. During my fieldwork period I heard several misconceptions about contraceptive use that were associated with severe side effects that resulted in infertility or mortality from both older and younger generations of women. The local girl's empowerment initiatives promoted the use of contraceptives as a way of enabling schoolgirls to continue their education and avoid unexpected pregnancy.

Following the introduction of the FHCI, President Koroma's government strengthened its commitment to reducing teenage pregnancy in 2013 by establishing the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy (NSRTP) and the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy (2013–2015), which was developed in the same year.[10]

Koroma's administration also established several gender legislation: The Domestic Violence Act in 2007, the Devolution of Estates Act in 2007, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act in 2009 and the Sexual Offence Act in 2012. Prior to these legislations the Education Act in 2003 and the Child Rights Act in 2007 had also been established.

The Education Act provides for compulsory free primary education for boys and girls and explicitly prohibits gender discrimination in educational institutions and the Child Rights Act prohibits the exploitation and abuse of children in relation to early marriage and other harmful cultural practices. The gender bills implemented legislation that addressed gender inequality in marriage and

[9] According to the Demographic Health Survey, self-reporting by 41 per cent of unmarried girls aged 15–19 found that they were not using any method of contraception when engaging in sexual activity, and only 28 per cent had accurate knowledge about the fertility period. More than 20% of girls from the same demographic reported using either injectables or implants as a contraceptive method (SLDH 2019).

[10] The initiative to reduce teenage pregnancy resurfaced with the new government after Ebola and was developed into the National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage. It incorporated several ministries covering health, education, gender and development, which produced their respective interventions and policies (UNFPA 2018).

divorce and prioritised laws on sexual offences and the promotion of gender equality due to the high incidence of sexual abuse that girls and women had experienced during the war (Coulter 2009; Dumbuya 2022).

Although many of these pieces of legislation represent the country's commitment to advancing and protecting women's and children's rights, there have been several challenges in their implementation and interpretation. In 2021 the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs founded a specialised Family Support Unit as part of the Sierra Leone Police Department that would provide the services of social workers and probation officers to manage cases of domestic and sexual violence, gather evidence for presentation in court and provide medical referrals for the victims (Dumbuya 2022; Graybill 2022). Graybill argues that the 'low conviction rates are attributed to the fact that the Family Support Units are chronically underfunded and ill-equipped to collect evidence and prosecute offenders' (ibid, 150). Additionally, the free medical examination and treatment and medical certificates for victims of domestic and sexual abuse were poorly implemented in most health clinics.

Because of their mistrust of the government and doubt about its enforcement of the new laws, people in Adonkia were less likely to report cases of abuse to the local Family Support Unit, turning instead to their elders and other community members to handle such conflicts.

The community in Adonkia became more aware of the gender bills after the First Lady, Fatima Bio, launched a national campaign called Hands off our Girls in 2018 to raise awareness of rape, child marriage and gender-based violence against girls and young women. Her initiative was mentioned whenever I told people about my research as I pursued my fieldwork. Her advocacy of girls' empowerment led to teenage girls being given the name 'Fatima's daughters'. Many believed that the campaign encouraged national discourse about sexual abuse and gender-based violence, breaking cultural taboos associated with silencing victims, especially when the perpetrator was a family member. The campaign fuelled debate about the inequality and status of girls and women in the country, which had been marked by a history of gender-based violence that was exacerbated by the civil war and the Ebola outbreak. Nationally, the initiative increased reporting on gender-based violence, 70 per cent of which involved girls under the age of fifteen, which led to the declaration of rape and sexual violence as a national emergency in 2019 (Graybill 2022). In his declaration the president announced a minimum 15-year sentence for sexual assault, with life imprisonment as the maximum penalty for the sexual assault of minors (Government of Sierra Leone 2019). Because of the pervasiveness of rape during these public health crises and political conflicts it was commonly

assumed that all teenage mothers were victims of rape, and children born during the war were at greater risk of being stigmatised, abandoned, or illegally aborted (Mackenzie 2012).

3.6.1. Progress in Healthcare: The Ebola Outbreak

Figure 2: The Free Health Care is Free. Anti-corruption poster at the local clinic

It was during Koroma's second term Sierra Leone experienced the Ebola outbreak, which resulted in his administration postponing many of the health and education interventions related to the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy.

When this disease spread rapidly across the nation and its neighbouring countries in 2014, the slow and poorly prepared response to such a public health emergency both nationally and internationally led to the collapse of the already fragile healthcare system. In Waterloo community, where I conducted research for my master's thesis, pregnant teenagers were reluctant to visit local clinics as conspiracy theories and rumours regarding the Ebola outbreak abounded. Girls avoided seeking healthcare because women and girls were dying during this time, and pregnant girls who did want to access the health services faced difficulties because of the quarantine, roadblocks and lack of transport. Some girls feared that their pregnancy would be mistaken for Ebola symptoms and avoided

the health clinics; instead they sought assistance from traditional birth attendants and delivered their babies at home.

In the early stages of the outbreak women were being infected at a higher rate than men because they were more exposed to the disease. The cultural expectation that they should care for the sick exposed them to the bodily fluids of infected family members (Massaquoi et al. 2021; Graybill 2022). At the health facilities healthcare workers refused to treat pregnant women, fearing direct exposure to their bodily fluids during delivery, which would increase their risk of contracting the disease. The healthcare system could not keep pace with the influx of cases and overwhelming demand as the widespread transmission resulted in high rates of mortality among healthcare workers, resulting in the closure of clinics and hospitals and the construction of special Ebola Treatment Units (Abramowitz 2017).

The Ebola outbreak prompted public discourse on teenage pregnancy as news outlets and NGO reports stated that the rate of teenage pregnancy had increased during the lockdown period, due to the prolonged national closure of schools and the economic and social disruption. However, the increase in teenage pregnancies during the outbreak was contested and debated as national health reports revealed that the rate of teenage pregnancy had already been alarming before the outbreak, which merely exposed and attracted more political attention to this pre-existing public health challenge (Denney et al. 2017).

Others have argued that it was the increase in consensual sex among teenagers during the outbreak that resulted in the upsurge of teenage pregnancies. Yasmin (2016) suggests that teenage pregnancy rates increased 65 per cent in some communities at this time. This rise was also caused by young people not having access to youth-friendly healthcare services because most clinics were prioritising Ebola cases (Graybill 2022). The soaring rates of gender-based violence were equivalent to the sexual vulnerability girls had experienced during the civil war, as confirmed by Family Support Unit reports that noted the alarming increase in the number of sexual assault cases in the early stages of the outbreak (ibid).

In Adonkia, both healthcare workers and community members believed that girls' involvement in transactional sexual relationships was the leading cause of the rise in the number of teenage pregnancies. They argued that the current generation was more independent and inclined to form relationships without parental involvement until they became pregnant. With the financial strain of the Ebola outbreak, girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds turned to older men for financial assistance, which in many cases resulted in unexpected pregnancy.

As discussed, the prevalence of teenage pregnancy resulted in moral panic, influencing national discourses related to young women's reproductive health. The subsequent narratives about the questionable increase in teenage pregnancy appearing in research and NGO reports also addressed the issue of male exploitation of socially and economically vulnerable girls during the outbreak (Amnesty International 2015; Denney et al. 2017). Many in Adonkia blamed parents for their lack of control over their daughters' sexuality. Others claimed that it was schoolgirls' idleness and promiscuity that led to the spate of pregnancies during the lockdown. In many ways the outbreak disrupted both the social and the moral order, with members of the community believing that girls sought male attention when their parents were unable to provide for their financial needs. In a Save the Children report Kostelny et al. (2016) note:

> Some children experienced diminished expectations for the future that contributed to a desire to become pregnant and a decreased use of contraceptives. Other girls, wanting to have as much fun as possible since they believed they would eventually die from Ebola, became pregnant. (2016, 9)

Although the teenage girls in my study had become pregnant several years after the Ebola outbreak, the health crisis is worth mentioning because it influenced the national course of action addressing teenage pregnancy and motherhood. While teenage pregnancy was common in Adonkia before the Ebola outbreak, the consensus alluded to the exacerbation of the social problem during the health crisis.

Figure 3: Teenage pregnancy, not me, not now! Billboard in Sierra Leone
These (Source: Denny 2016)

3.6.2. Progress in Girls' Education

In Sierra Leone the formal education system is divided into six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary school and three years of senior secondary or vocational education. Since the Education Act, primary education has been free and compulsory but public schools are generally substandard, often lacking both supplies and qualified teachers. Most of the private schools in Adonkia were founded after the war and these small inexpensive schools were considered slightly better than public schools. Most of the private schools were affiliated with Muslim or Christian institutions. Although the majority of the population today identify as Muslim, it is not uncommon for Christian schools to include students from Muslim households, whereas the opposite is less likely. Christian schools in Adonkia and the rest of the country focus less on conversion than they did in the colonial period and are considered more prestigious because of the legacy of many of the earlier private institutions. Parents are therefore willing to enrol their children in Christian schools that emphasise moral and traditional values, given the prevalent belief among many Sierra Leoneans that Muslims and Christians worship the same God.

Most private schools are financially accessible to low-income households through scholarships and extended family support. Most secondary schools in urban and semi-urban communities have a better reputation than those in rural areas. Like Kadi, mentioned in the introduction, a few other interlocutors also left the village after finishing their primary school to complete their secondary

education and pursue their desired future. Sierra Leone's education reforms have increased access to primary education and its successful completion rates, but the completion of secondary education is much more challenging as many girls drop out because they become pregnant.

According to the World Bank (2021), 97 per cent of boys and 100 per cent of girls complete primary school, while only 47 per cent of boys and 67 per cent of girls complete secondary school. Since the end of the civil war several development initiatives have promoted formal education for girls at both primary and secondary school. Boys may drop out of secondary school to contribute to the household income, especially if they are from a single-parent household. The rate of students continuing their education typically decreases in secondary school because of the tuition fees and other expenses required by government schools. For low-income families, education is not an inherent human right but a sacrificial financial investment that they hope will bear fruit (Bledsoe 1990b; S. Blake 2021).

The Ebola outbreak also affected girls who did not become pregnant. While some girls married, despite laws against early marriage, others were forced to find employment and provide for their younger siblings after losing the breadwinner of the family.

The outbreak also led to educational delay due to families' lack of funds to pay school fees. In Adonkia it was common for girls to complete their secondary education in their twenties due to one or more of these delays. In a context of poverty, completing secondary school is considered a significant accomplishment because of the limited opportunities available to young women and teenage mothers in the community. As I discuss in Chapter 7, returning to school and completing their education is not only a status symbol but also a way for girls to restore their negative image as teenage mothers. In development discourse, education is conceptualised as empowerment to prevent teenage pregnancy and early marriage. It is seen as a means of breaking generational poverty, in contrast to the past, when girls' education had less social and economic value because families preferred girls to be married early. Now that more opportunities are open to young women it is rare to encounter parents who oppose female education; instead most parents, predominantly illiterate parents who also benefit from their children's academic skills, take pride in educating their daughters.

After the Ebola outbreak the ministerial declarations promoting the universal right to education banned visibly pregnant girls from enrolling in schools and taking their exams. Although school bans had previously been a long-standing practice, the official 2015 anti-pregnancy policy took the political stance that girls were deserving of education until they became pregnant. In an interview

with Amnesty International, Miojue Kaikai, the former Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, stated:

> We cannot have pregnant girls sitting alongside normal girls in normal school. This will not send out the right signal at all. It sends the wrong message and it encourages other girls in the class to get pregnant. During the Ebola outbreak children were given clear instructions: do not touch [...] These girls could not even comply with basic rules and there must be consequences for their actions. (Amnesty International 2015, 17)

In response to this statement, the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission, NGOs and the government, with assistance from UNICEF, initiated a programme for pregnant girls offering after-hours education. Financed by donor funding, the government established Community Learning Centres and school radio programmes for home study, which supported 14,500 pregnant girls and teenage mothers who had had babies during the Ebola outbreak (Schwartz, Anoko, and Abramowitz 2019; S. Blake 2021). These initiatives were criticised for marginalising pregnant girls. However, the president continued to support the ban on visibly pregnant girls attending school till the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and international civil society groups ordered its abolition, overturning it in 2019. During the first year of his presidency Bio demonstrated his commitment to girls' education by following through with his campaign pledge to sponsor primary and secondary school students by paying their school fees (Schwartz, Anoko, and Abramowitz 2019; Graybill 2022).

3.6.3. Marriage and Kinship Structures Today

Although cohabiting unions are increasing in Freetown, by law women and children in such constellations do not inherit anything on the partner's or father's death. These laws also extend to polygynous unions, in which the first wife is typically the only legally recognised partner (Harrell-Bond 1975; Mackenzie 2012).

The 2019 demographic health survey found that 30 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men were in polygynous unions (SLDH 2019)[11]. It was surprising to discover that a few of my interlocutors in Adonkia had polygynous family structures. Within the community the practice was

[11] Since Western Area (Rural and Urban) represent a small proportional size of Adonkia and Freetown, these numbers most likely pertain to other districts.

primarily associated with Islamic leaders and older Muslim men. Among educated non-Muslims, polygynous marriage was and remains an unpopular trend that is seen as uncivilised and backward (Harrell-Bond 1975). The negative perception of polygyny as resulting in favouritism, jealousy and resentment among half-siblings and co-wives also made the practice less appealing to the younger generation. Coulter (2009) notes that the number of wives of polygynous men has also decreased because men can no longer afford to provide for large families.

While the practice of initiation rites is also less common in Adonkia than in the past, some ethnic groups, mostly those living in rural areas, still practice early marriage following their cultural and Islamic beliefs. In urban settings arranged marriages, in which young, educated Muslim women consent to the proposed arrangement, are also practised, while other girls are encouraged to find a partner for themselves (Taqi 2010). Like polygyny, the practice of early marriage and arranged marriage has decreased significantly due to the rise in the number of those in formal education. Instead, 'love marriages' based on friendship and mutual interests have become increasingly common, as families favour their daughter completing her schooling before allowing her to choose when, with whom, and how she will enter into a marital union. This freedom of choosing one's partner has also led to an increase in the divorce rate (Coulter 2009). Uneducated women are still inclined to claim marital status following customary ceremonies, whereas educated women consider themselves married after a religious and civil ceremony. Because of the economic hardship of the last few decades, young men hesitate to propose and save for marriages that involve bridewealth (Bledsoe 1990b; McLean 2019).

In Sierra Leone there is considerable cultural uniformity across kinship structures and marriages, despite the number of ethnic groups in the country. Most Sierra Leoneans follow an extended family structure; migration between urban and rural relatives is fluid as individuals move in with relatives in urban communities to pursue schooling or work opportunities or return to their rural communities to seek family support after childbirth. From a traditional and cultural perspective, marriage is a familial rather than an individual concern, wherein two families unite.

In the past the bride was welcomed into her husband's kinship and household until the couple established their own home. Over the years more families have adopted the nuclear family model. Nowadays it is not uncommon for several generations including widowed grandparents or extended kin to be represented in a household or family compound (Jackson 1977; 2004; Lipton 2017). Fostering patterns add another layer to family dynamics, with children who are not necessarily

biologically related recognised as classificatory or fictive relatives, as I discuss in Chapter 6 (Bledsoe 1990a).

Today it is common for Both Muslims and Christians to enter marriage via customary practice involving the consent of both families, and the occasion is usually smaller and less expensive than a church ceremony. Among the youth that I got to know, their Christian beliefs and social change influenced their understanding of marriage. While their religious views on marriage and their exposure to Western films and pop culture have given them idealised notions of love and marriage, their actual practice often reflected a different reality. I came across several individuals in the community who were in their early to late twenties and in a long-term relationship. They had children but had not yet formalised their marital union in a customary or religious ceremony, despite social pressure from older relatives. In some cases young women settled for a small customary engagement ceremony, setting aside their desire for a grand and expensive wedding celebration, which most cannot afford without financial assistance from their friends and family.[12]

In Adonkia community it is common for both married and unmarried individuals to maintain a primary partner while simultaneously dating others. Young women often engage in relationships with younger or older married men for financial gain. Culturally, the marital union is not consolidated until the couple has children. Once a young woman has reached their desired age for reproduction, infertility, whether in or outside marriage, can lead to stigmatisation, accusations of witchcraft, divorce, and much frustration among members of both families. Young women in the community who desire children are encouraged to pursue motherhood independently without relying on a male partner for support, especially when the relationship is unstable. The common perception among these women aligns with James's assertion that 'women can only validate their existence and prove their womanhood by bearing a child, as her power and social status is reflected in her children' (1990, 45). Coulter (2009) also notes that Sierra Leonean women value their identity as a mother more than their role as a wife, which is also reflected among the women in Adonkia, where there is a general absence of men in the household and many women in the community who are divorced, widowed, or have never been married, exercising control over economic resources and decision-making.

In Sierra Leone there is a clear distinction between children born within a marital union and those conceived in an extramarital affair. Married men may choose to invest selectively in children produced by their marriage union, while children conceived by their mistresses, who are in some

[12] For modern Sierra Leoneans the common trend among Muslims and Christians is the customary engagement ceremony followed by a white wedding: a religious wedding in the church or mosque, followed by a reception.

cases teenage mothers, receive limited recognition and financial assistance. These children are socially classified as 'outside' or 'illegitimate' (Bledsoe 1990c). Culturally, extramarital pregnancies are less stigmatised when the genitor acknowledges his paternity.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the intersections and tensions within and between Sierra Leonean history, development and culture. The country's political and traditional history including devastating war and conflict presents a distinctive case for understanding the experiences, consequences and dynamics of teenage pregnancy and motherhood. In this chapter I have discussed how the precolonial system, its colonial history and the introduction of Christianity shaped the country's development and its kinship and educational structures, especially in Freetown and the surrounding Western Area. While both polygyny and early marriage are still practised in some rural communities, modernisation has shifted family structures and traditional practices and values, especially in communities such as Adonkia. I have presented the historical and patriarchal patterns of gender inequality since colonial rule and during the civil war that influenced post-conflict legislation affecting women and children in Sierra Leone.

In Adonkia social change is particularly evident when it comes to educational aspirations. Most teenage girls now aspire to complete their education before becoming wives and mothers, which has not always been the case. From a development standpoint, education also represents economic and social empowerment. The girls' empowerment initiatives have been particularly pronounced in Sierra Leone since the civil war and the Ebola outbreak as international organisations have partnered with the government to promote women's empowerment through the health and education sectors. However, while the national public health and education policies, initiatives and strategies look good on paper, they retain moralising views that explicitly condemn and marginalise pregnant teenagers.

Understanding how gender inequality is tied to political conflict and health challenges is key because it highlights girls' vulnerability to sexual and physical violence while living with misfortune and hardship. What is clear from Sierra Leone's history is that social and economic disruption have heightened their exposure to exploitation, sexual abuse and other forms of gender-based violence.

The next chapter presents the specific fieldwork context in Adonkia and my methodological approach.

4. The Fieldwork

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter gave an overview of the Sierra Leonean context, highlighting some key historical events, especially the most recent Ebola outbreak, which led to moral panic and a specific political focus on teenage pregnancy. My awareness of how teenage pregnancy has been discussed and problematised since then led to me choosing to carry out research in Adonkia, which I outline in this chapter. Conducting fieldwork in Adonkia turned out to be much more challenging than anticipated. This chapter describes the fieldwork process and the methodological framework generated along the way as the research unfolded.

The fieldwork was carried out over eleven months between October 2021 and mid-September 2022. Most of the research was conducted in Adonkia, identifying clinics and schools from which to recruit participants for the study. I also visited religious institutions and NGOs in Freetown and neighbouring towns along the peninsula.

I chose to conduct research in Adonkia for several reasons. Firstly, I had experience of public health research in a similar semi-urban community in the same region, the Western Rural Area. Another reason for conducting research in this area was the connections that my family has established over the years while building our family home in Adonkia. Before the research I had only been to Adonkia once or twice, but several relatives were familiar with the neighbourhood and were able to recommend key informants. The main objective was to understand the social and moral tensions that pregnant teenage girls experienced as they transitioned into motherhood with support from their relatives and social networks. I sought to gain insights into the lived reality of motherhood from their perspective and to identify the expectations of those closest to them.

During the data analysis process the objective and research questions were refined and subdivided into three temporal stages (see Table 1), highlighting the primary complexities encountered at each stage. I developed and adapted the research questions based on the relevant strands of thinking that stood out as I reflected on the concepts and literature discussed in the previous chapters.

I considered the web of social constraints that Kadi and the other girls had experienced even before they fell pregnant, which affected the individual and social aspects of their decision-making that led to pregnancy and their choices made after discovering their pregnancy. Another reflection focused on sexuality and its ties to relational, historical, economic and cultural factors that are constantly under negotiation, especially for teenage girls, whose sexuality is constructed within a political and

international development discourse as something biological, social, passive and in need of control (Pincock 2020). Lastly, I recognised the importance of exploring experiences of teenage motherhood to gain a holistic understanding of this significant life transition and of how the girls receive (or fail to receive) support in the context of reproductive misfortune. The following section discusses how I gained access to the participants and some of the questions, obstacles and opportunities that arose along the way. A brief overview of the research design and the ethnographic triangulation approach used to explore the main objective and subsequent research questions is provided and the data analysis process is discussed, followed by reflections on my positionality and ethical considerations.

Table 1: Research questions are divided into three stages

Before/on discovering pregnancy	During pregnancy	Life after childbirth (motherhood)
How do girls navigate their sexuality, kinship dynamics and the moral complexities related to the early stages of teenage pregnancy? (Chapter 5)	How do cultural gender norms, moral tensions and religious value systems influence girls' navigation of sexuality and responses to social judgement during pregnancy? (Chapter 6)	How do teenage mothers navigate educational aspirations, motherhood and kinship support in the process of social becoming? (Chapter 7)

4.2. The location

Figure 4: A gated house in the Neighbourhood

Figure 5: A house under construction in the neighbourhood

Figure 6: The Neighbourhood

4.2.1. The Neighbourhood

Adonkia (pronounced 'ah don' care') owes its name to the Sherbro ethnic group that settled in the area in the early eighteenth century. The area, known for its fishing trade, is by the peninsula in the Western Area Rural District, 13.6 kilometres from central Freetown. The town has undergone rapid urbanisation and development within the last two decades. The Western Rural Area as a whole has also witnessed a substantial population increase due to a persistent pattern of rural migration (Ménard 2023). Adonkia is subdivided into seven small communities with an estimated total population of around 20,000. Each community has a headman (a local leader) to assist with community and land disputes. Over recent decades the area has become more ethnically and religiously diverse. Although it is predominantly Muslim, the Christian population is increasing, and in each community there is a big mosque and several smaller Pentecostal churches.

I stayed in our family home with Ali,[13] a close family friend and caretaker for the house, who knows the community extremely well. He oversaw our family's building project for a few years while studying at the university. After completing his first degree in his mid-thirties he was unable to find employment. As a result he began assisting my mother and other families in the diaspora with their

[13] For ethical reasons, majority of the names have been anonymised. However, a few key informants consented to the use of their real name, provided they received an email with context to their statements.

housing projects. Ali became like a brother, gatekeeper and go-to person for my mundane enquiries about public holidays and increasing market prices. He also taught me how to find my way around the neighbourhood and negotiate the increasing cost of transport. Ali was generally considered humble and trustworthy, and he played an active role within the neighbourhood's Muslim community. My association with him made connecting with others from the community easier.

The family home was completed in 2018, and despite having visited the area during the construction phase, this was my first time living there. The neighbours were better acquainted with my mother and older siblings, who visit Freetown more frequently, and regularly enquired about their well-being or asked me to pass on their greetings.

The home was a two-minute walk from the main road, the local mosque, the police station and the supermarket. I was initially struck by the neighbourhood's peaceful yet lively character and the constant exchange of morning, afternoon and evening greetings between people sitting in front of their house and those passing by. The main road had small stalls and shops selling phone credit and household goods, and small bars where men gathered to watch football matches or just hang out. The neighbourhood was full of tailors, hairdressers, carpenters and car mechanics, and local restaurants, also known as 'cookeries', offering the day's dish, a stew or soup served with rice or fermented cassava (fufu). Both rural and urban areas were affected by the lack of a consistent electricity supply, especially during the dry season. Since most of the electricity was hydroelectrically sourced it was considerably more reliable during the rainy season. This affected social interactions and movement around the neighbourhood. Birthday celebrations and other social gatherings were planned considering the possibility of a power outage. Those who could not afford a generator ensured that their electronic devices were well charged with assistance from wealthier friends in the neighbourhood who had access to one.

With the exception of the main road, the streets in the neighbourhood had numerous potholes and only a few were paved by affluent residents who had taken it upon themselves to pave the outside of their homes to the main road. While some admired and appreciated this initiative, those who did not directly benefit from it perceived it as self-serving.

There was considerable economic and social disparity in the neighbourhood, which contained a range of built structures including affluent gated homes in large compounds with generators and large water tanks right beside them. A typical street included large, medium-sized and small homes as well as houses still under construction and small, temporary metal sheds for the construction workers living in the compound they were building in. Most homes had an outdoor kitchen area where

individuals washed the dishes and prepared meals on portable gas stoves. Once homes under construction were roofed they were promptly occupied by caretakers, like Ali, or extended family members assisting affluent businessmen or Sierra Leoneans living abroad with their building project. A few girls lived in homes where the building project had been at a standstill for years.

The industrial workforce in Adonkia was gendered, as the few capital-intensive and foreign-owned businesses primarily employ local men. Men manufactured furniture, building materials and garments along the main road and were generally responsible for providing for the household financially while women were expected to manage domestic affairs. These roles were performative at times and did not always live up to reality: in many households women oversaw most of the decision-making while their partners kept up the appearance of the head of the household to avoid other community members' ridicule and loss of status.

The men I interacted with in the field worked in construction or as drivers, mechanics, or other unskilled or semi-skilled occupations outside the Western Rural Area. Affluent men in the neighbourhood occasionally socialised with other community members during festive seasons or religious gatherings. They were mostly seen leaving or entering their compounds in expensive vehicles. Their wives and children were more visible in the community, engaging with neighbours and community members from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The women I interacted with contribute to the household income through petty trade and small-scale businesses, retailing second-hand clothing, running home-based enterprises selling food supplies, or braiding hair at a local salon or from home. Girls and women also worked as maids for affluent families in the neighbourhood.

Social media (WhatsApp and Facebook) and radio were the primary news outlet, especially for the younger generation, but religious institutions also disseminated information that shaped people's perspectives and understanding of daily life. Stories of witchcraft were abundant and the topic was a focal point at the neighbourhood's vibrant weekly prayer gatherings, revival meetings and worship services. These religious practices reinforced communal beliefs about witchcraft and evil forces in the neighbourhood. Adverse reproductive health outcomes such as miscarriage, infertility, stillbirth, maternal mortality or any severe morbidity were commonly associated with evil forces, as I discuss in Chapter 6. Women mainly sought healing through spiritual and religious practices and ancestral herbal knowledge. Rumours circulated about neighbours suspected of practising witchcraft or pastors whose 'hands were unclean,' alluding to their involvement in occult activities.

4.2.2. Religion in Adonkia

While I engaged mostly with practicing Christians during my fieldwork the interreligious ties between Christianity and Islam are worth mentioning. The practice of Islam in Adonkia and the rest of the Western Area differs from that in other predominantly Muslim nations in West Africa such as Gambia and Senegal that integrate Islamic ideology and traditions into the political and cultural spheres to a greater extent than Sierra Leone (Touray 2006; Eerdewijk 2009; Suh 2014). Over recent decades the influence of Pentecostalism has grown with the influx of Nigerian and Ghanaian churches established in Adonkia and other semi-urban communities, as evidenced by billboards and posters across town promoting upcoming church services and conferences focusing on solving spiritual, financial and material needs (J. B. Bangura 2016). Many drivers of public-transport vehicles indicate their religious affiliation by displaying stickers with verses from the Bible or the Quran or playing loud gospel music on the radio.

There are certain moral tensions and inconsistencies when it comes to youth in the community practising their religious values. Some adhere to strict religious codes of ethics during Jumu'ah (Friday prayer), Ramadan or Sunday service, but this may contradict their behaviour outside these specific instances. Because of the prevalence of interreligious marriage and cross-religious schooling, many community members are raised in households where different beliefs, rituals and spiritual practices are merged. Outside the political arena, tribalism is not common in Sierra Leone, with most of my interlocutors and key informants and Sierra Leoneans in general open to migration and marriage across ethnic and religious ties. Islam and Christian religious holidays are celebrated and observed across the nation. Interreligious marriages among social and political elites are fairly common; the current president, Julius Maada Bio, is a Mende Catholic married to a Mandingo/Gambian Muslim woman, Fatima Bio. Both openly practice their faith and engage in philanthropic work within the Muslim community during the celebration of Eid. Similar patterns are seen among those of my interlocutors who were raised in interreligious or interethnic households.

4.2.3. The clinic

Figure 7: An empty waiting room at the large health clinic

The only clinic in the neighbourhood was established in 2009, originally as a private facility. However, it transitioned to a public institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. The healthcare workers consisted of midwives, nurses and minimally trained community workers. Doctors supervised the clinic a few times a month. The clinic was small and cramped, with healthcare workers providing support and guidance for women and girls, some voices calm and reassuring while others seemed condescending amidst the chaos and heavy workload. Women were referred to the central hospitals in Freetown in emergencies, but most of the girls had given birth in a larger clinic in a neighbouring town a five-minute drive from Adonkia. The small clinic was comparable in size to the larger clinic's outdoor waiting area, which was filled with pregnant women or nursing mothers by 10 a.m. The waiting area was not just a space for waiting to be seen but also a community hub where women bonded and shared experiences of motherhood, casually handing over their newborn babies during conversations or before stepping onto a scale. The physical presence of men was rare at the clinics, yet they were often the topic of discussion, which ranged from marital and relationship advice to lack of support from partners resulting in sleepless nights. From the end of November until January, I spent my mornings at the clinics, alternating weekly between the two clinics, on the set days for antenatal and postnatal assessments. During this period I spent most of my time in the waiting area, where I observed and assisted with holding babies while women were being assessed. From February, I went to the larger clinic sporadically to interview healthcare workers and observe a few health consultations with my interlocutors and other young women. Older first-time mothers generally asked

more questions during consultations, while pregnant teenagers were quite timid, allowing female relatives (sister, mother or aunties) to ask questions and lead the conversation.

4.3. The Methodology and Research Design

4.3.1. Access

During the first two months, I familiarised myself with people in the neighbourhood, one of whom was Aunty Pat, who knew my mother and was friends with Ali. Aunty Pat was one of the few female pastors in the neighbourhood. She was well-respected and widely sought for spiritual counsel. Although she did not lead any church, she was often invited to preach at various church events and people came to her for prayer. Through her, I was introduced to women and girls in the neighbourhood and before long everyone who visited her house knew about my research. Our discussions and conversations during the initial stage of my research were insightful and prepared me for some of the dilemmas and practical challenges I experienced later on. Aunty Pat shared many stories about her personal experience of teenage pregnancy, which helped me understand the generational challenges, some of which were still ongoing in the community. We discussed the difficulties and joys of motherhood and how to navigate these topics while developing trust with the interlocutors. Aunty Pat introduced me to Rose, the head nurse at the small clinic, who helped shape the research and the recruitment process in the second month of fieldwork, assisting with mapping clinics where I could identify and recruit pregnant girls. Through her, I gained access to the small clinic and the larger clinic in an adjacent town, both of which provided primary care for community members in Adonkia. Aunty Pat also introduced me to Nina, a local NGO employee working for an organisation supporting young victims of sexual abuse. Through Nina, I used the snowball sampling technique to recruit key informants for semi-structured interviews (Green and Thorogood 2004). This process began in the third month of fieldwork and continued until I left the field site, facilitating introductions to government officials, international and national NGO workers, teachers and religious leaders with expertise and knowledge about the political and religious discourse of teenage pregnancy in the local context. Gaining access to conferences and workshops on gender-related issues also provided valuable opportunities to recruit key informants and observe discourses related to teenage pregnancy. In all, I conducted 32 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, NGO workers, government officials and other key community members (see Appendix 2).

At the larger clinic I observed healthcare workers during antenatal and postnatal assessments. The majority of them lived in Adonkia and engaged casually with the pregnant girls and women. Ideally,

I had planned on recruiting and conducting life-history interviews with pregnant girls and following their progression and trajectories from pregnancy to motherhood over several months of ethnographic fieldwork.[14] However, from the very beginning circumstances took me by surprise and necessitated some readjustment of my plans.[15] After losing several potential participants from the clinic during the recruitment stage, I broadened my scope, visiting schools to identify and recruit young mothers who had resumed their education after giving birth. I gathered fourteen life-history narratives in the form of unstructured qualitative interviews with three pregnant girls from the large clinic, five schoolgirls, and six teenage mothers in the community who had already given birth and dropped out of school (see Table 2). The duration of the life-history interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Pregnant girls and schoolgirls were less available on weekdays for follow-up interviews and casual hangouts, and meetings were therefore scheduled for weekends, around clinic visits or after the annual school examinations. Girls from the community who were no longer in school were more flexible with their time, and I spent mornings or afternoons with them and their families on a weekly or biweekly basis. When key informant interviews were cancelled or postponed, I joined or assisted my interlocutors in various daily activities to fill the time.

Table 2: Interlocutors' demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship status	Living arrangements	Childbirths reported	Religions practised in the household
Seray	18	Single	Aunt	1	Christian
Fatima	19	With partner	Mother	1	Christian
Evelyne	19	With partner	Grandparents	2	Christian and Muslim
Michella	19	With partner	Mother-in-law, partner	1	Christian and Muslim
Sonia	18	Single	Aunt	1	Christian
Gloria	19	With partner	Mother	1	Christian
Rugiatu	18	Single	Older sister	2	Muslim
Mariama	20	With partner	Partner	3	Christian

[14] I had planned to interview girls who were either pregnant or had given birth, automatically excluding girls who did not go through with their pregnancy, which could be a limitation. A few of the interlocutors considered and even attempted to terminate their pregnancy unsuccessfully.

[15] Many of the girls attending the large clinics who were interested in participating in my research did not have a mobile phone. I arranged with them to meet at their next clinic check-up, but some did not show up. Others gave me the phone number of a relative, but to my disappointment, on calling I found that the girl had returned to her village, which was common during the Christmas break, or that the phone had been disconnected.

Mary	18	Single	Parents	1	Christian
Deborah	19	With partner	Older sister	1	Muslim
Fanta	16	Single	Older sister	1	Muslim
Kadijah	18	Single	Grandmother	1	Muslim
Halima	18	Single	Friend	1	Muslim
Hasana	19	Single	Mother	1	Muslim

The girls' ages ranged from 16 to 20, the oldest turning 20 a few weeks before our first interview. I had aimed to find respondents aged 15 to 19 at the clinic, but identifying the younger girls was challenging. According to the nurses, girls aged 16 and under lie about their age to avoid the shame and stigma of an early pregnancy. During the recruitment stage a few underage girls agreed to participate in the study, but their guardians did not consent.

The data on their relationship status defines whether my interlocutors were single, married or in a partnership. None had been married or engaged during their pregnancy. Some mentioned the possibility of an 'introduction' – a small traditional engagement ceremony between the girl and the family of the baby's father after the birth. Family members often referred to the father of the baby as the young mother's 'man' or 'fiancé', even after a couple had broken up. Relationships were constantly in flux, and only three of the girls were still dating the genitor of their child while the three others with partners had moved on to other relationships. Interlocutors who denied being in a relationship at our initial meeting or at the beginning of their interview discussed their relationship status more freely as our friendship evolved. Five genitors supported the girl practically throughout the pregnancy, while the others acknowledged paternity but took no responsibility for the child's financial or emotional needs. Fanta, the youngest interlocutor, whom I introduce in the following chapter, was the only case in which the genitor did not claim paternity after being threatened by her relatives for not acknowledging the paternity.

The girls' living arrangements changed frequently. Some returned to their village or moved in with their partner while pregnant or immediately after giving birth. Coincidentally, many had lost one or both parents and lived with members of their extended family. Some interlocutors moved back to the village or to a neighbouring town where they could access assistance with childcare, while others left their child in the village to focus on pursuing their education in the city. Fostering children out or living in a compound with extended relatives is fairly common in Sierra Leone (Lipton 2017). Culturally, fostering is an inherent part of Sierra Leonean culture, but unfortunately many children,

especially young girls, end up being maltreated within these constellations (Bledsoe 1990a). In Chapter 7 I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of fostering for teenage mothers and their children. It is a prevailing belief in Sierra Leone that orphaned girls who have been mistreated or did not have a stable male figure such as a stepfather, uncle, grandfather or older brother are more likely to be sexually exploited and fall pregnant, especially if they come from a low-income household.

The majority of the interlocutors reported having given birth to one child. However, three girls reported being pregnant twice or three times. In two cases the child had died shortly after childbirth. Table 2 includes only self-reported pregnancies and childbirths, even though in one instance a relative revealed information about a miscarriage in an informal conversation, and it is unclear whether this was an abortion.

The girls' religious identity and practice were fluid in many cases; some practised religious syncretism based on the religious affiliation of the family member they lived with or of their partner. Two girls disclosed how their quest for 'spiritual deliverance' from witchcraft and generational curses had led to their conversion from Islam to Christianity, as I discuss in Chapter 6.

Some of the individuals living with my interlocutors became part of the ethnographic research: I formally interviewed three genitors, a father and a grandfather who were involved in the girls' lives to enrich my data and understand the nature of their relationships with these men. However, because most of the research took place during the day when men were typically at work or otherwise absent, the majority of my interactions and interviews were with female kin, eight of whom agreed to participate in the study. The conversations with men provided nuance to the local sociocultural gendered expectations, revealing how they struggle with the tension between individuality and collective decision-making. I also engaged informally with individuals from the girls' social networks including friends, neighbours, current boyfriends and distant relatives.

4.3.2. Interviews

All the interviews were recorded on an iPhone. Some of the recordings were reviewed in preparation for follow-up interviews, writing down any questions or topics that required clarification and further exploration. The interviews were conducted in Krio or English, sometimes interchangeably depending on the informant's preference. Actively listening without taking notes during the interview felt more engaged and less distracting. I recorded voice memos about the interviews on my way home, reflecting on interesting observations and key themes.

The life-history interviews, which focused on their concepts of self, pregnancy, motherhood, religion, culture and society facilitated comprehensive and detailed biographies about the girls' lives, encompassing events from their birth until the time of my fieldwork. Borrowing from other anthropologists conducting ethnography in Sierra Leone, certain stages of my fieldwork took on a flexible and formless character. In contrast, other stages, such as the interviews at the clinic, were much more structured due to scheduling and time constraints.

The formless structure was particularly evident when I began to engage more with the girls' social networks. Although I was interested in their family history, unlike Lipton (2017), this was not my primary focus. My main interest was how girls narrate their life histories and the important experiences and events that have shaped them individually. Interviewing their relatives was supplementary, adding more nuance and context to the narratives the girls had shared. For instance, hearing different versions and perspectives of the same event exposed ambiguities and contradictions. Inspired by Fabian (2015), I understood how participants were co-producers of the research in some ways. They decided whether they wanted to be recorded and how much they were willing to share about themselves. Some shared what they thought I wanted to hear, while others just wanted a chance to vent and pour out their frustrations.

The formless ethnographic structure has also worked well in the Sierra Leonean context in studies of young people and their coming of age to understand how individuals move between multiple positionalities (Bolten 2008; Lipton 2017; McLean 2019). While these investigations mainly centre on young men, their relatives and their social networks, the heart of the present study is to capture the social flux of teenage mothers in a shifting cultural and historical context.

The life histories exposed how one event, crisis or situation subsequently affected other life circumstances (relocating, increased poverty, dropping out of school) that ultimately led to what my interlocutors perceived as an 'accident': an untimely pregnancy. The six girls who had lost one or both parents shared how such tragic life events were 'entry points' to comprehending the social and economic structures that influence their lives (Abubakar, Bakar and Abdullah 2008).

Striking a balance between interjecting to ask for clarification or with a neutrally-formulated question while conveying my empathy for the interlocutors was a learning process, especially around sensitive topics such as personal loss or sexual abuse. While some girls were open and comfortable sharing their personal stories, others appeared slightly anxious and cautious about disclosing too much. Like Chris Coulter, I understood that many sensitive topics in the Sierra Leonean context were

considered taboo, and some interlocutors had never discussed their experiences in depth or detail (Coulter 2011, 25). I did not want to take their willingness to share their experiences for granted. I aimed to avoid provoking grievous memories through probing questions. Once a foundation of trust had been established, discussing challenging and traumatic topics during the follow-up interviews was more manageable. Despite explicitly maintaining a neutral disposition, my loyalty to the girls posed a challenge when conducting interviews with physically abusive relatives or partners who had mistreated them, as my perception of them was influenced by the narratives the girls had previously shared with me. Nonetheless, allowing family members to present their perspectives was helpful, even when the information seemed contradictory. Relatives or partners occasionally contributed additional details to the girls' narratives without probing. Recognising that there are two sides to every story and different perceived realities, I refrained from pointing out what appeared to be contradictions. Another reason was concern that girls could be punished for oversharing or revealing family secrets. After months in the field, the contradictions and observations relevant to my research focus would come up in conversation as girls became more comfortable around me. As a researcher I was aware that some girls deliberately chose not to disclose details of their life history to protect their self-image and feared being judged, shamed or stigmatised. Being privy to verbal family disputes subsequently led to deeper conversations about family dynamics, which added further context or clarity to the girls' narratives.

To build trust and ensure their safety I conducted the interviews in private settings, asking my informants to choose their preferred environment or location. In institutional settings such as schools and clinics I conducted follow-up interviews after school or towards the end of the day to avoid distraction and a noisy environment.

Interviews with stakeholders and community members took place in their homes or a quiet area outside the religious, governmental, or non-governmental institution. These interviews were more semi-structured, with a general outline of the topics to be discussed. The interview guide had open-ended questions to keep the flow and structure of the interview flexible to accommodate the informants' backgrounds and expertise. It began with general questions about teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, followed by more specific questions about their views on religious, gender and moral discourses surrounding teenage pregnancy (see Appendix 1). Interviews with religious leaders, teachers, healthcare workers, government officials and NGO workers provided a rich and comprehensive understanding of teenage pregnancy from diverse perspectives.

Christian and Muslim leaders provided insights into how faith traditions address teenage pregnancy within their communities and how they counsel, discipline and support pregnant girls, young mothers and their families. The healthcare workers, doctors, midwives and nurses interviewed provided information about the medical aspects of teenage pregnancy and childbirth, including the common risks and challenges for young mothers. Some shared experiences of working with pregnant girls and young mothers and their personal views on abortion and contraception, and how these influenced their practice and the care they provided for girls. While I intended this thesis to include healthcare workers and religious leaders from the beginning, a significant methodological adaptation I had not considered was the inclusion of key informants with first-hand experience who also happened to be healthcare workers and religious leaders.

Interviews with government officials and NGO workers centred on their collaboration to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies and promote girls' sexual and reproductive rights. The historical context and changes in social attitudes and policy related to teenage pregnancy were also discussed in the interviews for a comprehensive understanding of the current political landscape. Nurses and NGO workers who were once teenage mothers themselves shared their experiences freely and passionately. In the same vein, teachers and religious leaders with daughters who had been pregnant as teenagers also spoke with great enthusiasm when discussing this season of their lives and how it influenced their perspectives on teenage pregnancy and ministry. Informants with overlapping roles and intersectional identities further enriched my understanding of the topic.

4.3.3. Participant observation

During my fieldwork the extent to which I observed and participated in different activities was influenced by various factors that were sometimes beyond my control. I was always aware of how others' perceptions of me affected my inclusion and exclusion from activities. When I entered the field and spent the first few weeks at the clinics I had not considered my role as an observer. I spent most of my time taking notes and assisting with holding babies in the waiting area. As time progressed, I was able to engage more actively when attending the clinic with teenage mothers. We would usually discuss some of the questions the girls were afraid of asking the midwife during their consultation. In almost every setting (the neighbourhood, the clinic, religious institutions) I went from passive to active participant observation as I familiarised myself with the community and my interlocutors (Delamont 2004).

In both instances I used thick description (Geertz 1973) to provide detailed and contextual accounts of interactions while hanging out with my interlocutors or participating in daily life events, trips to the beach, visiting neighbours and friends and attending prayer meetings, Bible study, religious youth conferences and Eid celebrations.

I actively participated in prayer meetings and church events with interlocutors. I was a bit more reluctant to engage in deliverance services, not fully understanding the reason behind certain prayers and spiritual rituals. However, engaging despite my reluctance often provided an opportunity for fruitful conversations afterwards with my interlocutors and the religious leaders about the significance of spiritual deliverance and the prevalence of witchcraft and generational curses in Sierra Leone.

Actively participating in hair-braiding and cooking sessions also afforded entry points to rich informal conversations with my interlocutors and people in their social network. Conversations occurred in local clinic waiting rooms, on public transport, in living rooms, or while assisting with washing, feeding, or playing with their children. I spent a significant amount of time in a small local restaurant owned by Fatima's mother, where I regularly hung out with Fatima and two other interlocutors, Evelyne and Mariama. Evelyne's boyfriend was also a frequent customer and Mariama came regularly to sell fruit there, with her newborn baby on her back and her five-year-old son by her side when he was not at school.

The restaurant was a great place to understand the general norms, beliefs and values of the community. To enable me to write a thick description of observed behaviour or events, I asked about meanings, definitions and cultural codes while assisting with food preparation and other daily activities. Although my focus was the girls, observing male and female interactions in a predominantly male space was insightful and added nuance to my cultural understanding of gender dynamics.

The restaurant was a hub of activity bursting with energy and laughter, with cigarette smoke filling the air. Young men ate big bowls of rice in their lunch hour or after work, quenching their thirst with a cup of water or plastic pouches of local whisky. People also came to watch movies and music videos on the small-screen television. During the rainy season and Ramadan the restaurant was less busy. Ramadan is considered a holy month by many, prompting Muslim women who typically exposed their hair to wear hijabs, while men who habitually drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes reduced their consumption or completely abstained throughout this period.

Like McLean (2019), I aimed to observe elements of change in the girls' lives throughout my fieldwork, observing differences in their perceptions of their intersectional identities. I also observed changes that accompanied their relocation, childbirth, employment and educational attainment. I witnessed their joys and frustrations throughout the day as the girls looked after their infants or toddlers. Attending prayer meetings and church events with them provided an opportunity for fruitful conversations about their religious practices and personal beliefs about topics raised during prayer services, such as witchcraft and generational curses. Even though I did not carry a notebook, I entered many important notes on my phone and regularly documented my observations of events or conversations during the day, writing up fieldnotes on my computer in the evening or the following day. Due to frequent power outages I was unable to do this every day.

Over time the fieldnotes merged into a personal journal where I wrote down questions, reflections and concerns. I examined these throughout my fieldwork, identifying issues that they raised and aspects of the research that could be explored further. Through journaling, I also became more aware of my biases and how they influenced my methodological approach, as I discuss in section 4.4.

4.3.4. Organising and analysing data

There is more to communication than verbal exchange (Fabian 2015). After spending several months with my interlocutors in their local context, observing their speech, cadences and body language, the transcription process was straightforward. I came to understand the everyday slang and filler words they used in their daily conversations. The relationship I had developed with them made it easy to distinguish between what was communicated, what they were trying to convey and what was left unsaid (Fabian 2015). My close relationship with interlocutors enabled me to fill in the gaps regarding the life-history interviews as I became more familiar with the girls and their family backgrounds.

Although all of the interviews were in English or Krio, interpretations and meaning can get lost in translation due to cultural and language differences, and should therefore be given careful thought and attention (van Nes et al. 2010).

Moving from fieldwork to analysis was an ongoing process that I began towards the end of my fieldwork. Transcribing the key informant interviews was not always straightforward, because there were instances where no words in the English language accurately captured specific phrases or terminologies in the Krio language, as some concepts do not directly translate into English. For instance Krio lacks specific terminology for 'teenage mother'. Instead the term 'kombra' is used to

denote motherhood or mothering, with a teenage mother referred to as a young or small kombra. Depending on the context, the term 'young kombra' can also mean someone who has recently given birth or a first-time mother. In moments of uncertainty I was able to clarify specific terms with the key informants who lived in the community. I also cross-checked my translations and the meanings and definitions of words, sentences and phrases with friends and other community members.

While transcribing, I took additional notes on recurring and emerging themes that I had not considered during the fieldwork. I used my fieldnotes for the contextualisation and descriptions of places, experiences and relevant details, for deeper analytical insight. Specific themes such as abortion were expanded into a main category in order to unpack the complexity of the topic (see Table 3).

Through supervision and data processing, I eventually decided to organise the categories chronologically into three temporal groups: before/on discovering pregnancy, during pregnancy and after pregnancy. This structure simplified the organising and analysis process, making it easier to identify prominent and recurring themes as well as narratives that illustrated central themes and experiences during each temporal group. The analysis continued throughout the writing stage, continually generating and reorganising narratives, concepts and themes as a central and coherent narrative structure emerged from the writing process. I aimed to narrate life histories in as much detail as possible and from the perspectives of the interlocutors themselves, drawing on essential aspects of their environments and family backgrounds to contextualise the narrative chronologically. During this process I compared their narratives, patterns and themes to identify subjective meanings and nuances. For instance, I compared what my interlocutors valued about their future and the experiences of motherhood and pregnancy.

Table 3: Example of the analysis process

Category		Temporal Group		Theme
Abortion	➔	Before / Discovering pregnancy	➔	Dilemma Religious views Unsafe abortion
Navigating pregnancy	➔	During pregnancy	➔	Church discipline Ansa belle
Hope for the future	➔	After pregnancy	➔	Returning to school Child fostering

4.4. Notes on positionality

Throughout this project I wrestled with the implications of my positionality and how it influenced the different stages of fieldwork. As a researcher born in Sierra Leone who relocated to Denmark at the age of five, conducting ethnographic research 'back home' made me reflect on my intersecting identities. Having visited Sierra Leone a few times in the past for family visits, as I set out for my fieldwork my reflections on various aspects of my position and identity in the field were influenced by Nigerian scholars, living in the Nigerian diaspora, who had conducted similar research in their home country (G. Amakor 2018; Oluseye 2021)I knew it was crucial to understand and process how my diasporic identity, class privilege, and gender and ethnic differences had the potential to influence the data, subsequently challenging my personal assumptions throughout the fieldwork. Because of prior research experience I understood the general context in which the data was situated, and compared to a researcher unfamiliar with the context, I could contextualise the data effectively using my knowledge of relevant religious, political and public health factors.

To illustrate ways in which different aspects of my identity and role were positioned, below I reflect and draw on examples from the fieldwork, borrowing from Johnstone (2019) by answering the following questions: How do my identity, role and evolving position as a researcher influence both my research subjects' perception of me and the data gathered? and: How do my emotional reactions shape my interpretation of the collected data?

4.4.1 Identity and Role

Dichotomising 'insider' and 'outsider' status as a social researcher has been critiqued for its oversimplification (Ryan 2015). The implicit assumption that shared heritage or ethnicity automatically translates to insider status can be misleading, as both researchers' and informants' multilayered identities unfold during fieldwork (ibid.). Mwangi argues that many African researchers grapple with a performative element and 'deeper critical engagement with a variety of selves' (2019, 13). Therefore viewing positionality and the terms 'insider' and 'outsider' as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy was helpful (van Hooft 2019). In my case, acknowledging that language, religion and parental status added layers of complexity to my positioning as a researcher led to my downplaying or emphasising my heritage and other identities to build rapport with informants. For instance when contacting gatekeepers and stakeholders, my class and education facilitated access and cooperation because most national and international NGO workers and healthcare workers were educated or had

some level of expertise on my research topic. Some regarded me as an ally, a 'Sierra Leonean sister' and one of 'their own', leading them to feel a sense of obligation to support my research. As a former nurse I was also very comfortable conducting research at the local clinic. Given my experience with public health research after the Ebola outbreak in 2016, I was knowledgeable about the many barriers and teenage girls' health-seeking behaviour.

However, I rarely discussed my nursing background because I prioritised engaging and connecting with interlocutors through other aspects of my identity, such as shared cultural values, to compensate for and partially overcome the elements that were not shared. Ethnographic scholars have discussed how the shared experience and implicit bond of motherhood increased their access when building rapport with other mothers during fieldwork (see Dibben 2015; Kaplan 1997; Mchome 2021). Although I did not have children, I was still able to build some level of rapport with the young mothers by engaging with their children and assisting with childcare.

Living in a multi-ethnic community in Adonkia, I shared the same Mende ethnic background as many of my interlocutors. However, this was not necessarily an advantage. Upon saying my name, Massaquoi (a common Mende surname), I was commonly asked if I spoke the language and which village I was from. I lost some credibility for not being able to speak Mende, especially with the older generation. 'Real Mende people speak the language', I was told, yet ironically, mention of my doctoral studies prompted a light-hearted stereotypical saying, 'Mende man lek book', which refers to Mende peoples' studious nature and love of education. Thus despite my insufficient Mende language skills, my ethnicity was recognised because of my dedication to scholarship. While my linguistic skills in Mende were limited to basic greetings, I was frequently complimented for preserving my fluency in Krio after living abroad for many years. I compensated for the Mende language barrier by increasing my Krio vocabulary and familiarising myself with local slang and common terms. The switching between Krio and other ethnic languages in regular conversation felt disorienting at times, especially when observing family disputes where enraged or frustrated relatives expressed themselves in languages other than Krio.

Despite explaining and introducing my research throughout the fieldwork, community members outside institutional settings struggled to categorise me. Some perceived me as a social worker, while others assumed I was a journalist or an NGO worker. Rarely was I identified as a researcher in my interlocutors' close networks. Encountering scepticism, one genitor assumed I was related to his girlfriend, one of the teenage mothers. Despite initially consenting to an interview during a phone call, when we eventually met he questioned my identity as a researcher until I showed him the consent

form for my research. I later discovered that he had assumed that the interview was a trap orchestrated by his girlfriend's family in order to obtain evidence that he had impregnated their under-age daughter.

4.4.2 Emotional influence on data collection

At the beginning of my fieldwork, community members seemed curious and interested in participating in my research. Girls and their family members shared extensive details about their backgrounds and lives in the community. It appeared that many had rarely discussed their experience of pregnancy in detail or reflected on the conflicting emotions and the vulnerabilities that had led to what some referred to as an 'accident'.

Whenever I shared my research topic with strangers or local friends I heard a wide range of societal perceptions about teenage pregnancy. Girls were portrayed as either sexually promiscuous or victims of sexual assault. Conscious of these stereotypes, I deliberately aimed towards broadening the narratives and stereotypes surrounding teenage pregnancy.

My curiosity and interest in people's lives instantly created new bonds and friendships with both men and women. I was pleased, but in time it became exhausting, especially when it came to my interactions with men. At the initial stage of my fieldwork I felt that elderly women perceived me as innocent and perhaps too friendly towards the opposite sex. I quickly learned that initiating small talk and friendly banter could be misconstrued as flirtatious behaviour or romantic interest, prompting men to enquire about my relationship status. Observing how other women evaded such questions, I employed similar strategies, navigating conversations with increased caution. This awareness significantly impacted my research. In male-dominated spaces, such as the local restaurant owned by Fatima's mother, when Fatima was not around I waited for her inside the restaurant. However, later when she was not there I preferred to assist her mother in the kitchen while waiting for Fatima or to leave, returning when she was around, to avoid interacting with male customers. I refrained from interviewing flirtatious men and was careful to present myself with a manner that conveyed modesty and professionalism.

Gaining a deeper understanding of the gender dynamics in Sierra Leone also prompted empathy towards my interlocutors, which was reflected in my data collection and analysis.

Ringsted (2008) writes about this emotional turmoil and sense of inadequacy among researchers conducting ethnographic research with vulnerable groups, recognising the difficulties of emotional detachment even after the fieldwork ends. I left my fieldwork still grappling with a sense of

inadequacy, wondering if I could have supported them more emotionally, questioning my ethical approach and emotional boundaries, some of which remained ambiguous, and with a sense of responsibility and loyalty towards the girls whom I now regarded as friends. I found an ethical middle ground through sustained contact with some of the girls via messaging apps such as WhatsApp; despite their limited access to the internet we were able to communicate occasionally. Below, I elaborate further on how emotional boundaries were established through the research process and post-fieldwork.

4.5. Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee and the School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee at the University of East Anglia. In addition I sought permission to recruit participants from the managing directors of the two clinics and the principal of the school.

Throughout the study I confronted ethical challenges such as issues of gender-based violence, where girls related narratives of complex challenges and recent incidents of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. They rarely expressed any interest in reporting incidents of severe abuse and refused further referral to support services.

While sexual violence was not condoned, physical abuse in marriage and intimate relationships was justified by both men and older women, especially in relation to jealous men beating and monitoring their wives or girlfriends if they felt disrespected. Both teenage girls and adult women were held accountable for their partner's behaviour and it was not uncommon for girls to be scolded for aggravating or provoking their partner, or for married women to be blamed for their husband's infidelity. Schneider notes that gender relations in Sierra Leone 'are embedded in fundamental assumptions that aim to explain and excuse behaviour and regulate responsibility. However, especially the assignment of women's responsibilities is contradictory to the overall situatedness of the gender order' (Schneider 2019a, 135).

The typical response to gender-based violence in the community was associated with the desire to maintain the peace rather than seek justice. My conversations with community members on this topic revealed that women, and especially older 'aunties', perpetuated and reinforced the importance of practicing religious notions of forgiveness. Based on her research on intimate partner violence in Sierra Leone, Schneider describes how cases of gender-based violence are managed:

> […] women must decide whether they want to keep the issue in the house or carry it to the porch. If they decide to keep it in the house, they call upon the patrons of the relationship. These patrons are usually elders from one's family who have been chosen as mediators upon entering the relationship. These mediators then come, gather all those involved, discuss the issue and decide on the way forward. The case is then formally solved and discussing it with others would be an offense. (Schneider 2019b, 130)

The cultural pattern described here is similar to what I witnessed in Adonkia. When girls spoke about recent incidents involving family members, reporting the assault was never brought into question. In Adonkia, reporting sexual assault is highly stigmatised, especially if the perpetrator was a relative or close family friend, and women and girls avoid reporting it to the police to protect the family's reputation and avoid rumours in the neighbourhood. However, it was more common for families to threaten to report genitors for impregnating a teenager if they refused to acknowledge their paternity, although such threats were rarely followed through.

Most of those who shared incidents of sexual abuse from their childhood during the interviews, or informal conversations, had suppressed these experiences. As a researcher, navigating these conversations was challenging because most girls never explicitly used common terms associated with rape, but their body language and descriptive cadence strongly implied incidents of coercion and manipulation that had resulted in sexual abuse. During these conversations I drew on my nursing skills and experience with psychological counselling, reflecting upon my responses and my questions with compassion and empathy to avoid emotional triggers.

Girls under 18 years old who expressed interest in participating in the study were asked to obtain written informed consent from their legal guardians. Research objectives and consent forms were discussed and reviewed with the guardians, some of whom also agreed to participate in the study themselves. The names of the girls, other informants and institutions have been replaced by pseudonyms. During ethnographic fieldwork, negotiating informed consent is an ongoing process, which was communicated at various stages of fieldwork. Even though all the girls signed the written consent form, I noticed a pattern of hesitation among older relatives, who were more open to consenting verbally as signing a consent form would formalise an otherwise relaxed and comfortable research setting and create negative associations with governmental and institutional involvement (Bremner 2013). No monetary incentives were offered to participate in the ethnographic study. However, I provided light snacks and drinks during interview sessions with girls and other informants and covered their transport costs whenever I accompanied girls to the health clinic or participated in different activities with them. Compensation was only discussed after the recruitment process.

The friendships I established with the girls led to many assumptions about my willingness to assist with monetary favours during and after my fieldwork. These requests rarely came from the girls themselves but from others in their social network. As mentioned, while my role as a researcher was clear to the girls, it remained somewhat ambiguous to their friends and relatives. Establishing clear boundaries was sometimes draining, requiring a lot of patience.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter reveals the complexity of being in the field and becoming familiar with the local community. Despite my initial planning and preparations, I was unable to escape some of the challenges common to novice researchers in the process of establishing rapport with key informants and interlocutors. I have discussed how my identity as an educated Sierra Leonean woman from the diaspora facilitated access to different contacts. At the same time, being young, single and childless also influenced others' social perceptions of me. My background and role as a researcher meant that I was excluded from certain kinds of knowledge and experiences and only partially exposed to others.

Going from conducting public health research in the past to formless ethnographic fieldwork was another learning curve. Being able to trust the process and negotiating between structured and non-structured environments through passive and active interactions and observations was another aspect of the methodological approach that led to further curiosity and exploration. As a former nurse, beginning the fieldwork at the local clinics was a great starting point. Although observing the interactions between healthcare workers and patients was familiar ground, learning to use my observational skills beyond the clinical gaze was not as straightforward as I had anticipated. Viewing girls at the clinic as participants rather than patients also took some adjustment.

Gender was another central theme during data collection. Although I had a theoretical understanding of the patriarchal structures in Sierra Leone, observing how girls and women in general coped daily with sexual harassment and toxic gender norms influenced the conceptualisation of gender roles that I used to interpret the empirical findings.

While gender-based violence and sexual abuse were not part of my research focus, they became a central ethical concern during the fieldwork, given the prevalence of both physical and sexual violence among my interlocutors. Unfortunately, my prescribed ethical guidelines under such circumstances were sometimes to no avail. Learning to respect these young women's boundaries despite my concern led to personal reflections about my ethical approach and their emotional well-

being, as is inevitable when participants become friends. I aim to approach some of these concerns and complexities with empathy, situating and analysing the data within a broader social context.

The following chapter considers the empirical findings. I begin with a vignette that highlights some of the moral dilemmas that girls and their families experience when dealing with reproductive misfortune.

5. Discovering Pregnancy

5.1. Introduction

> 'The girl never knew that a lady would get pregnant just at a touch, her first touch ever, so she got pregnant. The father just decided to encourage her because that is the only daughter to him.'

Anna, a midwife and NGO worker, was telling me about teenage girls' lack of knowledge about their reproductive health and referenced a recent encounter with a pastor and his teenage daughter. The day before our interview she had counselled him and his wife after their sixteen-year-old daughter had fallen pregnant. 'She tried to hide the pregnancy from her parents, but they eventually detected the pain she was going through, everyday abdominal pain, until they contacted me', Anna explained. The daughter expressed her desire to terminate the pregnancy and return to school, while her father, strongly influenced by his Christian beliefs against abortion, insisted on her carrying the pregnancy to full term. He had no objections to her returning to school after she had given birth. Anna described the father's deep distress as he exclaimed, 'I don't know why the devil wants to frustrate me like this! I don't want anything to happen to my daughter; she is my only child'.

The pregnancy was the outcome of sexual abuse, which made the story all the more devastating. According to Anna such cases were common but difficult to detect, because girls rarely spoke openly about it or attended the clinic after the incident. Cases of rape and sexual abuse perpetrated by relatives, teachers or close family friends are highly taboo, leading girls to feel pressured to lie or remain silent to protect the family's reputation.

The pastor knew his daughter and future grandchild would be the subject of much gossip and judgment because of his position as a pastor and because there was no legitimate father in the picture. The decision to keep the child would potentially affect the family's reputation; however, he disregarded his reputation and the ministry, prioritising his only child. Anna admired him for that. 'He is ready to stand by his daughter until the end. Me too, I admire him so much because it's difficult to find such parents. Only parents who reason can do that.'

While I understood Anna's admiration, trying to interpret the narrative from a different perspective left me with more questions than answers. Having grown up in a Danish society where young girls have more influence in the decision-making process, it was difficult to understand why parents would subject their daughter to carrying a pregnancy to term after such a traumatic experience. Indeed, the

moral reasoning among parents varied after discovering their daughter's pregnancy.[16] This narrative serves as a good starting point from which to explore the first research question: how do girls navigate their sexuality, kinship dynamics and the moral complexities related to teenage pregnancy?

This chapter illustrates and examines the conflicting and complex sets of values that are considered and rationalised on both a social and an individual level when a young girl falls pregnant. Through the conceptualisation of uncertainty and reproductive misfortune, the chapter illustrates the multiple interpretations and solutions that may seem correct to guardians, healthcare workers and religious leaders. I argue that teenage pregnancy is typically a collective rather than individual matter, where spiritual and social interpretations of misfortune determine whether the girl is met with compassion or condemnation. The chapter begins with a discussion of sex education and the cultural norms, expectations and moral responsibilities regarding the sexual behaviour of teenage girls. The following section explores parental reactions to the news of a pregnancy. I discuss how moral responsibility relates to the experience of uncertainty as families find themselves at a pivotal juncture after they learn about the pregnancy. For a better understanding of local interpretations of reproductive misfortune, the issues and dilemmas of medical and unsafe abortion[17] are highlighted. Like the daughter in Anna's narrative, the decision to terminate or continue with the pregnancy was not always within the girl's control. I use the narratives of Michella and Fanta, girls with contrasting family backgrounds, to illustrate how girls navigate the challenges they experience during the early stages of pregnancy. The central theme in both narratives is social relations and the fragility and restorative patterns that emerge in kinship and other social relationships once the pregnancy is discovered or disclosed.

5.2. Sex education and moral responsibility

All of the interlocutors became pregnant unexpectedly. While some had been aware of the consequences of unprotected sexual activity, many were not. They had limited knowledge about puberty and had received confusing and contradictory messages about sex, contraception, love and relationships from friends and social media. A few had a basic knowledge of biology and the male and female reproductive systems from conversations with peers or older siblings.

[16] The words 'parent' and 'guardian' are interchangeable in this chapter as many of the girls had lost one or both parents and lived with other relatives or close family friends.
[17] An unsafe abortion is defined as a procedure for terminating a pregnancy carried out by unskilled individuals. The procedure often takes place in an unsanitary environment lacking proper medical equipment.

Globally, there is no common consensus on where the responsibility lies when it comes to providing education about sexuality (Moore and Reynolds 2017). In the UK, Turnbull et al. (2008) found that gender, psychological factors and family dynamics played significant roles in how parents discussed sexuality education. Due to familial concerns, parents are more inclined to engage in conversation about sex with girls, while boys tend to acquire their knowledge from peers or the media. Even when teachers are the primary source of information, the knowledge young people receive does not lead to any significant change in their perceptions about sex. Existing research points to contentions regarding the question of responsibility when it comes to sex education in Africa (Meekers 1994; Meekers and Ahmed 1999; Mbugua 2007; Nyanzi 2008; Bratton 2010; de Haas and Hutter 2019). In Uganda the primary responsibility for sex education extends beyond the nuclear family, especially within Buganda culture. The *ssengas*, typically referred to as paternal aunts, traditionally serve as trusted mentors, offering advice on a wide range of sexual health topics based on cultural and traditional practices. Ssengas are expected to provide accurate information to young people about sex and its associated risks (de Haas and Hutter 2019).

The prevailing belief in Sierra Leonean society, especially when both parents are actively involved in the daughter's life, is that mothers take on the responsibility of discussing matters related to sex and sexuality with their daughters. These discussions are typically contingent upon the mother's knowledge, personal experience, value systems and willingness to engage in such discussions. Although conversations about sex are considered taboo, mothers are still expected to provide daughters with sufficient knowledge and information for them to remain abstinent, avoid pregnancy, or exercise caution regarding premarital sexual activity. However, even highly educated parents may feel uncomfortable engaging in discussions about sex education due to moral or religious convictions, embarrassment or cultural norms (Mbugua 2007).

Healthcare workers at the local clinic acknowledged their role in informing girls about contraception but still held to the general perception that it was more beneficial for girls to receive information from their mothers as opposed to their peers, despite the cultural taboo. Nurse Ena explained:

> Sierra Leonean parents do not have time to discuss about sex with their children, and when you do not do that and it happens, her friend will educate her on that, she would listen to her friend [...] but if you have time to talk to your girl child two to three times a week [...] have time to talk to your girl child and even a male child too, talk to them about sex, it will help. And then you also talk about the different complications relating to early

> teenage pregnancy. But again, how many people are educated to talk to their children about the complications involved in teenage pregnancy?

Nurses expressed the importance of fostering open communication between parents and children, especially mothers and daughters, through trust, friendship, and guidance. Mary, a nurse in her fifties, emphasised the importance of transparency: 'We should have time to sit our children; educate them and make sure we are not hiding anything from them.' Fiona, a nurse in her late thirties, used herself as an example. The first time she had overheard her classmates sharing their sexual experiences she had immediately reported it to her mother, who had a background in teaching, 'My mother sat me down, spoke to me and encouraged me to not follow their behaviour. And it was a good idea to tell my mother'. Upon reflection, she acknowledged that the bond she had with her mother played a crucial role in her decision to talk about her classmates. However, this ideal may be unrealistic or seem foreign in a society where most parents and young people are uncomfortable talking to each other about sex. In a context where children are socialised not to question the opinions of adults, there is not much room for communication about sexuality. Talk and discussions about sex could also be interpreted as social approval or parents encouraging their child to engage in sexual activity. This resulted in girls being misinformed about their sexual and reproductive health through their peers and social media, resulting in inaccurate use of contraceptives. Mary stressed the importance of mothers befriending their daughters:

> We should also talk to parents to make their teenage children friends. If you befriend her, talk to her, as long as she has reached her menstruation stage, do not let her get some certain information outside. Teach her a lot of things; [mothers should say] 'Since you have started seeing your menses, if you have a sexual relationship with a man you will get pregnant. If you encounter any problem, you should come and tell me, do not tell a friend or a neighbour because they will gossip about you. I am your mother and so I will keep your secret.' A parent and a child should interact, and the parent should not be that fearful to the child, because if something goes wrong she will not tell you, but if you are friends she will tell you some certain things and then you will advise her as a parent. But if you are too fearful to your child she might do bad things because she is so fearful of you, she might get problems but she will not be able to express herself to you unless she goes to friends, and a friend will not give her good advice.

Nurse Ena also believed in the involvement of religious leaders from the community and the importance of them addressing the repercussions of premarital sex, emphasising the reward of

receiving a marital partner when abstaining faithfully and avoiding God's anger and punishment for engaging in premarital sex:

> Pastors should say 'You that are into immoral things, it is not good for you; wait until God gives you a rightful partner'. Even as they sit and listen, tell them that God can even get angry with you because of these things. They need to know pastor has said that sexual activity is not good, let me wait until my time. Even imams should talk to young people. Mothers should also talk to their daughters. Mothers, fathers, everyone who goes to the mosque. Everyone should know their responsibility.

In many West African societies mothers and daughters' behaviour are intertwined and mutually reflective. Depending on the context and family structure, it can be difficult to distinguish when the moral responsibility lies with the parents and when the girl is solely responsible for her sexual behaviour and the consequences. Amakor (2018) notes hat in patriarchal societies women are held accountable when their daughters fail to live up to religious and sociocultural norms. He observed how Nigerian mothers from religious communities were punished for their daughter's immoral behaviour, while fathers rarely faced any consequences. This finding aligns with the common saying in Sierra Leone *Wa pikin komot fyn na in papa den da praise, but if e komot bad na mama den da blame*, meaning that when a child turns out well they praise the father, but if he or she turns out badly they blame the mother. When the father is not in the picture it is believed that the efforts and reputation of the mother, whether good or bad, determine her children's future. As the Wolof proverb goes, 'The child will reap the fruits of this mother's work' (Eerdewijk 2009, 86).

In contrast, Riesman (1992) describes how the Fula ethnic group in Burkina Faso see moral character as an attribute given by God. However much parents guide their children towards a moral path, God is the ultimate determiner of children's obedience. This notion detaches the process of childrearing from the moral consequence of the children's behaviour. He compares the American and the Fula way of parenting, where American parents feel a sense of responsibility for their children's moral conduct while Fula parents are more relaxed, believing that this is ultimately predetermined by God. Due to societal expectations, mothers in Adonkia internalise their daughters' moral behaviour through a religious lens while some fathers, like the pastor in the introduction, empathise with their daughters after a sexual assault, less concerned about their own personal and pastoral reputation. The following section illustrates how parents and religious leaders subjectively process the news of a teenage pregnancy through a moral and religious lens.

5.3. Her shame is our disgrace: Reactions to pregnancy

Discovering and disclosing the news of a pregnancy elicited a range of mixed feelings, mostly characterised by shock, fear and anxiety. As the girls were either in school or financially dependent on others, most feared the potential aftermath. Girls reported partners feeling shocked and blindsided when they learned about the pregnancy, despite not having made any effort to suggest or use contraception. Because modern contraception in Sierra Leone is mostly feminised, targeting women and young girls in public sexual health messages, there is a prevailing perception among men that it is the woman's responsibility to prevent an unwanted pregnancy.

Sharing the news of their pregnancy was daunting, and the girls carefully considered how and who to disclose the news to first. The guardians of all fourteen girls were disappointed when they learned of the pregnancy. A few of my interlocutors initially visited the clinic several months into their pregnancy. Healthcare workers confirmed this as common practice in Sierra Leone, especially among younger girls. In some cases girls tried to conceal their pregnancy for as long as possible. Others did not realise they were pregnant until a neighbour, parent or family member became suspicious. Those who lacked assistance and support after discovering their pregnancy feared being confronted with stigmatisation, judgment, discrimination or harsh treatment at the clinic and preferred to postpone the prenatal visit for as long as possible.[18] Once the pregnancy was visible, girls avoided religious gatherings for similar reasons. In some conservative churches pregnant girls were punished and those who were actively involved in church activities were forced to step down from their position, as I discuss in Chapter 6.

While some parents were not willing to forgive or forgo their reputation to support their daughters due to religious and cultural factors, most were willing to forgive and accept their daughter's pregnancy after receiving counsel from their social networks.

Parents were rarely the first to receive the news of a pregnancy. The fear of parental reaction and rejection led many of the young girls to choose a convoluted or strategic approach, disclosing the news to a mediator first, who then told the parents or supported the girl through this process. Religious leaders and healthcare workers like Anna often found themselves mediating between a girl and her guardians.[19] Mediators encouraged girls to acknowledge their 'wrongdoing' by seeking their parents'

[18] I rarely observed girls being spoken to in a harsh or condescending tone. Most of the nurses seemed kind and accommodating in their interaction with pregnant girls. My preconceived notions of healthcare workers' poor attitude towards young girls made me question whether their kindness was genuine or if my presence elicited performative behaviour.

[19] The mediator could be a trusted neighbour, a member of the extended family, a religious leader, a healthcare worker like Anna, or a teacher. A mediator includes anyone who tries to reason with the parents or guardians on behalf of the pregnant girl.

forgiveness. Subsequently, families identify the genitor responsible for the pregnancy. The actions taken thereafter differed. In some cases it involved moving away to avoid the shame and embarrassment, or receiving assistance from extended relatives willing to offer support during this stage. Some girls were told to go and stay with the genitor, which in many cases led to them moving back home when the relationship failed.

Mkhwanazi observed that once the initial conflict around the news of pregnancy was resolved, South African mothers and daughters reaffirmed one another through a process of acceptance: 'Not throwing a daughter out of the house [for being pregnant] and instead helping her to transition into motherhood provided a space for both mother and daughter to reaffirm their adherence to local ideals of good parenting and intergenerational relationships' (2010, 356). In contrast, Kaplan (1997) notes that some girls never regained the mother-daughter relationship after disclosing the news of their pregnancy, due to the disappointment and failed expectations on both sides.

I was informed that fathers sometimes evict both their wife and their daughter, asserting that the wife is responsible for the misconduct that led to the daughter's pregnancy. Victoria, a neighbour and the guardian of one of the interlocutors, shared that her husband had blamed her for their daughter's pregnancy ten years ago. He had reacted strongly to the news and thrown her clothes out from the balcony, shouting 'You and your daughter! You are stupid, you are useless!', and threatened to evict both of them. He wanted them to leave the house immediately but she was able to calm him down. 'I told him 'You want to kick us out before asking us what happened'. Both Victoria and her husband found out about the pregnancy through rumours from neighbours. Although she believed her husband's reaction was unreasonable, she was not worried about the possibility of eviction because her relatives owned the house. Instead, neighbours urged her to talk to him, which she eventually did, using moral reasoning: 'I told him one thing: 'Mr. Conteh, now you are kicking us out, but this child's shame is our disgrace, this child's shame is our disgrace, because if you kick her out and I allow you to do it, if anything happens to her, God will never forgive us for that sin until we die.' In Sierra Leone a phrase is repeated twice to emphasise its importance. Victoria acknowledged that their daughter's actions and internal shame would disgrace the family, but she was not affected by the rumours circulating about her daughter's pregnancy. Neither did she internalise her husband's reaction and the blame he projected. As a devout Christian, her primary concern was connected to her moral beliefs She held her husband accountable, recognising their shared responsibility as parents and that failing to protect and show empathy towards their daughter could result in further misfortune and serious spiritual consequences. The interpretation of misfortune in Victoria's case is noteworthy

because it demonstrates how her sense of reasoning was driven by her religious beliefs. Her feelings of blame and disgrace were not as significant as the fear of facing God's judgment for abandoning her daughter. Victoria believed she would not be judged for her daughter's actions in the eyes of God; however, she would be held accountable for her response and how she treated her on discovering her pregnancy. Ibrahim, an imam and youth coordinator for the Inter-Religious Council, expressed a similar sentiment:

> In Islam there is a principle where they say when two issues occur, when they are both negative you look to the issue that is least negative. In this case, where teenage pregnancy has occurred as a sinful act in the Qur'an or in the Sunnah, [they] abandon the child and throw them out, because that is what some parents do, the moment they find out their child is pregnant and is not married, yet that is what they decide. So what we advise mothers is that they should not abandon their children because that causes more harm. When they are in the streets the daughter's life and the baby's life are both at risk, so the best thing is to accept the child and encourage them. It is possible, like the Qur'an advises, the time will come when they will repent and realise their mistake, so the doors of repentance will open.

The imam's statement reflects the common leaning towards compassion and empathy. Reproductive misfortune should not be met with harsh treatment or condemnation, which have the potential to exacerbate both the physical and the spiritual consequences. Instead, parents should extend support and understanding rather than resorting to harsh treatment or condemnation. From a spiritual perspective, parental encouragement and forgiveness may lead to remorse and changed behaviour. Victoria and the imam both believed that parental abandonment was wrong or even sinful, as it exposes both the girl and her unborn baby to worse conditions, especially if the act of abandonment leads to a fatal outcome. The imam believed that girls who were abandoned, or feared abandonment, could easily resort to 'doing something crazy to free themselves from the trauma' such as having an unsafe abortion or attempting suicide.

According to him, religious leaders are not only a signpost towards moral behaviour but are also seen as the most trusted voice, functioning in different layers of society, addressing family, community and national issues, with people turning to them for conflict resolution. This was also the consensus among the healthcare workers, who believed that religious leaders had much influence in the community.

Kadi's father, Sheikh Karim, was one of the influential Islamic leaders in the community. He had mediated in several cases of teenage pregnancy providing advice, guidance, and support for parents through religious teachings. As much as the Qur'an condemns sexual sin, he believed that there were worse things. In other words, as humans are capable of much worse, parents should be willing to forgive their children. After his daughter became pregnant his stand on teenage pregnancy became more lenient than those of many of the other religious leaders in the community. The experience of preaching one thing and experiencing the weight of the situation first-hand resulted in incongruence between his beliefs and his actions. When his daughter became pregnant at the age of sixteen, practicing what he preached was challenging. Initially he was affected by the shame but he quickly distanced himself from this, acknowledging how his daughter's experience of shame and misfortune would be worse than his own because people distinguished his role as a respectable and devout religious leader from his daughter's immoral behaviour. He explained 'They will still say "Look at the man's daughter, the one who advises people, it is shameful!" [...] But on the other hand, people see the way I behave, so my daughter will experience more shame than me.'

Sheikh Karim had done what he perceived to be his best to guide his daughter towards the right path while recognising that 'I am not God'; he was fallible and incapable of controlling another human being. He reasoned and deflected his moral responsibility as a parent and spiritual leader, highlighting the prevalence of teenage pregnancy as part of a broader sociocultural landscape, nationally and beyond: 'How many imams have those children [teenage mothers] in their home? We have had many of these cases here, there is no way to go about it. This is Africa, this is Sierra Leone. We are just trying to understand each other, but God has the final say.'

Like Victora, Sheikh Karim acknowledged God's will and judgment, recognising that religious upbringing does not guarantee moral behaviour. Even in the homes of the most pious and respectable religious leaders young girls are not exempt from 'sexual sin' that results in pregnancy outside marriage. Ultimately, through this religious lens Sheikh Karim believed that God's divine influence and authority determine an individual's destiny. He also used this notion to justify his position against abortion:

> From God's perspective [abortion] is very bad, because the sin lies with the people who have sinned. The child is not a sin. Maybe the child will not follow in the parent's footsteps [...]. Maybe that child will take a different path and become a religious person. And when the child is ready to settle down, they will get married first. They won't be someone who sleeps around.

Sheikh Karim alluded to the mistakes or 'sins' of parents not being projected onto their children, who potentially journeyed on a more virtuous path. In essence, the religious notion went in both directions; devout parents could raise a 'disobedient' and 'immoral' child, whereas a child conceived through 'immoral' circumstances might choose a more righteous path than their parents'.

5.4. Abortion: A Moral Dilemma

Figure 8: Midwife examining patient at the small local clinic

The teenage girls perceived abortion as a way to mitigate their feelings of uncertainty and avoid the potential consequences of their reproductive misfortune. However, in a context where it is illegal unless the mother's life is in danger, the thought of the risks of an unsafe abortion also led to uncertainty.[20] Many of the girls who considered having an unsafe abortion during the early stages of their pregnancy ultimately chose to carry the pregnancy to term, fearing that an abortion could result in death, severe health complications or future infertility, which for many was perceived as a greater misfortune than the social disruption the pregnancy would cause.

[20] While abortion is illegal, post-abortion care is legal in Sierra Leone. I explain the ambiguities between the two medical procedures below.

My interlocutors' justification for avoiding abortion was mostly associated with fear rather than religious conviction. The fear attached to unsafe abortion was fueled by numerous horrific stories about friends and schoolmates in their community who had bled to death or experienced severe complications after an abortion attempt. These narratives served as a rationale for choosing to carry the pregnancy to term, as the girls feared losing their lives. In the context of poverty, the fear of death is common, embedded in Sierra Leone's history of political conflict and health crises where death was inescapable. Thus grief is a shared reality across generations, as most Sierra Leoneans are familiar with the experience of tragic loss having encountered the deaths of relatives, neighbours or close friends. With this in mind, the choice to avoid an unsafe abortion was a means of self-preservation. Despite the high rates of teenage maternal mortality, most of my interlocutors feared the dangers of unsafe procedures more than childbirth. This was reflected in the advice they extended to friends who became pregnant after them. For Deborah, it was important to emphasise the spiritual and moral consequences as well as the potential risks of an abortion to her classmate, insinuating that God might not hear or answer her friend's prayers if she chose to terminate her pregnancy; 'I advised her, and told her abortions were bad. What if you lose your life, which God are you going to call [if something goes wrong]? That's what I advised her [...]. She went ahead with an abortion, but when she became pregnant for the second time, she did not get an abortion.'

Illegal and unsafe abortions always came at a substantial moral, economical, or physical cost that girls were unable to afford or unwilling to risk. Abortions were considered a means of removing an obstacle to achieving their educational aspirations or avoiding exacerbating their financial hardship. Anticipating disappointment and lack of support from parents, relatives or genitors also influenced their choice to terminate the pregnancy.

Across sub-Saharan Africa the incidence of unsafe abortion is highest among single or unmarried young girls (Harrell-Bond 1975; W. Bleek 1978; Bledsoe 1999; Koster 2003; Nyanzi 2008; Sijpt 2018). Culturally, as West African societies change and evolve, motherhood and marriage are no longer viewed as the only marker of social prestige, as Bleek explains:

> The unwillingness to bear a pregnancy to term is related to, and partly caused by, the reluctance of the present young generation to settle in an early customary union. The ambitions of the young lie outside the traditional sphere of the village where marriage and children used to provide social status. At the present time, they are considered rather a hindrance to success. (1978, 119)

This message resonates even more strongly with young West African women today, as most desire to pursue an education before becoming a wife and mother. Morally, abortions were seen as what Johnsen-Hanks calls 'the lesser shame' (2005, 201), and many perceived a secret abortion as less shameful than a visible pregnancy. In Sierra Leone and other African societies schoolgirls are known for terminating pregnancies (Harrell-Bond 1975; Bratton 2010). In the pursuit of educational attainment abortion was considered a means of avoiding reproductive misfortune, erasing the potential limitations and responsibilities ascribed to motherhood and avoiding stigmatisation in school and religious institutions.

Although abortion is illegal across West Africa, the level of criminalisation varies significantly across countries. Whittaker (2010) writes that even countries with similar religious profiles may adopt distinct legal frameworks and varying positions and interpretations regarding abortion, which differ among religions and the degree to which religious laws and principles influence national policies and legislation. For instance despite both having a majority Muslim population and inheriting restrictive colonial legal legacies, Senegal and Sierra Leone differ significantly in the restrictiveness of their abortion legislation (Suh 2014). In Senegal abortion is highly criminalised and the responsibility for the abortion is seen as shared between the pregnant girl and the skilled or unskilled person carrying it out. Under the law, the latter are in jeopardy of being reported and apprehended, and risk losing their medical certification. For healthcare workers this creates significant tension and ethical dilemmas about safeguarding patient confidentiality and their perceived legal responsibility to report cases of induced abortion to the authorities to protect themselves against potential accusations (ibid.). In contrast, the criminalisation of girls and skilled or unskilled abortion practitioners is rare in Sierra Leone and the legislation and national policy are more a moral statement and guidelines than a tool for criminalisation. Thus the fear of criminalisation for terminating a pregnancy was not a personal concern for healthcare workers or my interlocutors. Girls with the necessary financial means could easily access a medical in-clinic abortion from 300,000 SLL (US$14.5). The price was higher in the private sector and increased according to the gestational stage. None of my interlocutors were able to afford this on their own, as those who were employed earned an average salary of 400,000 SLL a month working for catering services and as domestic helps.

As a national health strategy to reduce maternal mortality, healthcare workers were clinically trained in post-abortion care and were able to treat abortion complications in cases where women faced significant risks of medical complications when carrying a pregnancy beyond 12 weeks. While numerical data on induced abortions in Sierra Leone remains scarce, recent data estimated that 91,494

women sought post-abortion care in 2021, with 78 per cent presenting with moderate to severe complications (African Population and Health Research Center 2022).[21] Those carrying out unsafe abortions typically initiated an induced abortion with the intention of provoking bleeding that would necessitate medical intervention to complete it (Hull and Widyantoro 2010).

The healthcare workers I spoke with at the clinic all identified as Christian and conveyed conflicting views on abortion and post-abortion care, which was clearly understood to be a lifesaving medical procedure, while clinical abortion services were never explicitly suggested as the first line of action due to the legal framework. A nurse explained 'It is illegal, yet they brought it and trained people how to go about it because they know that people are doing it. Before that old lady at that corner kill someone [...] but now they call it post-abortion care. We do the post-abortion care for pregnancies that are life-threatening.' National and local awareness of unsafe abortions compels some healthcare workers to conduct clinical abortions as they perceive it to be the lesser of two evils, knowing that in their desperation girls are more likely to seek dangerous alternatives from unskilled individuals if they are rejected at the health facility. Healthcare workers who held strong religious beliefs regarding abortion navigated a moral dichotomy between the two medical procedures, taking pride in the post-abortion procedure that aimed to preserve life while meeting the other, medical abortions, with reluctance and regarding it as a 'sinful' act.

Healthcare workers' interpretation of misfortune was associated with their religious beliefs about abortion and the sanctity of life. They balanced their moral beliefs alongside their medical and professional judgment, acknowledging that the damage had already been done by the time they received girls at the clinic after an unsafe abortion attempt. Tina explained, 'She was the one that did the abortion, but it is not complete. If I leave it she will die, and her blood will be on my head. It is different with the complete one [medical abortion] that someone might come with for you to do'. Despite their reservations about abortions, healthcare workers were still willing to recommend qualified colleagues to perform the medical procedure, as Fiona explains:

> Now, I am a Christian that do attend a Bible-believing church where they preach about sex before marriage [...] Like I told you about the area of abortion, of course, everyone here knows that I cannot get involved in doing abortion. But when [young girls] do come most time 'Nurse, I have come, and I am pregnant. I don't want the pregnancy because I am going to school'. With all your Christianity, you will talk to them, 'Do not remove the pregnancy; why didn't you prevent?' she will say 'No, I will not be able to keep this

[21] The women included in the data sample were of reproductive age (15–49), and of the 38 per cent of unplanned pregnancies 68 per cent resulted in an abortion.

> pregnancy, do help me.' We already have the place inside here. So, I will call the one that is there which I am not supposed to do because I am a Christian who goes to church, it is a sin for me, but I just have to do it because it is my work. I am not the one that is conducting the abortion, but I directed her, which I was not supposed to do.

In a medical context healthcare workers felt compelled to support the girls by providing what they perceived as the best possible care. Counselling served as neutral ground where they engaged in conversations and tried to mediate if the parents were aware of the pregnancy or requested an abortion for their daughter. These counselling sessions reflected healthcare workers' religious views, which in most instances aligned with the opinions of those undecided about the pregnancy. However, for those in deep distress, desperate and determined to terminate their pregnancy, counselling proved to be ineffective. Anna, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, had separated her religious views from her medical profession for many years. Because of her personal experience with teenage pregnancy she was able to relate to the feelings associated with uncertainty and reproductive misfortune. She met girls with the compassion she had longed for herself when she fell pregnant at the age of sixteen. Back then, she did not have access to any medical counselling. She believed it was important to prepare girls for motherhood with adequate information instead of judgment and contamination.

However, her ideological position changed after marrying a pastor. 'I have stepped down from [assisting with clinical abortions]. Back then I was a professional in doing that, but because of the kind of man I am dealing with, and I want to reconcile with my God now, so I stopped'. Anna perceived herself as a 'very good Christian' even before meeting her husband, but in the process of 'reconciling with God' she had had to adopt her husband's views on abortion and could no longer separate her personal life and role as 'first lady' and 'woman of God' from her medical profession. In a country with high rates of maternal mortality, fear persists, especially related to unsafe abortion. Anna believed that medical and societal concerns about abortion would decrease if people had access to quality healthcare. Harrell-Bond (1975) concurs, emphasising that the first step towards achieving this is more liberal abortion laws. Although South African scholars have demonstrated that legalising abortion does not eliminate reluctance or discriminatory behaviour from healthcare workers (Mkhwanazi 2011; Moodley 2021), it could soon become a reality, as the political ideology around abortion is gradually shifting in Sierra Leone. In the following sections I turn to Michella's and Fanta's narratives.

5.5. Michella: Making the right choice

Discovering their pregnancy was an unexpected turning point for most of my interlocutors. While some became suspicious that they were pregnant because they were experiencing irregular bleeding, others became aware through signs of fatigue and sickness. This was the case for 19-year-old Michella. She was in her final trimester when we met at the clinic. She seemed friendly and her welcoming gaze led to our initial conversation. Unlike most of the girls in my research, both of Michella's parents were still alive, but they had divorced when she was 8 years old. Her father had never remarried, and as the only daughter and the oldest of his three children she was responsible for the household chores. Despite being raised by her father, a high-level soldier and devout Muslim, she described having a closer relationship with her mother, whom she visited during holidays and stayed with periodically.

Michella did not recall her mother educating her about sex. When she began dating her boyfriend, Samuel, she introduced him to her mother, who explicitly stated her disapproval of Michella 'running around with different men' now that she had introduced Samuel. At the time, Michella's mother cautioned her 'at this age I can get pregnant. [My mother] said she would not try to stop me because she knows I can do stuff behind her back and she would never find out. The only advice she will give me is to be careful'. Both of them hid Michella's relationship from her father; if he knew Michella's mother was aware of her romantic relationship he would hold her responsible for 'encouraging' Michella into a sexual relationship.

Strategically introducing a boyfriend as a partner instead of a genitor was considered respectful in this context, because in most cases relatives would be more receptive to news of a pregnancy if they already knew the genitor. This practice is known as *show face*, and it is a familiar and informal way of introducing a partner. While *show face* does not constitute the promise of engagement, it often represents the genitor's willingness to take responsibility for his actions, signifying the first steps towards commitment that could lead to an engagement and subsequent marriage. Similar to the practice of paternal acknowledgement commonly observed and negotiated between a girl and the genitor's family when a girl has been impregnated outside marriage, *show face* rectifies the moral order of unintended pregnancy outside marriage. The genitor makes his intentions known, asserting the seriousness of the relationship, which quickly clarifies any ambiguities towards the child and teenage mother.

When Michella and I met at the clinic she had just moved in with her mother-in-law and boyfriend and was no longer living in Adonkia with her father. Michella was neither engaged nor married, but she referred to her partner's mother as her mother-in-law because both mothers were aware of their

relationship early on. Like unmarried girls in Cameroon, it is common for girls to employ future titles to refer to individuals in the present (Johnson-Hanks 2005). In this case it also asserts the seriousness of their relationship. Michella and Samuel had been together for a few years before engaging in sexual activity. According to her, Samuel had won her over with his 'humble and respectful character'. He was three years older than her and worked as a sand miner. When the two initially started dating, Michella and Samuel's mothers had a meeting with the headman in the area to hold Samuel accountable for the relationship. During the meeting Michella's mother told them 'If anything happens to my daughter I do not want to hear any stories [excuses] or denial […]. If she gets pregnant she is in your hands'. Samuel's response demonstrated to Michella that he was serious about their relationship. In front of everyone he declared his willingness to 'face anything', taking full responsibility for his actions. His mother, on the other hand, cautioned Michella not to 'tamper with other men' or deceive them about the baby's paternity. It is common practice for women to deceive responsible men into thinking they are the father of their unborn child, often manipulating the situation to secure support and protection.

However, this was not Michella's intention. At this point she was sixteen and feared engaging in a sexual relationship for various reasons. Primarily she feared her father's reaction if she were to fall pregnant. She also feared losing her virginity, which her friends had described as a painful experience. At the age of eighteen, during her final year in secondary school, Samuel came to 'know her as a woman', and she lost her virginity. Soon she fell pregnant.

In the early stages of her pregnancy she ignored the signs of constant fatigue, weakness, dizziness, and loss of appetite after an inconclusive pregnancy test, explaining:

> I was sick a lot, but I didn't realise I was pregnant. My boyfriend, Samuel, was the one who went to buy the pregnancy test. It showed one line, but the other line was not clear. Because of that I didn't take the test seriously and I told him, maybe I am pregnant, maybe I am not, and he said he would be happy if I was pregnant.

As her pregnancy symptoms increased, her 'mother-in-law' suggested taking her to the hospital, only to discover she was pregnant. 'I didn't realise I was pregnant until I was five months along because my stomach was still small', she shared. Initially she felt apathetic about a potential pregnancy, but Samuel's positive response reassured her.

Michella's father was the last person to find out about the pregnancy because she had moved out a year before she fell pregnant. She explained 'I just left the house and moved in with my friend. My

dad did not do anything to me. He did not kick me out and he was not violent towards me, he did not yell at me, I just went to stay with my friend because I wanted freedom. My father is too strict.' Initially she had not planned to stay with her friend for long but her friend's parents, whom she referred to as 'aunty and uncle' 'took her as their own', treating her well and giving her money to start a small business selling bread and fried eggs in front of the house. Michella believed the family had her best interests at heart and supported her to the best of their abilities. The last thing her aunty wanted was for Michella to 'go and useless herself': in essence suggesting that it was preferable for Michella to earn her own money rather than resort to promiscuity to earn money.

Michella explained that her aunt and uncle had opposing views when they found out about her pregnancy:

> When I became pregnant, she told me to terminate the pregnancy, but her husband said why would she tell me to terminate the pregnancy? If something were to happen to me people would hold her responsible because she had encouraged me to do it. Just because she had given birth and raised her children and no one told her to get an abortion, why would she suggest that to someone else?

Her uncle questioned his wife's advice, alluding to the potential dangers of abortions in Sierra Leone, acknowledging that she would be held responsible for suggesting and enabling such behaviour, which would subsequently affect her reputation when Michella's parents found out. He also emphasised the aunt's freedom to choose motherhood without external pressures, and that advising abortion would deprive Michella of this experience. Michella sided with her uncle, and when they asked her what she wanted, she expressed her desire to carry the pregnancy to term: 'This is my firstborn, and I don't know if this will be the last or the firstborn, so I won't abort it'. Fear of future infertility was commonly used as a reason for not pursuing abortion, especially in a first pregnancy. Michella reasoned that the child would eventually be desired by both families because neither her mother nor her 'mother-in-law' had any grandchildren. This echoes Blake's description of South African grandmothers who placed great value on 'enjoying their grandchildren' by spoiling them and delighting in their presence (R. Blake 2017, 191).

Michella's aunt also became more settled after she introduced the genitor, whom she had dated for 'a good four years', to her. When her boyfriend's mother initially suggested that she move in with them, her aunt did not want her to leave. For the sake of financial security, Michella reasoned it would be better for her to stay with her boyfriend, as if she lived far away he would be more inclined to spend his money on other things.

After Michella settled in with her boyfriend she shared the news of her pregnancy with her mother, who then informed Michella's father. She recalled him being upset initially: 'My mother said my father was upset and he said he did not want to see me again. But she spoke with him for a while to calm him down.' By leaving her father's house she had traded her formal education for independence, which was worthwhile in her opinion, as unlike most of my other interlocutors her educational aspirations were not a priority. Ironically, neither was marriage, although they had initiated the stage of cohabitation and rectified aspects of their relationship by *showing face*. Distancing herself from a 'strict father', a patriarchal figure who knew nothing of her relationship and was deliberately excluded from the reproductive decision-making process, was her means of maintaining control. She ensured that he was the last person to know about the pregnancy, as his involvement could have created tension and conflict with her mother and Samuel's family.

5.6. Fanta: 'Pwell belleh is not in our family'

Sixteen-year-old Fanta was born into a devout Muslim family. She was the third youngest of nine children and grew up in Moyamba district, where her parents still lived with her two youngest siblings. When I met her she was living five minutes away from the local clinic with her son, her older sister Bintu, her brother-in-law and their two sons. Her older siblings had all moved to the city to pursue job opportunities and her oldest brother had left the country to seek greener pastures in Dubai. He had been able to convince the parents of this tightly bonded family that it would be best for Fanta to move to the city with their sister after completing her primary school education.

Fanta seemed reserved around family and appeared more open when we were alone. I observed the opposite with her older sister, with whom I also developed a friendship. Fanta shared that her reserved nature hindered her cultivating friendships at her secondary school. She engaged with classmates but had no close friends: 'I am the type of person when I go to school, I don't have friends I open up to or share my secrets with. I do not have friends in school. I have friends I talk to if I want to borrow their book to copy my notes'. Soon after relocating to her brother's place she secretly began dating a man eleven years older than her. Despite the significant age gap, Fanta expressed her fondness for him, although she rarely spent time with him due to logistical constraints. The pattern of secrecy continued after she became pregnant at the age of fourteen.

She found herself doubting her ability to complete her education, resenting the idea of motherhood. The weight of uncertainty and secrecy lingered and she became increasingly desperate to terminate the pregnancy, as the thought of bearing a child while continuing her schooling overwhelmed her,

wondering how these two things could coexist. To her surprise, the genitor reacted positively to the news and was willing to take responsibility for the child, but this was not enough to reassure her.

Her mother, who visited regularly, began noticing slight changes to Fanta's body and whenever she asked if she was pregnant Fanta would 'deny and tell her she saw my period regularly'. The rising suspicion heightened her determination to terminate the pregnancy, which she attempted twice. 'The first time I went to buy medication at a pharmacy, because people said there was a certain medication that could terminate the pregnancy, but I took it all and nothing happened', she explained. Fanta clarified that she had taken Ampiclox without experiencing any complications. The failed abortion attempt heightened her anxiety and she felt extremely stressed during this period, explaining, 'You know when you are panicking, anything people say you are willing to try it'. At this stage she found subtle ways of asking around to find a possible solution to her 'problem', which resulted in the second abortion attempt. This time she tried the herbal remedies frequently used by women in rural areas. Whereas some women drink herbal concoctions, others administer these remedies vaginally to terminate an unwanted pregnancy (Bledsoe 1999). The lack of regulation of Sierra Leone's pharmaceutical stores makes it easy for girls to obtain the wrong or ineffective medication. The need for secrecy often results in unsafe abortion, as girls conceal any complications during this procedure, exposing themselves to further health complications. Luckily Fanta had no complications. She was around four months pregnant after the second failed abortion attempt. During this period her sister-in-law discovered her pregnancy and shared the news with the rest of her family. It was no surprise to Bintu; she said that Fanta had asked her for assistance with terminating the pregnancy, which she had refused. While she supported her sister's wish to complete her education, she did not want to be held responsible in the event of an unfortunate outcome: 'If I help her terminate the pregnancy and something happens to her, our people will say I was the one who supported her. I was eighteen when I was pregnant with my first child'. The sisters knew that their parents strongly opposed abortion, and Fanta had previously mentioned that '*pwell belleh* is not in our family'.[22]

Bintu believed that her sister had to face the consequences of her actions just as she had herself. She recalled her parents being upset when they found out about the pregnancy, but advised Fanta to 'deal with it' because they 'would not kill her'. Although they came from the same background, Bintu's experience was more like Michella's than her sister's. Although she questioned her plans for her future trajectory for a while, uncertain about moving back to the village and dropping out of school, she eventually moved in with her long-term boyfriend, whom she married after giving birth.

[22] *Pwell belleh* is the local term for abortion and translates as 'spoiling the stomach'.

With hindsight at the age of twenty-four, she had no regrets about ending her education to start a family.

Fanta's genitor, who had initially expressed his desire to support the baby, was no longer in the picture. One afternoon as we were waiting for Fanta to come home Bintu shared that, in front of both families, Fanta's genitor had denied impregnating her, which led to their older brother reporting the case to the police but to no avail.[23] Bintu questioned whether Fanta may have been too ashamed to share the full story of what had occurred between her and the genitor, who may initially have accepted the pregnancy but eventually changed his mind, or perhaps had rejected it from the beginning. Lack of support from the genitor further explained Fanta's desperation to terminate the pregnancy, as his rejection may have increased her sense of shame and misfortune. After the confrontation with the genitor and his relatives her siblings arranged for her to move back home to live with with her parents. In the village she was obliged to give birth and come to terms with her fate. Having been through the situation once before, Fanta's parents were able to reason through the circumstances. Fanta shared her mother's sentiments: 'She said if she kicks me out and I die or something happens to me that would make her regret, she should hold [encourage] me. Even though she was upset, she did not yell too much. [...] My dad was the one talking to my mother and told her to just leave me alone' By encouraging their daughter and accepting the predicament, their conscience was clear. Luckily for Fanta, Bintu agreed to assist with the baby once she gave birth so that she could return to school and complete her education.

5.7. Reproductive Misfortune

This section focuses on the implications of the vignettes presented above and the different interpretations of reproductive misfortune throughout the chapter. While such misfortune may begin with an unexpected pregnancy, the two narratives show how the reactions of those in their social networks and the girls' capacity to deal with an unexpected pregnancy can alleviate or intensify feelings of uncertainty and expand or limit the available trajectories.

As argued above, uncertainty related to the pregnancy is often mitigated when girls are in a committed relationship and the genitor is willing to take responsibility for the pregnancy, which reassures the parents and reduces the anxiety and uncertainty related to reproductive misfortune, mainly if it results in marriage. Being in a stable relationship and giving birth became a social value

[23] Inconsistent narratives were common among family members as interlocutors shared their personal interpretations of reality.

for Michella. Instead of focusing on the economic and social risks and challenges associated with her pregnancy she prioritised the 'fortune' and sociocultural values attached to her mother and mother-in-law having their first grandchild. With this in mind, she also had a sense of social security because she knew they would assist her with the baby. Her uncertainty was connected to her father's response. Her 'contingency plan' (Bledsoe 1999) entailed pursuing her independence and surrounding herself with people who were able to honour her decision. For Michella, dropping out of school had already created the possibility of small business alternatives, another reassuring factor that reduced her sense of uncertainty.

Both she and Fanta navigated uncertainty through patterns of avoidance and secrecy, deliberately avoiding those whom they believed exerted control or intensified their feelings of uncertainty. Secrecy played a significant role in Fanta's contingency plan, placing her in a vulnerable position as she carried the weight of her pregnancy alone. Her sense of independence and attempt to maintain her social position as the innocent younger sister and daughter also exposed her desperation and vulnerability. She may have been less inclined to terminate the pregnancy secretly had the genitor acknowledged paternity or objected to her having an abortion.

Beardshaw (2006) notes that women are less likely to terminate a pregnancy once they feel assured that the genitor will offer financial and emotional support. Some interlocutors from my study chose to continue their pregnancy because they knew that their partner wanted the child. For Fanta, the immediate advantage of dealing with the misfortune of an unwanted pregnancy outweighed the fear, potential health problems and risk of unsafe abortion. Because of her age, one can speculate about whether she was aware of the consequences and possible risks of unsafe abortion. Although her parents had experienced this predicament before with her older sister, her situation was different because Bintu's boyfriend had 'shown his face' to the family and was willing to take responsibility. However, her parents were able to come to terms with her pregnancy, showing empathy, even though it may not have been the kind of empathy she desired.

Unlike Michella, Fanta enjoyed her schooling and was less optimistic about the possibility of ending her education, resulting in increased feelings of misfortune and uncertainty as individuals discussed spiritual and social accountability, they stressed the importance of moving forward with a clear conscience. In a context where abortion is both taboo and associated with the risk of mortality, the mediators in these narratives, Bintu and Michella's aunt and uncle were not only apprehensive about abortion because of the potential for a fatal health outcome but also concerned about their personal reputations if they supported or encouraged the girls towards this reproductive decision.

5.8. Conclusion

This chapter has shown how individuals within families and society subjectively interpret and deal with reproductive misfortune after young girls fall pregnant. The discovery of pregnancy in teenage girls triggers varying reactions embedded in cultural, religious and social norms. Many girls hide their pregnancy for as long as possible or contemplate an unsafe abortion to avoid facing humiliation and other social consequences. The analysis above resonates with those who argue that teenage pregnancy is attributable to parental failure, particularly that of mothers (Eerdewijk 2009; G. Amakor 2018). Because the prevailing gender norms and double standards minimise their role in parenting, fathers are often afforded more leniency and find it easier to distance themselves from the social consequences of humiliation and misfortune, as Kadi's father did.

The chapter also demonstrates the contrast between spiritual and socio-cultural accountability. Based on religious interpretations of reproductive misfortune, forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation were encouraged to prevent divine judgment and greater misfortune. While women were held responsible for their daughter's actions culturally, the pastor in the introduction and Victoria's narrative illustrates that spiritual accountability is not determined by gender but by personal moral conviction. A similar religious and moral conviction is witnessed among healthcare workers who refuse to assist with medical abortions. While they had personal and professional justification for providing post-abortion care to save the lives of young women after failed abortion attempts, this was not the case with medical abortions. Despite their convictions the nurses still showed empathy towards pregnant teenage girls and their relatives. Moral beliefs and interpretations were also subject to change, as seen in the case of Kadi's father, who became more lenient after his daughter fell pregnant, and Anna, who changed her stance on abortion after marrying a pastor.

Ironically in a context where abortion is illegal, concern about the prospect of criminalisation never occurred to the girls, parents or healthcare workers. Instead the girls were apprehensive about the high abortion mortality rate and the devastating stories circulating in their community. Fanta and Michella's narratives emphasise how reproductive misfortune is socially and relationally mediated, exacerbating or mitigating the circumstances based on a girl's degree of social dependence. Michella slowly unravelled the concerns and uncertainties related to her pregnancy once she had solidified her relationship with Samuel and introduced him to her mother, unlike Fanta, who was determined to terminate her pregnancy and continue her education. Although her parents eventually supported her, the two narratives demonstrate girls' flexibility and adaptability as they process and navigate the

expectations associated with pregnancy. Their experiences during their pregnancies are explored in Chapter 6, paying specific attention to central themes related to gender norms and sexuality.

6 Being Pregnant

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter shed light on different interpretations of reproductive misfortune as girls and their relatives processed the news of an unexpected pregnancy. I argued that feelings of uncertainty were mitigated if the genitor had been introduced to the family through the practice of *show face* or was willing to assume paternal responsibility. This chapter continues this conversation, questioning how cultural gender norms and moral and religious tensions influence the navigation of teenage sexuality and girls' response to societal judgement during pregnancy. To answer this question I explore how femininity and gender are situated in kinship relations, sexual relationships and religious spaces during pregnancy.

Conceptualising the performative nature of heteronormative gender roles is central to the analysis. Drawing on Butler's (1998) understanding of gender performativity I demonstrate how individuals conform to and resist normative gender expectations, analysing the social expectations attached to the gender roles in different social frameworks.

I explore three central themes. In the context of kinship, I argue that the process of *ansa belle* negotiations places men in a dilemma as they choose to accept or reject paternity, which can increase or mitigate the financial burden for a girl and her family. I suggest that parents in Adonkia are more likely to leverage and secure respectability for their daughters by requesting educational assistance than by insisting on the genitor marrying their daughter.

Secondly, I argue that the outcome of *ansa belle* negotiations is also contingent on how a girl is situated in her sexual relationship with the genitor, which can be romantic, transactional, or sometimes both. I show how gender is constituted through moral discourse and sexual relationships that reinforce male dominance while compromising the respectability of unmarried pregnant girls.

Lastly, I demonstrate how girls subjectively draw upon and interpret moral and religious concepts and value systems to cope with notions of reproductive misfortune and respectability within and outside religious communities. In the following section I give a short explanation of how *ansa belle* is understood among my interlocutors before turning to Gloria and Mike's narrative.

6.2. *Ansa belle* in Adonkia

As mentioned in Chapter 3, ansa belle is a pre-colonial practice aimed at destigmatising premarital pregnancies and safeguarding family honour. In Adonkia the practice has evolved significantly alongside urbanisation and the decreasing rates of marriage in the community.

The interpretation of *ansa belle* varied across ethnic groups and influenced how girls defined a cohabitating relationship. For instance for conservative Islamic ethnic groups such as the Fula and Mandingo people, *acknowledging paternity* is often tied to Islamic law and traditional engagement or the expectation of marriage. The engagement or marriage typically takes place shortly after the man acknowledges paternity. During the Muslim engagement the genitor and his family present kola nuts to the girl's family as a symbol of respect and goodwill and the man's intention to marry their daughter. For many of the interlocutors the distinction between an official marriage, an engagement and cohabitation was extremely vague and fluid due to the mixing of cultural and traditional practices. They and other young women in the community who desired marriage could rarely afford a 'white wedding', referring to a church ceremony and a reception, without financial support from their social network. Many young couples desiring marriage settled for a simple church blessing or customary engagement ceremony similar to the Muslim engagement practice.

For interlocutors from non-Muslim backgrounds, *ansa belle* had no religious significance. Instead cohabitation was increasing among unmarried couples in Sierra Leone. It was socially frowned upon but tolerated, especially among couples who had agreed upon or negotiated cohabitation arrangements during *ansa belle*.

During the *ansa belle* negotiations genitors are often portrayed as the primary instigator of the sexual relationship while the girl is perceived as a passive or unwilling participant, especially when the genitor is significantly older. Ethnographic literature from other West African contexts describes similar cultural understanding in which the sexual innocence of girls is emphasised while their sexual conduct is rebuked (Touray 2006; Bratton 2010; Eerdewijk 2009; Ababio and Salifu Yendork 2017). As in Kadi's case, described in the introduction, many parents try to protect the family honour by policing the sexuality of unmarried girls, implementing strategic ways of monitoring and controlling social restrictions to ensure their compliance with normative expectations and moral codes.[24]

[24] Kadi and another interlocutor mentioned virginity testing as a means of parental control once their parents suspected they were sexually active. It was unclear whether these tests were conducted by healthcare workers at the local clinic or by traditional birth attendants in the community.

In other African settings, such as South Africa, men are expected to pay *inhlawulo* or 'payment for damages' in cases of premarital pregnancy. The fines are associated with violating a girl's virginity and notions of female respectability. Payment (or the absence of payment) regulates and determines the father's access to the child (Nkani 2017). In Sierra Leone fines were not so strongly emphasised during negotiations, although families frequently threatened to report the genitor to the police for sexual violation, especially when he was significantly older than the girl, leading some men to acknowledge their paternity out of fear.

Nevertheless, in urban and rural communities most settlements have been discussed between the two families and legal action is rarely taken. Proving paternity through testing is expensive and there is no formal system for enforcing child-support payments. Unlike in Denmark and other European countries, the Sierra Leonean government cannot trace individuals through their social ID card or deduct child support funds from their wages, and some families therefore force the genitor to sign a document agreeing to provide financial support and compensation for the child and the mother. This is effective in smaller communities (McLean 2019).

Figure 9 A young father with his daughter

6.3. Gloria: Denying or Accepting Paternity

Gloria's sister was the only one in her family who knew she was in a relationship when she became pregnant at the age of 18. Mike, whom she had been dating for three years, was three years older than her. Gloria was a member of a nearby charismatic church and prided herself on being a devout believer. Like most other churches in Adonkia, her church encouraged girls to focus on their schooling, uphold their social respectability and resist social pressure to engage in sexual and romantic relationships, and therefore Gloria and Mike had agreed not to have sex until she had taken her final secondary school exam. The last thing Gloria wanted was to be distracted by *man bizness*.[25] When they met they had both ended previous relationships and Mike did not mind taking things slowly. Since they were both virgins, they chose to abstain from sexual relations for a few years. Eventually Gloria overheard some of her classmates talking about *man bizness* but as soon as she approached they excluded her from the conversation. Her peers mocked her and called her immature and 'unromantic' for not engaging in *man bizness.* This led to increased frustration in her relationship, as she wanted to prove herself. At first Mike refused, but after Gloria threatened to leave the relationship they eventually had sex on February 14, 2021. Gloria was laughing as she narrated this experience; she only remembered the date because it was Valentine's Day.

For Gloria the period of her pregnancy was marked by stress, intense gossip and the scrutiny of church members. As a result her mother advised her not to go out often during this time except to attend church. She also contacted her older brother, Gloria's uncle, because he was the figure of authority in their family. Gloria feared her uncle and felt apprehensive about what might happen. In response she chose to leave home and seek refuge with Mike. She recounted that Mike was afraid her family would report him to the police for engaging in sexual activity with her when she was below the legal age of consent, and field facing Gloria's relatives and his mother.[26]

Mike encouraged her to return home until the situation was under control. He and his family eventually came to acknowledge paternity. For Gloria, Mike's acknowledgement of the pregnancy signified ultimate proof of his feelings for her; 'He likes me greatly because if he didn't like me, he would deny the pregnancy, but he took accountability for the pregnancy'. Mike was met with various expectations. Both families expected him to provide financially for Gloria and the child once he graduated from university. Bledsoe and Cohen (1993) observe the

[25] *Man bizness* or *uman* (man or woman) *bizness* is a local term for engaging in a sexual relationship with the opposite sex.
[26] The legal age of consent in Sierra Leone is eighteen.

importance of paternal recognition, which still applies today when children are born outside marriage: 'Whether the parents have concluded a marriage is considerably less important than whether a man is willing to acknowledge fatherhood and to claim the social and economic responsibilities of that role' (1993, 80). Gloria's mother feared that the father would not take responsibility for the pregnancy and was relieved when paternity was acknowledged:

> [Mike and his family] wanted to give my mother money, but my mother said no. She said she did not want the money; instead, they should register me at the local clinic. She said as long as they have acknowledged the pregnancy, she is okay with that. She said the only thing she feared was that I would get pregnant for someone who would not *ansa belle*. She did not want me to give birth to an illegitimate child.

Gloria was planning to move in with Mike and his mother after she gave birth and then return to school the following year. This was what the two families had agreed upon during the *ansa belle.* Most relatives, including Gloria's mother, prioritised the restorative significance of paternal acknowledgement over a customary engagement, which did not guarantee marriage or long-term commitment to the teenage mother or the child. Education was considered a safer long-term investment. Gloria's mother's primary concern after Mike acknowledged the pregnancy was for Gloria to resume her education after giving birth. She shared, 'I told them it is not about marriage, I want my child to go to school, she has to take her final exam. She will have more job opportunities once she finishes her final exam, but no one should bring up marriage right now. Gloria will give birth to his child but that does not make them a married couple'. In contrast to previous generations, where respectability is associated with marriage it has become linked to educational prospects and opportunities for Gloria's mother and other parents.

Her concern also seemed justified by the high rate of school drop-out among pregnant girls. To punish a young father for his actions his parents may refuse to pay his school fees, allocating the funds to the girl's family, or force him to drop out of school, find employment and take responsibility for the girl and the child. Although not the case for Mike or any of the other young fathers in my study, boys also faced a year's suspension in some schools, although it was unclear this was merely a rumour or such actions were enforced in certain schools. While pregnancy is inevitably visible, it is difficult to detect paternity unless the boy and girl attended the same school.

Mike expressed his desire to do the right thing even though he was very anxious about becoming a father and questioned the stability and future of his relationship with Gloria. While her family did not expect them to marry, his family did. He did not believe that his responsibility was to 'mould

Gloria into the perfect future wife' as some relatives had suggested. He revealed that his family held to the traditional constructs of marriage, fatherhood and masculinity, placing him in a position of authority to project cultural expectations of a wife onto Gloria. For young fathers, failing to meet the financial obligations of fatherhood may lead to feelings of failure or emasculation (Chili and Pranitha 2017). Mike seemed more comfortable and accepting about performing his masculinity through the role of fatherhood than through that of future husband. For some men the obligations of fatherhood are tied to their relationship with the child's mother; they could find the pregnancy a burden if they have a poor relationship with the girl or lack the financial means to provide for the child. Even when men are financially able, they may still be reluctant to accept paternity due to competing priorities (Sijpt 2018). McLean (2019) argues that the emerging values of masculinity among the younger generation of men in Sierra Leone have become less patriarchal and are tied more to notions of responsibility, love, harmony, and egalitarianism (2019, 325).

Mike and other young fathers are now re-evaluating the social norms and concepts of masculinity as the ideals related to fatherhood have shifted in comparison to those of previous generations. Young fathers are not only expected to provide financially: they also desire to provide emotionally and engage with their children. For Mike, who grew up without a father, having a son entailed exemplifying and embodying a standard of masculinity that was missing in his childhood. Although boys are not socialised to desire fatherhood to the same extent as girls are to become mothers, some young men may still prioritise the obligations of fatherhood and reject the inherent obligations associated with being a husband (Bledsoe 1999; McLean 2019)

Mike and Gloria's relationship was interesting and unique because it went against the prevailing gender norms and most of the other interlocutors' accounts, which related how they had been persuaded or covertly coerced into having sex, with their partner threatening to break off the relationship or withhold their financial favours if they rejected their sexual advances, as I discuss below.

This case was the complete opposite as Gloria was the one threatening to end the relationship when Mike initially refused to engage in sex. Gloria's conceptualisation of romance and interest in sex was influenced by her peers. The pressure to perform her femininity was twofold: on the one hand she would gain social standing with her peers by proving she was mature and sexually desirable – her narrative was unclear about whether her peers knew she was the one initiating the sexual relationship, which went against social norms and might have been perceived as desperation. On the other hand,

she also performed her femininity at home, portraying sexual innocence through secrecy and discretion, lying about her whereabouts whenever she was with Mike.

Gloria's enactment of femininity demonstrates her ability to navigate through contradicting regulatory structures, which aligns with Butler (1998) assertion that gender identity is reinforced through repetitive feminine scripts imposed by regulatory frameworks, in this case peers and family.

Below I discuss how other interlocutors dealt with similar challenges regarding their sexuality and the tensions and social perceptions involved in sexual relationships with both older and younger men.

6.4. Romantic and Transactional Relationships

When I met the fourteen interlocutors, six of them were in relationships and four of these were romantically involved to varying degrees with the biological father of the child, while the remaining eight identified as single. None of the girls had ever been married in either a civil or a religious ceremony before their pregnancy, but two had got engaged to the babies' genitors shortly after they acknowledged the pregnancy.

Ten of the genitors were the girls' schoolmates or men two to five years older, while the other four were considered adults at ten to twenty years older. There were clear distinctions between the girls' expectations of older men and of younger men. Relationships with younger boyfriends were often more romanticised, characterised as open, public and more socially acceptable, emulating notions of love from pop songs and pop culture. The sexual power imbalance was significantly reduced when, like Gloria, girls dated boys of a similar age who were equally sexually inexperienced.

Girls were more likely to engage in sex when their boyfriends perceived unprotected sex as a demonstration of intimacy and connection, symbolising love and commitment towards their partner (Weber 2012). This strategy further emphasised the girls' lack of control, which was eventually used against them when the genitors denied their paternity, accusing them of infidelity or promiscuous behaviour because of their willingness to engage in unprotected sex.

Younger boyfriends were expected to pay for the girls' smaller expenses such as school lunches, mobile credit and public transport, while older partners were expected to give them a regular allowance, buy them a smartphone or assist with their school fees. Some girls with younger men disclosed their relationship to their families while dating by introducing one partner to preserve their respectability and avoid the assumption of promiscuity. Other girls such as Gloria remained secretive to protect their own and their family's honour. I had assumed that girls who were not in school were more likely to date older men, but that this was not the case. The few interlocutors who were no longer

in school dated young men from their neighbourhood, while the schoolgirls dated both older men and schoolmates.

Although Gloria and other schoolgirls initially aspired to delay engaging in sexual activity until they had completed secondary school, many compromised along the way, giving in to peer pressure and lacking the skills to negotiate sexual terms. Girls were more likely to subscribe to the idea of abstinence for moral or educational reasons than men, who engaged in premarital sex with little judgment, shame, or moral conviction.

Unlike Gloria, other girls safeguarded their relationship by agreeing to sex, as they feared that otherwise they would lose their partner. This may have been Mike's reason as well.

Gloria openly discussed initiating the sexual relationship and actively engaging in negotiating condom use with Mike, which was unusual among the interlocutors. Nyanzi's (2008) study of Gambian youth relates how schoolgirls maintained their negotiating power regarding condom use before engaging in sexual activity. To safeguard their education they withheld sexual favours from their partners until the men agreed to use condoms. When girls engaged in sexual activity regularly, their approach to sex was more aligned with local scripts of femininity. For instance they seemed embarrassed to admit to initiating sex, emphasising the importance of waiting to be pursued and communicating sexual interest by performing their femininity through their body language, clothing and flirtatiousness. Cultural cues such as paying a visit to a boyfriend's house, cooking for him or accepting gifts were considered subtle ways of enacting femininity to attract male attention.

Eerdewijk (2009) argues that while premarital sex may not be acceptable it may be implicitly tolerated through sexual discretion. In her research on young people in Senegal, schoolgirls discussed their relationships without disclosing their sexual experiences. While most girls in her study believed in abstinence and preserving oneself sexually until marriage, only a few practiced these values.

In the same vein, the interlocutors' construction and adaptation of femininities reflected their desire to adhere to some established gender norms, intentionally selecting the traditional, religious and conventional notions they found beneficial. Their subjective frameworks created apparent contradictions and moral tensions between various life choices and stated beliefs.

For instance, girls who had children with significantly older men all acknowledged that these men had initially supported them financially as a friendly gesture but eventually asked for sexual favours in return as a sign of appreciation. Girls identified older men as 'helpers' whom they engaged with for financial support. Because of their financial limitations, the assistance they received from their older partners became a crucial part of their livelihood, enabling them to buy school supplies, support

younger siblings or alleviate their household's financial burden. These factors incentivised girls to maintain their transactional relationships, as the financial benefits outweighed certain moral values and romantic aspirations. As one girl explained, 'I don't mind if a guy wants to help me, but for now, I don't want a [boyfriend]'. This sentiment and distinction were particularly pronounced among single girls during their pregnancy. The experience of disappointment and betrayal by genitors drove many to aspire to abstinence with a genuine desire to find a sponsor willing to support them without the expectation of sexual favours. However this was considered 'wishful thinking', a community member explained, because men no longer did 'something for nothing'. In the past acts of generosity and philanthropy were more likely and it was common for a 'big person' (affluent man) to support girls with their school fees without expecting anything in return, but after the war economic hardship increased the incidence of sexual exploitation and generous gestures were now motivated by self-interest and expectations of reciprocity.

Narratives about sexual coercion reinforced the negative stereotypes about older married men, who were also deemed absent and irresponsible fathers, exploiting girls for their own personal gain. Pastor Anita, a Pentecostal youth leader from a different community one of the girls had moved to, voiced her critique:

> It's actually worse with older men. Some men because they drink and smoke and don't have anything to do. How can they be responsible? How will he take responsibility when he can't even look after himself? How will he take care of a child? The girl and child will suffer [...] Some men work, but they may not be used to taking responsibility; once the girl is pregnant he will forget about her and the girl's family have to threaten to report him to the police. There are many of those cases in this community. There are also those men who have a wife and children at home but they will leave them to chase small girls, giving them money to misuse their future. Yes! They won't marry those girls, so they are just misusing their future because he is settled with a wife and children. But some men just want to live a careless life, they don't care about anything, they don't fear God, they don't want to know [about anything] [...] This also happens to grown women, they will date them and when they fall pregnant they forget about them.

The pastor's broad social and moral critique of older men highlights the structural challenges and perceptions tied to intergenerational and transactional relationships. When older men failed to meet the dominant social norms in the community they were criticised for 'immoral behaviour'. She also insinuated that adult women were susceptible to similar patterns of exploitation and neglect. This critique adds nuance to the social significance of holding men accountable through *ansa belle* and

Gloria's mother's underlying worries. While schoolboys can be deemed irresponsible and incapable of caring for a child because of their age (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993), the expectation that older men perform their masculinity by assuming social and moral responsibilities came with much harsher judgment if they failed. Although Mike was incapable of providing for Gloria financially because he was a student, his acknowledgment of his paternity, attesting to his character and desire to honour Gloria and her relatives, was valued highly.

The pastor and other community members were concerned about the perceived increase in transactional relationships in society, which they considered 'both an outcome of deprivation and a strategy to resist it' (Salvi 2019, 74).' In other words girls may choose to engage in such relationships because of their poverty, and strategically entertain older men as a means of social reproduction.

In this context the conceptualisation of transactional relationships sits along a continuum of masculine exploitation and feminine victimhood or promiscuity. On the one hand schoolgirls were perceived as sexually naïve for accepting favours from teachers, okada riders[27] and older men without anticipating that there would be obligations connected to their receiving good grades, free transportation or financial provision, while on the other they were blamed for being promiscuous and seductive, using implicit sexual cues such as accepting gifts, money and invitations to home visits. Based on their age and levels of maturity and innocence, community members pitied the girls or accused them of prostituting themselves by leveraging their sexuality for financial gain. These assumptions are consistent with Hawkins et al.'s (2009) findings on intergenerational relationships in Mozambique:

> It is within the context of these structural conditions and perceptions of prevailing gender and power relations that the strategy of age-disparate transactional sex gains both viability and meaning for young women. Through entering into such relationships, young women are able to gain access to the resources necessary to achieve social status using the means that are most within their control: the power of their sexuality. It is the young woman who is perceived to be in control through having the power to exploit a man's wealth under the guise of a relationship. Young women have no emotional attachment to or emotional expectations of their sengue [sugar daddy]. (2009, 178)

Local discourses perceived girls' relationships with their sponsors as intentional promiscuous pursuit when the girls benefited financially, claiming that they were using transactional and intergenerational relationships as a strategic resource. Such arguments undermine the exploitative

[27] An okada is the local term for commercial motorcycle

nature of these relationships (Bledsoe 1990b); although they were perceived as strategically anticipated, several girls reported having had limited sexual experience or none at all before their relationship with the man who got them pregnant. According to the narratives they shared, their interactions with older men were usually initiated by the men. Unlike adult women or college students who performed femininity through the sexual pursuit of wealthy men in order to attain a certain lifestyle (J. Cole 2010; Sijpt 2018), some of my interlocutors' sexual relationships appeared ambiguous and less intentional. Given their lack of sexual experience, I questioned whether they had fully consented to them and understood or embraced 'the power of their sexuality' (Hawkins et al. 2009,174), or had simply performed femininity by adapting to social expectations and the predicament they found themselves in, which led to the social interpretation of a compromised feminine identity. I argue that girls may have chosen to engage with older men without necessarily understanding the weight of their decision or the sexual risk and implications until they found themselves pregnant. The spectrum between consent and coercion is ambiguous. As mentioned, those who initially engage in a transactional relationship without expecting to have to provide sexual favours may eventually yield to sexual pressure for financial reasons.

Like Jewkes and Morrell (2012), I argue that these girls' choice to engage in sex was neither completely absent nor missing, as they asserted some level of choice when negotiating, rejecting and selecting sexual partners, but as the relationship progressed they were subject to social constructs of masculinity and power and found negotiating personal and sexual boundaries more challenging. Conversely, girls may have intentionally projected and expressed sexual innocence during our conversations or in sexual relationships to preserve their respectability by conforming to societal expectations. Maintaining the appearance of innocence while engaging in sexual activity demonstrates the tension between girls reproducing and subtly rejecting normative expression of femininity through embodied and discursive practices (Butler 1988; Kaplan 1997).

While girls were seen as compromising their moral values for material gain, premarital sex reinforced the notion of masculinity for men. Pastor Tommy believed that hardship and community conditions fostered this behaviour, even among 'so-called born-again Christians'. Whereas some girls had the integrity to stand up for what they believed in, many did not:

> They may intend to go out just to get that particular thing, and that is a huge challenge because you do not know how that person [other girls] gets that thing, especially when young girls are dying for iPhone without them knowing the sources of getting them, they

> will intend to do it the wrong way just to satisfy themselves while they are not working or doing anything.

He assumed that girls influenced each other on the subject of engaging in transactional relationships. The scholars have pointed out how young educated African women have sought these relationships to fit into an urban lifestyle (Wolf Bleek 1976; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Bratton 2010; J. Cole 2010; Leclerc-Madlala 2019). The solution, according to the pastor, is spiritual devotion: 'It only takes the grace of God. God only helps in this situation; that is, if you are coming to church regularly to pray and hear the teaching of God, that will help you to have perseverance in the teaching of God to overcome hardship'.

The pastor and other community members advocated abstinence for girls who were not sexually active as a safeguarding measure, suggesting that refraining from sexual activity is the ideal way for girls to ensure their education and a prosperous future. Despite his moral views, Pastor Tommy believed that individuals who had already been exposed to sexual activity were better off using contraception if they were unable to exercise self-control. 'For some that do not have resistance it is good to prevent if you know you have something to achieve, in fact for those that have the understanding [sexual experience] we do not even teach them about prevention because their eyes are wide open to contraceptive.' This approach, he argues, could help prevent unintended pregnancies among girls and reduce the likelihood of their dropping out of school.

When teenage mothers had already resisted or failed to enact their sexuality in alignment with social expectations, Pastor Tommy and other elders were tolerant towards a restorative femininity that facilitated 'planning for the future' by preventing further disruption. Blake (2021) argues that practising tolerance towards young mothers returning to school in Sierra Leone required an openness to contraceptive use when it facilitated aspirational and educational objectives. This openness demonstrates the shifting yet socially contradictory ideals associated with female sexuality. On the one hand, the use of contraceptives is associated with moral disruption and promiscuous behaviour, while on the other hand, contraceptive use among unmarried teenage girls symbolises a performative act that challenges traditional gendered scripts by reinforcing modern femininity and sexuality.

The general perception was that the moral disruptions associated with the sexuality of teenage girls was beyond social control. The sentiments of Mama Haja, an elderly woman in the community, reflect the general attitude toward young women's sexuality. She stressed the importance of contentment, believing that discontent led many girls to engage in sexual relationships for money. Recognising the current generation's moral decline she advocated abstinence, while viewing schoolgirls' utilisation

of contraception as they aspired to further their education with tolerance. 'I won't say [contraceptive] is good and I won't say it is bad. As long as they are using it to progress in life, we just have to watch them [and see what happens]. Because even if you tell them not to [engage in sexual activity] they will do it, so you see', she shared.

Butler argues that performativity is a sign of both regulatory boundaries and social change (Butler 1988). By resisting and pushing the boundaries of female sexuality the perception of a progressive shift may lead to more encouraging discourse about sexuality and social reproduction. In other words, tolerance of contraceptives gives teenage mothers another opportunity to prevent unexpected pregnancy and reproduce their social identity after pregnancy. Culturally, the shift towards contraceptives encourages discussion about educating young people about puberty and family planning. Ideally these conversations confront cultural taboos associated with sexual abuse and gender-based violence that have been ignored or dismissed in the past.

Below I discuss how girls overcame hardship and misfortune through spiritual practice and religious resignation, drawing attention to church discipline and rigid moral codes to illustrate how some of these institutions ensure compliance with religious norms.

6.5. Coping Through Faith: The Importance of Prayer

Although Adonkia was historically a Muslim community, over the past decade Pentecostal churches have outnumbered the mosque. While both Muslims and Christians seek private prayer when in crisis, imams are rarely approached for private prayer or counsel during pregnancy. Instead they are contacted to administer the traditional *pulnador* baby naming ritual that both Christians and Muslims arrange shortly after the birth. Some imams use this public function as an opportunity to talk about teenage pregnancy. Talk about sexual immorality was observed to be more directed at girls than at boys, reflecting traditional gender norms and societal expectations. The focus on girls stems from the practical consideration that they are more likely to bear most of the psychological, physical and economic burden and the consequences associated with pregnancy.

Of my fourteen interlocutors, six were Muslim, six Christian, and two identified with both religions. The two girls with dual religious identities came from Muslim backgrounds but had gravitated towards Christianity during their pregnancy, influenced by their partners and others in their

household.[28] Ethnic and religious backgrounds were not determining factors in their choice of partnership. Four interlocutors engaged with up to three places of worship during my time in the field.

I observed how the girls regarded their faith as a pragmatic tool and a convenient practice, as they selected spiritual principles that were easily adaptable and relevant to their circumstances. I noticed that cultivating a meaningful relationship with religious individuals (partners, relatives and spiritual leaders) during their pregnancy was more meaningful for most interlocutors than engaging with religious institutions. Nineteen-year-old Evelyne shared that her partner often woke up at night to pray during her pregnancy and encouraged her to join him in prayer. After moving from a Muslim household to her uncle's compound she began attending church with her neighbour, Aunty Nenneh. As her pregnancy progressed she rarely left the house because of the increasing difficulty of climbing up the small hill leading to the main road. Aunty Nenneh organised home prayer meetings on Sunday evenings for a group of seven to eight women in the neighbourhood, led by a junior pastor from their church.

Evelyne was the youngest in the group; Aunty Nenneh and her friends from the neighbourhood were in their late twenties to early forties. In contrast to the pastor, who dressed formally in loose-fitting trousers with a matching shirt of African cotton, the women wore t-shirts with long skirts of African fabric wrapped around their waist. The prayer meeting took place outside in front of Evelyne's shed. The seating was organised in a semi-circle with two small wooden benches and a few additional white plastic chairs, with the pastor's chair positioned in the middle. His voice carried weight and authority through his singing and speech. During these meetings we sang songs of praise and worship. The pastor frequently exhorted the women to express their gratitude: 'Tell God tenki' (give thanks to God) between the singing and the dancing. Although the meeting was primarily focused on prayer, the pastor spent ten to fifteen minutes sharing Bible testimonies or stories that aligned with the prayer points he wanted to focus on that evening. Most of the messages he shared derived from the prosperity gospel teachings promoting financial wealth, progress, victory and success.

Evelyne shared that these prayer meetings had sustained her spiritually and mentally during and after her pregnancy. Given the perceived prevalence of witchcraft in the community, she regularly prayed for a safe delivery and God's protection during her pregnancy.

[28] Both girls eventually went back to identifying as Muslim after giving birth. Evelyne moved into a Muslim household with her sister, reverting to her Islamic faith out of convenience and familiarity. Michella returned to Islam after choosing to participate in Ramadan and the Islamic baby naming ceremony.

Women outnumbered men in most religious settings as they are considered the spiritual backbone of most households. This was unsurprising, as they were generally more inclined to encourage their husbands and children to attend church (J. Cole 2010; J. B. Bangura 2016).

Michella, mentioned in the previous chapter, shared that her mother-in-law was an intercessor at one of the biggest Pentecostal churches in Sierra Leone. Although Michella had a Muslim background, when she moved in with her mother-in-law and boyfriend she became open to Christian prayer: 'I pray with [my mother-in-law] and I no longer go to the mosque, but I attend Sunday services because of her'. According to Michella her mother-in-law was a 'woman of God' who took prayer seriously. Whenever Michella had not felt the baby moving for a few days her mother-in-law would lay her hand on her stomach and pray for the baby, which usually triggered an active response. Before her boyfriend acknowledged paternity, she and her mother-in-law prayed for the *ansa belle* visit to go well, and 'when they went to meet my father, his heart was cold [calm] and he accepted the [monetary] gift they went with [...] Everything went well. The answered prayer made me want to join Christianity because it's the same God at the end of the day, and my boyfriend is Christian.' Michella's view of religion was widely shared, as many Sierra Leoneans believe the Islamic and Christian conceptions of God to be fundamentally the same. Although she was open to conversion to Christianity because of her positive experience with prayer and wanted to conform to the religion of the household she lived in, she still held on to many Islamic beliefs. Unlike some of the other girls, Michella had no negative experiences in church. Her mother-in-law was considered 'very holy' and an active church member, frequently attending midweek and all-night church services and fasting regularly with other church members.

6.6. Marie: My Children Are a Blessing

Eighteen-year-old Marie and her mother went to separate churches before she became pregnant, but during her pregnancy her mother forced her to attend church more frequently: 'They took me to church to pray for a healthy delivery. The pastor kept on encouraging me until I gave birth. He told me not to put anything on my mind [avoid overthinking], and that I should remain humble even when my parents are upset with me. I started attending morning service, second service and evening service.'

Marie's mother and the older women mentioned above may have encouraged the girls to turn to the church, prayer and divine protection because of the country's poor healthcare provision and the high rate of maternal mortality. The prevailing belief is that the natural and supernatural realms are connected, with both positive and negative influences on misfortune and success (J. B. Bangura

2016). In addition, like Cameroonian women they interpreted the manifestation of negative obstetric outcomes, infertility and maternal or infant mortality through a spiritual lens, associating them with demonic forces placed in the woman's womb (Sijpt 2018). This is not uncommon in West African societies, where reproductive misfortune is commonly attributed to witches, believing that they harm or eat infants in the spiritual realm which then manifests as physical death (Bledsoe 1980).[29]

Moodley (2021) found that South African mothers protected their pregnant daughters by imposing a fear of witches, encouraging them to stay indoors as witches embodied mal-intent, gossip, jealousy and envy. She suggests that the underlying reason behind the witchcraft discourse is to avoid community gossip and shame. While I believe some mothers experienced community shame, I propose that in this context the witchcraft discourse was more attached to fear. The fear of spiritual attack may also have been used to caution girls against avoiding going to church, reinforcing the importance of submitting to the church's authority through spiritual deliverance, prayer and other spiritual practices.[30]

Mariama had been pregnant three times by the age of 20 and had lost her second child two weeks after giving birth. After the loss, she and her boyfriend, whom she lived with, eagerly desired another baby. Mariama's spiritual devotion was inspired by her mother, who had died a few years after Mariama gave birth to her first son, who was now six years old. During her first pregnancy she attended the same church as her mother, despite fearing being questioned about the father of her child, who had impregnated her through rape and subsequently denied the allegations of sexual abuse and his paternity. Mariama wanted to leave the church after her mother died, but changed her mind after encountering her mother in a dream, who encouraged her to ignore social judgment and continue to attend church services.

> I have strong faith because I go to church to pray, because my mother used to say "You don't go to church for the pastor or the congregation or to show off your nice clothing", I can even dress like this [pointing down at casual t-shirt and long skirt] if they invite me to church, because I am not going to show my clothes but I go with my heart and the things that are in here [placing hand on chest]: that's what I believe.

[29] People often accused their neighbours or relatives of being witches. It is assumed that witches hinder progress in the lives of others out of jealousy or spite. Witches have the ability to leave their physical bodies and enter the spiritual realm, and are known to attack their victims through spiritual dreams at night (J. B. Bangura 2016).

[30] Individuals attended deliverance services to counteract these spiritual attacks and obstacles hindering them from walking in the life of abundance as promised in the prosperity gospel message (Daswani 2015). Both Muslim and Christian girls shared several stories about spiritual and generational obstacles they had been delivered from in church. Imams used the Quran to pray over individuals to protect them against harm from evil jinns.

Mariama explained that her spiritual journey was based on her heart's posture towards God rather than a superficial outward display for others. Her mother's advice and traumatic experiences of sexual abuse and loss had deepened and strengthened her faith. She reinterpreted her misfortune and devastating life events as 'trials' that she had managed to overcome. Framing circumstances of suffering in a positive spiritual light changes the discussion of pregnancy from a 'wrong' or 'sinful mistake' to another providential and meaningful trial worth enduring (Moodley 2021). Several girls, both Muslim and Christian, used similar rhetoric, perceiving the child and the pregnancy as a 'blessing', a predestined or divine plan of God. Such spiritual interpretation changes the narratives of reproductive misfortune, emphasising the cultural and spiritual value placed on having children. Although the circumstances in which the girls found themselves had not changed significantly, with some still navigating economic uncertainty, in the context of their poverty they regarded themselves as fortunate to have survived their labour and given birth to a healthy child.

For Mariama, religious resignation replaced the shame and moral conviction she had experienced during her first two pregnancies with gratitude and appreciation. Both she and her boyfriend desired a third baby. 'I am grateful to God, because some people are desiring children, but they don't have. That is a great blessing.' Because her third pregnancy was planned and desired she no longer felt any guilt. Her powerful and inspirational interpretation of motherhood and pregnancy enabled her to easily dismiss the negative discourse, as she derived spiritual meaning and purpose from each of her pregnancies.

After losing her second child she had started attending prayer meetings at the house of Aunty Pat, who assisted her with babysitting. She accredited her healthy pregnancy to the prayers with Aunty Pat and spiritual guidance from the second church that she attended nearby, where the pastor warned her to avoid playing with her cats while pregnant, believing that cats are associated with witchcraft and could provoke a miscarriage. Even though Mariama believed in following her own spiritual path she heeded this warning and gave up her cats as she feared losing the third baby. She informed me that the pastor also preached against cohabitation: 'The pastor told us it was not good to live together before we got married, but we ask God for mercy, may he have mercy upon us, because there are no perfect people in this world.'

Although Mariama, like most girls, acknowledged the implicit moral boundary and tension between religious teachings on premarital cohabitation and her lived experience, she relied on other fundamental Christian notions of mercy and human fallibility to justify her life choices. The flexibil interpretation of religious frameworks enabled girls to reinterpret their personal narrative of

misfortune and failure. While some internalised condemning messaging about premarital sex others focused on the affirming belief emphasising 'children as a blessing'. These interpretations were reinforced by their social environment, exposing the spectrum between internalised condemnation and self-compassion.

This is consistent with Steele's (2011) findings on Brazilian teenage mothers who constructed moral codes from subjective convictions, incorporating some aspects of religious teachings while disregarding others according to their circumstances. In a society where cohabitation is gradually becoming more socially acceptable, Mariama felt less conflicted as an unwed mother because she and her boyfriend eventually planned to marry. It was not a priority, because 'weddings are expensive'. Unlike other interlocutors, Mary and her boyfriend did not equate their union to marriage, although her boyfriend had *laid kola* and gone through the customary engagement ceremony mentioned above.

Some churches tolerated premarital cohabitation as long as the couple had children, planned to marry and were committed to living according to monogamous heterosexual norms. In other churches teenage parenthood did not automatically equate to marriage. Pastors not only advised against it but also refused to marry teenage parents, especially in cases where the boy was deemed immature and failed to assume the social, biblical and financial responsibilities of a husband and father. Pastor Tommy shared, 'We say no to them as a church because if we allow them, they will suffer because both do not know what they are doing due to underage issues and it is wrong. We are not encouraging that in church, as long as they are yet to reach that stage'. He alluded to the immaturity of teenagers and was preoccupied with the temporal significance of marriage, which is mainly determined by the husband's ability to provide for his family. Biblically, husbands are expected to make the important decisions and lead their households. Notably in Kono some Sierra Leonean families forced their young sons to assume independence once they became fathers, despite their lack of emotional maturity and financial stability. Those who persevered despite the odds by demonstrating other valuable traits of masculinity were applauded for their effort (McLean 2019).

6.7. Religious Punishment

Although both pastors and imams claimed that their moral teachings on spiritual implications related to premarital sex were gender neutral, the disciplinary measures and examples given below predominantly targeted pregnant girls. At the mosque imams did not discriminate against, ridicule or interrogate girls about their pregnancy in the way some pastors did, although they preached against it in public. Iman Alhaji admitted that he only approached and criticised those who were dressed

immodestly at Friday prayers, but his interaction with women and girls was limited at the mosque due to the separation of men and women during prayer. Imams frequently alluded to their compassion for unmarried mothers, accepting human fallibility and adapting to the reality of their misfortune in a morally corrupt society.

None of the Muslim girls mentioned personal experiences of ostracization or judgment at the mosque while they were pregnant. Anticipating moral judgment, they may have distanced themselves from religious communities, whereas Christian girls were more likely to engage with pastors privately outside religious institutions for spiritual support during pregnancy. To avoid shame and gossip, most girls stopped attending church once their pregnancy was visible and returned after giving birth.

Although some mothers were blamed for their daughters' sexual misconduct, this did not extend to religious institutions in Adonkia, whereas in Nigeria, for instance, mothers were removed or suspended from their church roles or penalised for their daughter's actions. Parents even sent their daughters away to protect their honour and uphold the institutional value system (G. Amakor 2018). In this context they did not fear personal judgment in church; instead, the experience of hardship and suffering related to financial or family issues such as a teenage pregnancy led women to prayer groups and redemptive teaching (J. Cole 2010). Misfortune fostered virtues such as physical and emotional perseverance and endurance, respectable and desirable feminine traits to instil in younger girls (Cooper 2018; Sijpt 2018)

Church discipline was not common in most churches, but Gloria experienced it firsthand as an active member of the choir. She had reservations about attending services, as she was concerned about the potential for gossip and judgment by others. She even lied to her partner about her church attendance to avoid further scrutiny. 'I stopped going to choir practice, and some church members came to visit me [...] They told me I could not join the choir until I had given birth.' I asked how she felt about that, and she replied 'I think it is bad. I used to sing with my peers, holding a microphone, but I am no longer among them, so I feel bad. At times I do not even go to church.'

Gloria was ultimately disappointed and felt abandoned by her church community. The disciplinary measures varied across churches and were mostly directed towards those serving in the church. Like Gloria, once the church was aware of a premarital pregnancy in a family the individual was either suspended or removed from their church role, their moral failure publicly acknowledged. In some churches girls were asked to 'confess their wrongdoing'. In extreme cases their actions were 'named and shamed', which was considered an important act of church discipline to set an example and deter other girls from engaging in premarital sex. These practices

reconstitute normative femininity by demonstrating how patriarchal authority, through repetitive disciplinary acts, monitor and regulate female sexuality while linking the moral value of teenage girls to notions of sexual purity.

The variation in disciplinary practices differed across religious institutions due to doctrinal and institutional distinctions. For instance disciplinary measures were uncommon in mosques, while Pentecostal churches prioritised spiritual and charismatic expression of faith; Baptist churches seemed more conservative, prioritising biblical orthodoxy and rigid moral codes. These distinctions shaped how pregnant girls were perceived and treated in churches.

Pastor John, a Baptist pastor with a small church congregation, criticised larger Pentecostal churches for their leniency and apparently boundless adaptability to suit their goal of congregational growth: '[Pastors] do cover up some of these thing in the name of church membership. They do not want to lose members. Some do not just want to know because they do not know the concern of the people.' Pastor John's critique implied that pastors compromised their moral standards for the sake of a larger congregation rather than through intentional oversight and pastoral care. Pastor John's church was conservative and orthodox in comparison to the Pentecostal churches in the community. The Baptists only sang traditional hymnals and rarely emphasised prosperity teachings and witchcraft, while in contrast the churches the girls attended were spiritually dynamic, with loud worship and prayer sessions, often including healing, speaking in tongues and spiritual deliverance services, all practices that pastor John disagreed with.

Although pastoral leaders believed that judgment and forgiveness are ultimately 'in God's hands', they generally seemed more concerned about girls proving their sincerity through submission to church discipline which, according to Pastor John, was also associated with regular church attendance. 'We would encourage you to come, and in fact that is one of the criteria: you need to always come to church meetings in the midweek, and talk less on Sundays. With that, we will know that you are healing from the mistake you have done.' Pastor Tommy from the Pentecostal church stated: 'You should always come to church. Except if you are sick, but if not, there is no way you should stay home without coming to church. They should come to church and sit at the back'.

In both churches the process of healing and redemption was preconditioned by rigid moral codes reinforced and fostered by social control. Being made to sit at the back, also known as 'back-benching', was a punishment used to signal social exclusion. Pastors emphasised that church discipline also applied to adults who served in church. Those caught in adultery or other immoral

acts were equally punished. Unlike pregnancy, other forms of sexual misconduct are more difficult to detect and less likely to be disclosed as individuals preserve their respectability through secrecy. Men serving in the church were more likely to be held accountable for a premarital pregnancy if the girl attended the same church. The lack of church discipline for men reflects the broader societal norms positioning women's bodies as within a moral framework of purity, honour and social control (G. Amakor 2018). While men's sexual failings are erased or overlooked the reproductive bodies of teenage girls represent a moral transgression subject to punishment and social judgment.

Both pastors expressed similar sentiments about girls remaining abstinent until they married, although they always considered children a 'blessing from God', whatever the circumstances they were born into.

This sentiment was also expressed by Islamic leaders, as mentioned in the previous chapter, highlighting the religious philosophy and the value placed on children. Religious leaders justified the need to embrace unmarried girls during their pregnancy with empathy and compassion to reduce the risk of unsafe abortion. Being a part of the religious community was considered an opportunity for the girls to redeem themselves of their 'double sin' of sexual immorality and the considerably graver sin of abortion. Both Muslim and Christian leaders used religious discourse to justify their lack of judgment of premarital pregnancies in religious spaces.

In larger religious institutions the girls were less visible and may not have experienced any direct discrimination from a religious leader. However, they still believed that slander and gossip were inevitable. Marie explained 'I went to church when I was pregnant but when the pregnancy was visible I was ashamed to go to church, because people won't ask but they will talk'. Ironically, churches that believed in church discipline also preached against discriminatory behaviour towards teenage mothers. Pastor Anita explained:

> We don't treat them poorly. We don't have time for that. They came for the service, so they will sit and listen to the preaching and through the preaching they might change their [immoral] ways, because the pastor will preach about different topics, so you will avoid repeating the same mistakes. But some stop coming to church because of shaming, and the man of God will not run after you, but when you come they won't kick you out.

Girls serving in the church were expected to meet higher moral standards than most as they represented the ministry. Steele (2011) describes how pastors were more lenient towards new members who were pregnant before joining the church, as they assumed they had come to seek

forgiveness from God. Pastor Anita asserted that they did not pursue or exclude irregular members; the moral objective was for girls to reconcile their faith through repentance and modification of their behaviour.

6.8. Conclusion

In a context where men in premarital sexual relationships are stereotypically known for abandoning their responsibility as fathers, the practice of *ansa belle* is a framework that aims to hold them accountable for their actions. While this practice does not always result in engagement or marriage, it clearly defines social gender norms and expectations, holding men responsible for 'spoiling' a young woman's sexuality and dishonouring her kinship. Acknowledging paternity is a restorative process in which families discuss practical ways of securing the well-being of the mother and child. The two families are subject to continuous negotiation as previous pathways to respectability have diverged because the girls' parents now prioritise educational assurance over marital engagement. In a society where masculinity and respectability are shaped by a man's ability to provide for his family acknowledging paternity may be particularly daunting for those who are unable to live to this societal standard.

Despite the financial challenges, however, young men like Mike may acknowledge paternity, embracing the responsibilities associated with fatherhood while resisting the patriarchal and traditional ideals associated with marrying the mother of their child.

The analysis demonstrate that the performance masculinity and femininity may not always reflect social norms as young men and women subjectively navigate sexual relationships and social expectations, sometimes resulting in moral compromises. Through their performance of sexual innocence and maturity girls reconstruct femininity within intersecting moral, religious and kinship frameworks.

Local discourses revealed that the ambiguities around romantic and transactional relationships were extremely contentious. Older men were perceived as immoral and irresponsible for exploiting vulnerable teenage girls while the girls, especially those who benefited significantly from transactional relationships, were deemed promiscuous, leveraging their sexuality for financial gain. When their sexual relationship resulted in misfortune, the men were blamed while the girls were victimised. While these discourses acknowledge the structural issues and gendered power imbalance at large, one wonders whether girls strategically engage in these relationships fully

aware of the consequences or deliberately perform femininity by presenting as sexual innocents, appearing more naïve than they are to preserve their respectability.

Several interlocutors used their religious practice as a coping mechanism during pregnancy. In a context where misfortune, suffering and hardship are explained and interpreted via spiritual belief, they found pragmatic ways to manage their predicament. Some made sense of their circumstances by connecting with spiritual individuals outside religious institutions, praying with relatives and conceptualising their pain and suffering as meaningful trials worth overcoming. Choosing to embrace the biblical doctrine that aligns with their lifestyle choices while rejecting more orthodox teachings on sexual immorality and premarital sex demonstrates the girls' flexibility in interpreting their sexual morality and exercising their religious beliefs.

Similar flexible interpretation was identified in church. Some pastors exercised compassion and empathy through spiritual discipline, while churches that did not discipline their members were accused of spiritual leniency and over-tolerance in an effort to increase their congregation. Even though religious leaders stressed the importance of demonstrating empathy and compassion, the institutional structures revealed that the path to redemption requires humiliation, exclusion, sincerity, commitment and spiritual submission. Although some girls eventually returned to church after giving birth, most of them chose to avoid religious institutions and found alternative pathways to spiritual and social redemption. This pattern represents the contemporary trend among youth in Sierra Leone and other African countries, who approach their faith through subjective, flexible and pragmatic strategies rather than strict religious moral codes (Cole 2010).

7 Motherhood and Life After Childbirth

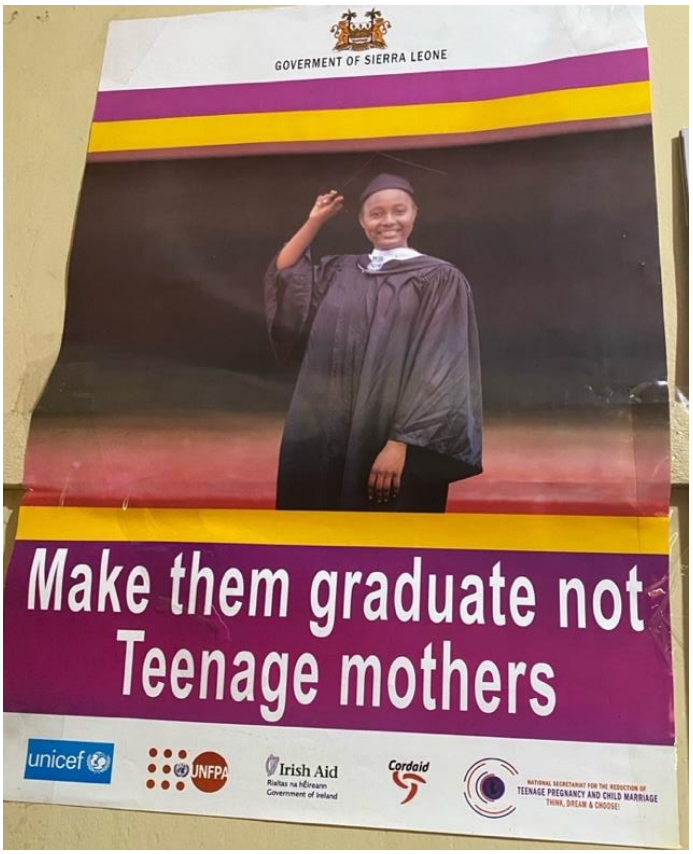

Figure 10: Poster promoting girls' education at the local clinic

7.1. Introduction

The previous chapters have discussed how girls navigated the uncertainties related to disclosing the news of their pregnancy (Chapter 5) and the moral and religious tensions that emerged as they managed the social judgment and expectations associated with their gender and sexuality (Chapter 6). In this chapter I shed light on how teenage mothers manage their educational aspirations, motherhood and kinship support in their process of social becoming. The chapter explores the intersection of education and motherhood through the teenage mothers' narratives. When girls' sexuality fails to conform to the moral code, their road to redemption is found in good mothering and education. Through the concept of social navigation I explore reproductive misfortune as it relates to 'movement through both the socially *immediate* and the socially *imagined* ' (Vigh 2009, 425). I argue that the fluid constructs of motherhood and parenting enable teenage mothers to receive support from their families and social networks as they strive towards social becoming via educational pursuits and

ideals of good mothering to counteract the social judgments and uncertainties related to their reproductive misfortune.

In this chapter I analyse three main themes. First, I discuss family structures and the significance of negotiating child-fostering arrangements and family support as the girls seek to provide a nurturing environment and upward mobility for their children and themselves. Secondly, I explore the social shift and perceived dichotomy between schooling and motherhood, and the cultural expectations, moral ambiguities regarding contraceptives, and conditions associated with young mothers returning to school. Lastly, I discuss the subjective virtues of motherhood within a mother-daughter relationship, demonstrating how unrealised social expectations foster misunderstanding and conflict as Fatima and her mother, Mariama, both strive to prove themselves as respectable, responsible and good mothers.

7.2. Fostering, Caregiving and Family Support

Of the fourteen interlocutors, only one girl lived in a nuclear household with both biological parents. Four girls had both parents in their lives and the rest grew up or lived in predominately female-headed households with an aunt, grandmother, mother-in-law or older sibling. The three girls who were raised by single fathers moved in with their partner or other female relative for further support after giving birth. In a country with low life expectancy it is common for teenagers to have lost one or both parents, as was the case for nine of the interlocutors, who were considered *men pikin*, the local term for foster-children.

Hampshire et al. (2015) argue that rural children, whether orphaned or not, have less access to education than urban children. Thus kinship fostering is widely accepted as it gives rural girls an opportunity to access an urban education and reduces their biological parents' financial burden.

Several interlocutors had experienced both rural-to-urban fostering and crisis fostering characterised by movement and adaptation as they were placed with different extended relatives.[31] Girls relocated in both directions, and while some moved in with members of their extended family to attend better schools, those who became orphans were less likely to further their education when placed with relatives who were unable to support them with school fees.

[31] Isiugo-Abanihe explains crisis fostering as follows: 'Child relocation resulting from the dissolution of the family of origin by divorce, separation, or death of a spouse may be termed crisis fostering. Children boarded out as a result of being born out of wedlock also belong to this group, especially in a culture where such children are stigmatized.'(1985, 57)

These family arrangements largely represent general family structures in the country, providing teenage mothers from socio-economically challenged backgrounds with some level of security through social assistance from family and social networks.

Sinclaire (1975) argues that social stratification is a key motivation for fostering in Sierra Leone, as extended kinship structures including fostering practices can have an impact on children's educational outcomes. Her extended family's resources, attitudes and capabilities may influence a young girl's educational prospects, potentially providing access beyond the biological parents' capabilities.

Fosterage is also commonly found among childless kin or grandparents wishing for companionship or assistance with household chores (Verhoef 2005). The majority of the shared narratives about fostering were associated with girls being overburdened with harsh labour and domestic tasks. These negative aspects of fostering arrangements subjected several interlocutors to various forms of suffering, abuse and harsh disciplinary treatment, which was perceived as the cultural norm for children's development and future success (Bledsoe 1990a). The interlocutors' recollection of crisis fostering conveyed how negative and positive experiences significantly impacted their childhood. Despite these experiences, several girls remained open to various forms of kinship fostering arrangements for their babies, as this allowed them to pursue their educational aspirations.

When teenage girls become mothers they are usually dependent on others for relational and structural support with the financial, emotional, physical and psychological challenges associated with their academic aspirations and childcare.

In Africa many teenage mothers struggle to return to school because of financial constraints (Ringsted 2008; Mkhwanazi 2010). Those afforded this opportunity temporarily or completely relinquish the role of parenting to pursue their education supported by relatives, the genitor, new boyfriends or others in their social network. This mode of child-fostering is what Kaplan (1997, 428) describes as 'baby getting and keeping'. Thus fostering plays a central part in the process of social navigation as a strategic approach that enables girls to endure their current predicament while moving towards the future they imagine for themselves and their child(ren).

7.3. Raising Children as a Community

Raising children has historically been a shared task in a supportive family and community network. In African communities childcare has been extensively documented as a communal practice. Given

the anthropological literature's emphasis on the feminisation of care and support, specific attention is paid to fostering and caregiving by female kin (Bledsoe 1990a; Ringsted 2004; Verhoef 2005; Ngabaza 2010; Ménard 2023).

In West Africa girls and female kin carry the majority of the burden of childcare and fostering (Bledsoe 1999). The division of domestic labour is still gendered and binary, intersecting with class and other social identities that position caregiving and parenting as the woman's primary responsibility (Collins 2021). Practices associated with mothering in Sierra Leone are socially constructed and influenced by cultural ideologies regarding motherhood. Sierra Leoneans, like other Africans, emphasise that children belong to the wider family and not only to their biological parents, because relatives sharing the responsibility of raising a child strengthens family ties and improves the likelihood of a successful life (Verhoef 2005). Different forms of fostering practice are widespread, deeply valued and integrated into ethnic kinship structures and traditions in Sierra Leone and other West African societies (Sinclair 1975; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Bledsoe 1990a; Verhoef 2005; Hampshire et al. 2015; McLean 2019).

In Adonkia, as in other places, the 'taking and keeping' of children is practised across a range of family circumstances and socioeconomic backgrounds, with different cultural expectations concerning kinship roles contingent upon gender and the lineage systems of specific ethnic groups (Clark et al. 2017). These cultural expectations are not always reflected in society, as despite their desire to provide for their children, Sierra Leonean men sometimes fail to live up to the expectations of fatherhood due to economic hardship (McLean 2019). As a result teenage mothers and their female relatives typically become both primary caregivers and sources of financial support. Maternal grandmothers, for instance, play a significant role in fostering and assisting with childcare.

In Guinea-Bissau, grandmothers may claim the customary right to one of their grandchildren, or take the child for some time as the mother stops breastfeeding (Einarsdóttir 2006). Among the Igbo people in Nigeria, grandmothers raising or fostering grandchildren are admired and considered blessed as their lineage increases. Ideally they trade retirement for childcare as this arrangement secures financial security, especially if the biological parents are alive and continue to provide resources in addition to regular visits and gifts (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Moodley 2021).

Caregivers are not strictly dependent on biological or marital relations. The lines between biological and kinship ties can be socially constructed, allowing a non-biologically related person, such as a neighbour or close family friend, to assume the role of a relative while extending substantial support in line with a kinship role (Ringsted 2004). Bolten (2008, 233) defines practical and fictive

kinship as a process of social creation through communal acts and argues that these social structures and familial relationships can be identified and altered within religious communities, emphasising notions of moral obligation to one another. For instance girls without biological mothers or grandmothers relied on other valued and trusted women for support. Some girls received financial support from spiritual leaders, teachers and neighbours for a season; others received assistance with childcare from women they referred to as sisters, aunties and grandmothers. Before they became mothers the girls had assisted with caring for younger siblings, cousins and extended relatives. Some had supported their neighbours and friends with their children, anticipating reciprocal support with their own babies. The following sections consider how girls pursue and adapt to their future aspirations in response to having children.

7.4. Rugiatu: Taking and Keeping the Baby

Rugiatu (Rugi) moved to Adonkia to pursue her education when she was eighteen. She is from Kono district in eastern Sierra Leone but relocated to Adonkia after a childhood friend who had returned to Kono promised to support her financially so that she could return to school. Rugi grew up with her mother, who had died when she was thirteen, and her maternal grandmother, who was still living in Kono with Rugi's two-year-old son. At the age of sixteen she became pregnant. The father of the child, who was ten years older than her, was from the same village.

Due to her grandmother's limited resources the child's genitor had assisted them financially until he learned about the pregnancy, when he disappeared before he could be acknowledged as the genitor. Despite her disappointment, Rugi's grandmother supported her through the first pregnancy. Rugi had never expected to become pregnant at such a young age and felt guilty about the financial burden she had placed on her grandmother, who did her best to support her and her son. Rugi wanted to make her proud by returning to school now that her son was older, but once her enrolment documents were finalised she discovered that she was pregnant for the second time. Soon after this she lost her phone with all her contacts, including that of the friend who had promised to assist her with her school fees. Before her second pregnancy Rugi had been motivated to return to school to set an example for her son. She shared 'When you do not have anything your child will call you mama, but when you are educated and find a job then your child will call you mommy, so I wanted my child to call me mommy.' For Rugi and other interlocutors the shift from 'mama' to 'mommy' represents a shift in their social position and movement towards social change. In Adonkia this term was commonly used

among middle- and upper-class Sierra Leoneans and signified educational attainment and upward social and economic mobility. Being called ‘mommy’ also suggested the intersection of teenage motherhood and education, which, as mentioned in the contextual chapter, has been a highly debated issue in political discourse.

Despite the policy shift favouring pregnant girls’ access to education, many schools continue to expel girls who are visibly pregnant. Because a considerable number of schools in Sierra Leone were founded by Christian missionaries and based on religious values, the lack of tolerance for teenage pregnancy preserves the schools’ moral and academic reputation, an argument that many teachers echo today.

However, motherhood can be a driving force and a motivation for girls to pursue an education and find a sense of identity and social value in their quest to become role models for their children by making something of themselves (Luttrell 1996).

Rugi acknowledged the weight and responsibility of motherhood even though her grandmother was currently the main caregiver for her child. Initially she had brought her child with her to Adonkia while waiting to begin the school enrolment process. She worked at a local supermarket, but was unable to care for her child when she fell ill and her feet began to swell, making it difficult for her to walk. The child returned to its great-grandmother, and a few months later became seriously ill:

> They were telling me to send money, and I told them to send pictures of the child, so I can see his condition before I send money. After sending the money his condition did not improve. I went to Kono and saw the child was severely ill. I took him to the government hospital where he was admitted for a week. We came home, and after trying herbal medication I brought him to the city with me. When I came back to Adonkia I was not able to return to work.

She questioned whether her family had used her child to exploit her financially, which is a common practice in Sierra Leone. Upon discovering the severity of the situation she decided to take responsibility for her son and care for him herself. Although she expressed gratitude for her grandmother’s support, acknowledging her role as the primary caretaker, Rugi also had a sense of loss and detachment from her son and her role as a mother. Even though she was eventually planning to return to school, her decision-making and actions in response to her child’s illness revealed that she had crossed the threshold of adulthood. For Rugi, childbearing was an entry point to proving herself as an adult, allowing her to display maturity and responsibility as she transitioned into motherhood despite not always feeling like a mother due to her regular absence in her son’s life, ‘My

child does not know that I am his mother. My child does not even know me that well; whenever I carry him he starts crying'. Rugi's actions contradict the generally perceived stigma against teenage mothers as immature and irresponsible.

Hill-Collins (2021, 157) discusses the 'fluid and changing' boundaries witnessed between Rugi and her grandmother as a central aspect of black motherhood. For both African and African American women, especially teenage mothers, sharing mothering and childcare responsibilities among female kinship is primarily based on seniority and gender rather than on roles related to status in a nuclear family. Even though her grandmother was unable to provide for her child financially, Rugi still preferred this arrangement because her grandmother was a nurturing character.

While living in the village she received financial support from men who were interested in her, one of whom was the genitor of her second child. He was much older than her, a 'big man' from the city who regularly travelled to Kono. They had been in contact since her first pregnancy and he had begun supporting her financially after the father of her first child disappeared. When Rugi moved away from the village she had initially wanted to stay with him, but to her surprise she discovered he was married with three children. Not wanting to be his mistress, she ended the relationship and found out that she was pregnant a few months later. At first he was reluctant to *ansa belle*, but he eventually complied and acknowledged the pregnancy after Rugi's relatives threatened to report him to the police.

Rugi wanted to return to school and did not want her grandmother to have to look after another child. When we met she was halfway through her pregnancy and the genitor had already proposed that the baby be weaned after six months and subsequently handed over to his younger sister. Rugi had agreed to this arrangement and informed her grandmother. Given the circumstances, the baby would be an asset to its aunt since she 'only had one child', insinuating that the paternal aunt had the resources and capacity to care for and ensure a better future for her baby.

The cultural practice of siblings considering each other's children their own also reassured her, believing that his sister would love and care for the child. Rugi was not sure if the genitor's wife was aware of the situation but she preferred this arrangement to the child living with the genitor, because stepmothers were known for maltreating their stepchildren. In this society it was not uncommon to secretly give away a child born as the result of an affair to protect the marital union. Many believed that if a child from an affair was raised among siblings from the marriage, the stepparent (especially stepmothers) would neglect or abuse their stepchild.

Adoption in the form of the permanent legal transfer of parental rights is rare in Sierra Leone. In Rugi's case it was unclear whether she would have any access to the child after the first six months. She anticipated an emotional attachment to the second child but acknowledged that she could not burden herself and her grandmother with more responsibility, stating 'Even if I am attached to the child, how will I cope if I can't support the child? Even the child that is with my grandmother, I am stressing about him'.

Because Rugi was determined to return to school and complete her secondary education she was willing to weigh up her options, which were both strategic and opportunistic. Not only would this option alleviate her financial burden because of the genitor's high social status but it also automatically positioned the child in a privileged position, which was culturally regarded as the ideal goal for child-fostering and an appropriate child-raising strategy. In her case social navigation meant relying heavily on her grandmother to care for her child while making adjustments and planning for the unborn child to mitigate her feelings of uncertainty. In the process of planning for the future she had difficulty detaching herself from her conflicting feelings as a mother (her the immediate situation) and her desire to eventually return to school (her imagined future).

Although her grandmother advised her to settle down after receiving proposals of marriage from men in the village, she was not interested in marriage until she had completed her secondary schooling. Having been disappointed by the genitor of the second child, Rugi found more social value in returning to school than in investing in another relationship. Going back to the argument in section 6.2, in the context of poverty and uncertainty, education was regarded as a safer and permanent investment, whereas marriage was regarded as a less secure social investment due to men's instability.

7.5. Faith: My Daughter is Like a Sister

Faith grew up in a household with both of her biological parents. At the time of the interview she was eighteen and her daughter, Sia, had just turned five. Sia knew Faith was her biological mother, but like Rugi's son she was more attached to her grandmother, because Faith had returned to school soon after giving birth leaving her mother as Sia's Ah primary caregiver. Faith explained that her attachment to and relationship with her daughter was more like the bond between siblings:

> I see my child as a small sister because my mom raised her. I used to say I wanted my child to live with me when I got married, but my father wants the child to stay with them. Because they are my parents I don't mind. The kind of love they have for me, they also have for my child.

Although Faith and the genitor were no longer together she was already thinking of the future, anticipating embracing the role of motherhood once she had finished her education and entered her marital home. Faith had a close bond with her parents and her justification for giving them full custody of Sia was rooted in their growing attachment to their grandchild as well as her trust in their parenting abilities, which she had experienced in her own stable and nurturing childhood. In her case there was no significant transition as she never 'became' a mother or experienced the role of mothering. Giving birth at the age of fourteen had enabled her to embrace the role of an older sister while maintaining her role as a daughter. For Faith, motherhood was erasable, as the kinship agreement represented the fluid constructs of mothering and kinship roles in African cultures that allowed her to focus on her education after giving birth. The arrangement demonstrates how social disruption and uncertain futures can be navigated and alleviated when grandparents are willing to take on responsibility for or full custody of their grandchildren (Johnson-Hanks 2005).

Unlike some of the other girls, Faith aspired to marriage because she had no concerns or apprehension about her education or her child's future. While her daughter knew she was her biological mother, Faith stated that motherhood was not a role she was planning to assume until she married. The family's social navigation of teenage pregnancy allowed her the flexibility and freedom to envision a future that was not marred by uncertainty. However, this privilege was attached to clear conditions and restrictions: on relinquishing her parental agency and responsibilities Faith and others in the same position were subject to intense restrictions and social control, as her parents wanted to reduce the possibility of another unexpected pregnancy. Thus such girls were closely monitored, had to observe curfews and were scrutinised after any social interaction with men. This was the sacrifice they were willing to make to ensure a better future, as the possibility of receiving social and financial support to complete their secondary education after childbirth was considered a privilege.

Although this was not Faith's experience, some parents take full custody of their grandchild to increase their daughter's prospects for marriage. Culturally it is ideal for mothers, especially teenage mothers, to leave their children from previous relationships behind when marrying someone other than the genitor (Einarsdóttir 2006). Men were commonly perceived as unwilling to assume responsibility for another man's child because of the financial burden. Thus raising a child that is not

their own may undermine their pride and sense of masculinity in a context where biological paternity is highly valued (Einarsdóttir 2006; Rosario et al. 2017). Although men were open to the idea of step-parenting, the notion of children as a financial burden was also embraced in Sierra Leone, shaping the negative perceptions and discriminatory dynamic between stepfathers and stepchildren. Such cultural norms left young women feeling obligated to leave their children behind in order to pursue upward mobility, exchanging motherhood for marital aspirations (McLean 2019). Conversely, young men who have children outside marriage are perceived more positively as their fatherhood status signals masculinity and maturity (G. Amakor 2018).

Several scholars have noted a shift in fostering and mothering arrangements across Africa as women have become more self-reliant due to their social and economic independence (Hampshire et al. 2015; Cooper 2018). Cooper posits that young women are more likely to rush into marriage and less likely to tolerate hardship in marriage than those of previous generations. Their lack of 'seriousness' and commitment to sustaining the nuclear family structure emphasises the cultural understanding that 'being serious in part relates to the understanding that marriage and parenthood can generally constitute a demand to increasingly concede one's desires and interests to the interests of others' (2018, 672). This universal trend has reduced the stigma associated with single motherhood and divorce and given young women the liberty to reject marriage. In the same vein, premarital cohabitation and lack of kinship involvement have become increasingly common in comparison to previous generations. When speaking to older generations it became evident that the Civil War and subsequent historical atrocities exacerbated both economic and household instability. Although the interlocutors were born after the war, they are children of a generation that has experienced the physical and emotional consequences of conflict, which resulted in economic stagnation and disrupted livelihoods. The war stunted the country's development and economic trajectory. These factors disrupted households, affecting generation continuity and creating a shift which orphaned many young people and forced them towards self-reliance in a situation of severe poverty without any assured support from older or younger relatives (Bolten 2008). Similar patterns have been found in southern Africa, where the AIDS epidemic increased the need to foster children (Hampshire et al. 2015).

Figure 11: A young mother a few days after childbirth

7.6. Evelyne: Teenage Pregnancy is Better Than Infertility

Nineteen-year-old Evelyne had lost both parents and during my time in the field she moved between living with her father's elder brother in Adonkia, whom she referred to as her grandfather, and her sister on her mother's side of the family, who lived on the opposite end of the city.

The catering school she attended was an hour away, closer to her sister's residence. To reduce the cost of public transport she eventually moved in with her sister permanently. She shared that living with them freed her to focus on her catering education.

During our initial meeting in Adonkia Evelyne sat in front of her neighbour's shed talking to her while holding her two-week-old baby in a blanket. At first I presumed the neighbour, Aunty Nenneh, was her mother, owing to her similar facial features and fair complexion. However, I later discovered that she was the person who had persuaded Evelyne to not terminate her pregnancy. She had assisted her since then, and after Evelyne returned from the hospital had cooked for her and babysat when

Evelyne returned to catering school. Evelyne disclosed later that her firstborn child was living with the paternal grandparents, who had taken full custody of the child when she moved in with her uncle. Evelyne was the only interlocutor receiving financial assistance from relatives living abroad. Her uncle's wife, who was referred to as G Mama, shared that her daughter, who was now in her forties, had been sponsoring Evelyne since her mother had died a few years ago. The cousin had agreed to sponsor Evelyne's with her school fees, and when she found out about the pregnancy she was initially disappointed but eventually came to accept the situation. She sent boxes of baby formula for her daughter and continued to extend her support. Having gone through a teenage pregnancy herself at the age of seventeen, her cousin was extremely empathetic towards her.

One evening in the compound Evelyne shared that her older sister, who was in her late twenties, and her brother-in-law were very invested in raising her daughter JJ because they had no biological children, insinuating that this was a cause of frustration: they had been married for several years but they had never conceived. It was apparent that that she enjoyed the status of motherhood, which was connected more to her fertility than to her parenting skills, although she often tried to free herself from the responsibilities associated with the role.

She emphasised and compared the years she and her husband had been trying to have a baby while Evelyne already had two children. Our conversation highlighted how deeply fertility is ingrained and hailed as a cultural value, with the ability to bear children closely tied to womanhood and social respectability.

Unlike teenage pregnancy, Sierra Leoneans may attribute childlessness to eminent suffering, great misfortune, feelings of emptiness, or witchcraft, adding to the social stigma and making teenage fertility preferable to the possibility of infertility (Hampshire et al. 2015; Cooper 2018). In a culture where parenthood is considered a rite of passage and a defining aspect of both masculinity and femininity, Sierra Leonean men equally experience social ridicule when younger siblings enter this life stage first (McLean 2019). Evelyne shared that her sister had claimed JJ as her own to secure social respectability. She was not opposed to this but ideally she wanted JJ to be fostered by her cousin living in the US.

I asked if she wanted to leave the country as well, but JJ 'had her entire life ahead of her,' she said. Evelyne believed it was more realistic and reasonable for her daughter to be adopted by her cousin. This came as a surprise, as most of the young people I engaged with often mentioned their desire to leave the country and escape their poverty by moving abroad. Such aspirations were more attainable

for those with relatives in the diaspora. Evelyne recognised that this process can take years for adults, while children are more likely to secure a visa through international adoption.

As much as her sister and brother-in-law loved JJ, she acknowledged that they did not have the financial means to provide for her daughter in the same capacity as her cousin in the US could.

Prioritising her child's advancement over her own reflected a universal and cultural parental value. Similar sentiments were found among Sierra Leonean men whose futures had been compromised by the war, increasing their determination to provide greater opportunities for their children (Bolten 2008; McLean 2019).

Evelyne thoughtfully navigated the economic realities, leveraging her resourceful network, which enabled her to provide care, stability and financial support for her daughter. She entertained multiple aspirations for both herself and her daughter. After finishing catering school she planned to start a business baking cakes for people in her network, although she was also open to other opportunities. Her flexibility and innovative plans reflected her social environment and upbringing: the loss of her parents had led to her moving back and forth between relatives, which continued after she gave birth, and she was therefore used to her social environment being fraught with uncertainty. When she was living with her uncle he frequently complained about her being 'frisky' and 'all over the place'. However, her life's adversities had taught her how to contend with her situation and negotiate for herself.

Her desire to secure her child's future through the best available option reflects that of parents who chose to reinvest in their teenage daughter's education after pregnancy. In Sierra Leone most parents and foster parents viewed children as an asset and insurance that would benefit them in their old age. Even if the child never became a doctor or lawyer they would be indebted to their parents or relatives for their significant economic sacrifice. The goal of parents' sacrificial investment was their children being educated and finding employment that would give them the ability to provide for themselves and others. In the process of social formation this strongly defines one's self-worth, respectability and social position in the family and community (A. M. Honwana 2019) and illustrates the structural dependency associated with the process of social becoming, as sacrificial investments often reflect parents' intertwined aspirations for themselves and for their children's future success.

7.7. Jariatu: Having the right foundation

Nineteen-year-old Jariatu had left her two-year-old daughter with her grandmother in Kailahun in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, to move in with her older sister and pursue her education in

Adonkia. As much as Jariatu missed and thought about her child, she made a conscious effort to not think about her too much because 'it became a distraction'. She visited Kailahun during the holidays and called her regularly but acknowledged that she was unable to balance both roles: 'If I focus on being a mother, I will prioritise buying things for my child and will end up dropping out because of that'. It was challenging for her to find a balance and embrace certain aspects of motherhood without neglecting her education. The dichotomy between schooling and teenage motherhood was a common argument used to problematise teenage pregnancy. Nurse Mary at the local clinic shared:

> I used to tell them that, at my former workplace, that two things cannot go together: you cannot be having children and at the same time, you are in school. Imagine you are a suckling mother and at the same time you are in school – will you be able to study during an examination if the child is sick?

Although Jariatu did not live with her daughter she was emotionally attached to her and was often distracted by her concerns. Nurse Mary's statement confirmed some of the competing priorities that Jariatu was grappling with, as whenever her daughter was sick she found herself unable to focus on her studies. This quote highlights the dilemma of trying to cope with the conflicting demands of childcare and schoolwork. When girls prioritise their babies they are perceived as 'irresponsible' students and conversely, when school is the main priority they cannot be fully present for their children (Chohan and Langa 2011).

Returning to school as a teenage mother has become more normalised in Sierra Leone. Despite the social change and shift towards social acceptance and advocacy, some Sierra Leoneans still believe teenage mothers should not be allowed to return to school after giving birth (Blake 2021). The growing value of education has been influenced by national and global advocacy of girls' education, especially since the war, when concerns regarding gender inequality and women's empowerment in Sierra Leone mirrored the global shift and trend. While some applauded teenage mothers for their determination and seriousness stop about completing their schooling, others, like nurse Mary, believed that 'seriousness' was demonstrated by a schoolgirl's ability to avoid pregnancy altogether.

Historically, girls' educational trajectory has come to an end after childbirth, as they were typically forced to marry the genitor, transition to motherhood and devote themselves to family life. However, the perceived value of and advocacy for 'the girl child' has made it easier for them to return to school after becoming mothers.

Richards notes that education in Sierra Leone is perceived as a 'passport to modernity' that increases the chance of escaping social struggles attached to poverty while securing employment prospects and economic stability in a developing capitalist economy (1998, 138; McLean 2019). Different agents in girls' social networks equally subscribed to this ideology and offered financial assistance towards the education of teenage mothers; for instance as a domestic worker Jariatu was sponsored by her employer, who wanted her to 'focus on her education'. Jariatu recognised that she was only able to prioritise her education knowing her daughter was 'well taken care of, alive and in good health'. She was determined to 'lay the right foundation', wanting to provide her daughter with the opportunities she lacked, explaining:

> Right now, if I do not have an education my child might follow my footsteps. If I had the right [financial] foundation I would not accept being with an older man. If my child does not have the right foundation she will also end up in the streets. That is why I want to get an education.

Jariatu had grown up without her father, and her mother had died. Before she became pregnant she had moved between relatives in Kailahun. The father of her child was an older man in his forties; she had initially refused his advances but eventually gave in because of her need for financial support. Many believed that if guardians were unable to provide financially for their daughters they would 'end up in the street', not necessarily in prostitution but seeking the attention of older men or boyfriends.

Jariatu's feeling of uncertainty was centred around two ongoing struggles. Based on her current position she was concerned about providing for her child's present needs, while her long-term concerns focused on her aspirations, which entailed providing economic stability by getting an education, which she was hoping would give her a pathway out of poverty and dependency. As a mother, being a good role model entailed setting a moral example, protecting her daughter from potential danger and the vulnerabilities that girls in low-income communities are exposed to, including the structure patterns in sexual exploitation and transactional relationships ascribed to economics that resulted in survival-based decisions for girls living in poverty. Amid the uncertainty she managed to demonstrate critical awareness of her unstable foundation, which led to her navigating life with a cautious and flexible approach, by actively assessing risk and possibilities (Vigh 2009). Through her pursuit of education she anticipated a future full of choices rather than limitations.

In a country with high unemployment rates, where 55 per cent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, the sad reality is that strategic social navigation does not guarantee employment after girls finish their education (UNDP 2023).[32] Yet without an education teenage mothers were less likely to find employment, as most employers prefer or require an academic qualification. Being educated also signals virtues such as determination, commitment, intelligence and respectability, which she desired to convey as a mother and a role model.

Luttrell (1989) argues that every society constructs different notions of an educated person. Even within the same society an individual's gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic status may determine how their education is esteemed, questioned and experienced.

In Sierra Leonean society, as in most other countries, the cultural pinnacle of educational success and social mobility is a degree in medicine, law, accountancy or engineering (Blake 2021). Amid their poverty and hardship, my interlocutors also aspired to this. However, young Sierra Leoneans have faced poor educational outcomes for decades, and without a scholarship or financial support from relatives with higher socio-economic status such as Evelyne's cousin or Jariatu's employer, interlocutors were unlikely to be able to further their education beyond secondary school. Honwana (2019) notes that unemployment among youth in Africa delays their transition into adulthood, situating them in a position of 'waithood' characterised by uncertainty and social struggle as they lack opportunities to realise their economic potential and future aspirations. However, waithood did not always interrupt the interlocutors' social navigation: instead they saw it as a valuable strategy requiring cautious evaluation as they pursued various aspirational projects (Eisenstein 2021). After giving birth, the girls who were unable to or uninterested in pursuing an education, for instance, 'wilfully waited' for marriage or a small business venture to materialise, despite the financial cost attached to these projects. Eisenstein (2021) suggests that wilfully waiting also requires a strong sense of faith. Faith was not only regarded as a coping mechanism during pregnancy, as seen in the previous chapter, but also considered an essential strategy for navigating and materialising personal aspirations.

When Jariatu and others discussed and shared their hopes and imagined futures there was frequently an element of wilfully waiting for 'God's perfect timing' as their uncertain realities slowly unfolded.

[32] Multidimensional poverty is defined as poverty that encompasses various deprivations experienced by people in their daily lives. These deprivations can include poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standards, disempowerment, poor quality of work, the threat of violence, and living in environmentally hazardous areas.

In Sierra Leone, 'Inshallah' or 'by God e pawa' were common expressions used to convey trust that aspirations and future projects would happen according to God's will, power or divine timing.[33] Like women in Uganda, Jariatu believed that when she prayed and submitted her plans to God after childbirth she would 'reap material blessing' (Eisenstein 2021, 465). People such as Jariatu's employer, Evelyne's cousin or Rugiatu's genitor's sister were considered 'destiny helpers' who 'answered prayers' about how the girls would navigate their educational advancement and social mobility.

7.8. Fatima: Being a Responsible Mother

Figure 12: Two customers from the neighbourhood waiting for their meal at Mariama's cookery (local restaurant)

Before she fell pregnant at sixteen Fatima dreamed of finishing school and getting married: 'I wanted to fulfil my father's wish. I have always said that the man I marry will be the man I have children with.' Despite her hopes of higher education, she discovered that she was pregnant a few months after her father died. Three years later she no longer dreamed of becoming a lawyer and marrying before starting a family, but she still held on to her aspiration to join a summer camp to prepare for the West African Secondary School Examination (WASSCE), which would qualify her

[33] The expression Inshallah simply means 'God willing' or 'if God wills'. The Islamic expression was also used frequently among Christians.

to apply for a law degree. She insinuated that had he still been alive, her father's strong authority as head of the house would have kept her from falling pregnant. Fatima's statement aligns with the socio-cultural perception that fatherlessness and the lack of male leadership and authority increases the likelihood of teenage pregnancy. Although she was in a relationship with the genitor before her father passed, she alluded to the emotional and psychological impact of her loss influencing her desire for male attention.

Her pregnancy forced her mother and stepmother to confront a pivotal moment in their lives in his absence. The first time I met the family I presumed Fatima's stepmother, Sallay, was her grandmother, because she was significantly older than Fatima's mother, Mariama, who had become a second wife when she was 14. She had given birth to Fatima at the age of 15, and two years later she had Fatima's younger brother. At the age of 35, Mariama had been married twice and had four children by three different men. Her youngest daughter lived with her ex-husband, while she was raising Fatima and her two younger brothers.

She and Fatima had not had a close relationship before Fatima got pregnant. When Fatima's parents divorced she and her younger brother had stayed with her father and stepmother. In many ways Mariama embodied the responsible mother. When her ex-husband died she was willing to move in with his wife Sallay and 'pick up the pieces', starting her cookery from scratch to ensure a stable income and provide for her children. When navigating motherhood, others praise and validate women and girls' efforts to provide the best life for their child(ren) as *trying,* which implied locally that they were doing their best and going to great lengths to stretch their limited resources.[34] It became apparent that both Fatima and her Mariama desired social respectability and acknowledgement for *trying*.

Others often praised Fatima for being responsible, managing the chores and taking care of her daughter Hawa and her seven-year-old brother Malik. She assisted at the cookery beside the house, taking charge whenever her mother went to the market to buy fresh groceries for the next day. When Fatima eventually began her preparation for the WASSCE at the summer camp she was forced to return home when her daughter became ill. 'That was the responsible thing to do', Mariama explained. She wanted her daughter to learn to be responsible by teaching her the importance of sacrificial motherhood. Caring for her sick grandchild herself would have prevented her going to the market and running her restaurant.

[34] The term *trying* is commonly used as a form of praise and acknowledgement in Sierra Leone. For instance when parents raise successful children they are socially praised for their accomplished parental effort, which is encapsulated in the notion of 'trying'.

Mariama wanted to prepare her daughter for the 'real world' and frequently compared her own experiences and challenges as a teenage mother with those of her daughter. Her early marriage was marked by hardship; she recalled suffering after her divorce as a teenage mother with two children. Her recollection of the past included how she adapted to her uncertainty, using her agency and determination to overcome challenging economic structures and imposing constraints. As her daughter transitioned to motherhood, she expected her to apply the same level of commitment to raising her own child.

Considering that both Fatima and her brother were born immediately after the war, the post-conflict environment and Mariama's social formation as a divorced teenage mother forced her to navigate the devastating repercussions of a war that had left the country in ruins and resulted in high unemployment rates, extreme poverty, political turmoil and volatility. While the country has seen noticeable progress since then, persistent social challenges, poor governance and weak institutional infrastructure the country's failure to achieve full recovery decades later (Wignall 2022). However, despite these challenges Fatima was in many ways more privileged than her mother as the degree of uncertainty in her life was less adverse, enabling her to control her life this process and focus on the present while feeling less apprehensive about her future. Below I illustrate how Fatima and Mariama's peinterpreted and navigated their expectations of motherhood from two different perspectives.

7.8.1. The Birthday Party

One morning as Fatima was washing clothes she shared details about her daughter's upcoming birthday party. Her face lit up as she spoke about the preparations. Grace was helping her with them; they had become close friends when Grace moved in with her older sister Janet, who lived next door to Fatima's new boyfriend Idris. Fatima's to-do list was very detailed. She wanted to buy some second-hand baby clothes from downtown, hoping to find durable shoes suitable for the rainy season, and a few different outfits. In addition to the outfits she also wanted to save up for a birthday photoshoot. It is common practice for parents to arrange for professional or amateur photographs of their children on special occasions. These images are shared on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, with a subsequent post expressing their gratitude for the child's life. Family and friends respond with praise and well wishes for the child. The birthday was to take place in an open space at a local social club that was particularly attractive because of its swimming pool that could be used for a small fee. The guests were mainly her closest friends in the neighbourhood. The

food at the social club was too expensive, so Fatima had asked her mother and a few aunties to prepare some ginger beer and rice and an onion stew with meatballs and spaghetti, which is eaten at parties.

Despite living in a poor urban community with apalling sanitary conditions, most of Fatima's friends were well-dressed and had access to smartphones and social media. It was customary to acquire a second-hand smartphone from a relative, friend, partner, or family member living abroad, but Fatima's phone remained inactive most of the time, due to the inconsistent electricity supply and scarcity of phone credit, which was perceived as a luxury reserved for communicating with friends on WhatsApp and watching Tik-Tok videos. This pattern was not unique to Fatima; it was a common trend in the neighbourhood. Birthdays were usually celebrated by dressing up and going to the beach or a local fast-food restaurant where one could take pictures to display wealth and enjoyment. Fatima wanted to be perceived as a good mother by making sure Hawa looked presentable through carefully crafted displays on social media platforms. This behaviour is mirrored in Cole's (2010) study in Madagascar, where young women try to break free from traditional family structures by engaging in unique forms of self-expression through their consumption of Western influences Lipton describes this as 'bluffing' (2017, 144), a local Krio term for 'showing off'. Young mothers may use this form of self-realisation to escape their vulnerable reality in the process of navigating motherhood and striving toward modernity. In a social-media generation this pattern is universal, with young people in both African and non-African contexts often masking their vulnerability in search of validation by portraying an image or lifestyle online that does not reflect or align with their reality.

On the day of the birthday party I anticipated a lively gathering outside the cookery before we headed to the social club. Instead the cookery appeared half empty. I walked in on Fatima's mother telling a friend and local customers about a conflict between her and Fatima that had occurred during the week leading up to the birthday party. A few customers were drawn into the conversation as Fatima's mother's tone reflected both frustration and firmness. Based on her explanation, their relationship had been increasingly fraught and the tension had come to a head over several issues. The first was that Fatima no longer assisted in the cookery after moving in with her new boyfriend, Idris, yet she expected her mother and her stepmother to take care of Hawa while she was spending time with her boyfriend and other friends. She saw this as irresponsible behaviour and wanted Fatima to stop making such poor choices. Another cause of the tension was the expense of the birthday. Fatima had given her mother 200,000 Leones (approximately 20 USD) from her savings and community contributions for the birthday party. Her mother had refused to prepare the food in response to Fatima's 'disrespectful behaviour', withholding the funds until Fatima apologised. She

justified her decision by pointing out Fatima's immaturity, insisting that Fatima could have used the money to invest in a small business instead of spending it all on a birthday party. She felt that Fatima was being an irresponsible mother, prioritising her friends over her family, which was another cause of frustration. 'Where were her friends when I was paying for her school fees and giving her transport money?' The customers were empathetic, nodding in agreement. Her friend offered to speak with Fatima to encourage her to 'beg' her mother, a local term for apologising.

As Fatima and I entered her room later that afternoon I noticed how quickly she had settled in with her boyfriend, who lived next door to her mother and the cookery. Having recently moved in with him, the room seemed to reflect the transition, appearing chaotic at first glance with most of her belongings scattered throughout the place. We settled into conversation on an old black leather sofa next to a mattress on the floor. As Fatima was speaking it became apparent that the underlying tensions had existed before she moved out of the house and had nothing to do with the birthday party. Fatima believed she was doing the right thing as a mother. She no longer cared about the money and refused to apologise, leaving the tension unresolved.

The episode between Fatima and her mother draws attention to two things: Mariama's desire for her daughter to mature into a respectable mother and to commit to navigating her transition to motherhood on Mariama's terms.

In Ringsted's (2008) study of young mothers in Tanzania the concept of sensibility (*akili*), is acknowledged as a critical marker used to assess young women's maturity and level of responsibility. Ringsted argues that for young women the transition to motherhood is not an inherent or predetermined position; rather young mothers must strive to demonstrate *akili*, which only they can only acquire through life experience. Older women hold the power to support or hinder the teenage mother's transition into adulthood. They have the authority to grant or withhold the recognition, rights and privileges associated with being an adult (Ringsted 2008). Building on Ringsted's observations, it was evident that Mariama was only interested in helping her daughter based on her own terms. Mariama's public criticism of Fatima's behaviour served as a way of seeking validation as a responsible mother, asserting her position by emphasising her motherly sacrifice. She socially navigated her motherhood strategically by anticipating the future and 'what was to come', advising and preparing her daughter accordingly. As described by Cooper (2018), the transition to adulthood requires a 'serious' disposition in the face of the realities of hardship and poverty. Mariama's 'seriousness' was informed by past disappointments and her status as a divorcee and single mother who had had to grow up prematurely due to her early marriage and motherhood. Her social navigation

and journey to self-realisation reflected the resourcefulness and resilience that were evident in her ability to create and sustain a small-scale business like the restaurant with minimal resources.

The contention between Fatima's intersecting roles as a teenager and a mother resulted in a reimagined identity. Her approach to this transition was informed by both short- and long-term goals. On the one hand she was committed to passing her WASSCE, even though she was apprehensive about the next steps as she did not have the funds to apply to university. She also exercised maturity and independence by moving in with her partner and taking charge of her finances and caring for her sick child.

On the other hand, motherhood provided a means for her to reimagine her identity informed by 'agency and creativity to invent new forms of being and interacting with society' (Honwana 2014, 30). Teenage mothers and young people elsewhere become widely integrated with and exposed to information and new ways of navigating their livelihoods via modernity and technological platforms (ibid.). It was evident that the birthday represented much more than a simple celebration. For Fatima it was an opportunity to socially and creatively display her position as a 'good' mother, seeking respectability in the eyes of her peers by conforming to the generational and cultural patterns of self-realisation via digital and global technologies and materialism. Although this only gained her short-term validation it was a strategic way of projecting an imagined future, living in the 'state of wants', while navigating the economic constraints of her social reality (A. M. Honwana 2014, 34).

Mariama always praised her daughter for being 'very smart', and indeed Fatima's resourcefulness was displayed in her intelligence and ability to collect funds and mobilise her friends. Despite their differences they were both capable of navigating and multiplying the few resources they had. This mother and daughter dynamic indicates that social navigation and the expectations of motherhood may take various forms amidst social change, as each generation constructs their expectations of motherhood while finding new and creative strategies to 'move within a moving environment' (Vigh 2009, 425).

7.9. Conclusion

This chapter has questioned how girls reconstructed their social image as they navigated their intersecting roles as mothers, daughters and students in the process of social becoming. It has also illustrated the multiple ways in which teenage mothers negotiate and navigate child-fostering arrangements and family support as they return to school to complete their education. While the

transition to motherhood and adulthood differed from one context to another, it was evident that social navigation towards educational advancement did not come without maternal sacrifice. I argue that while some of the teenage mothers were able to reject the role of motherhood completely, relying on fluid constructs of motherhood and extensive parental support, others depended on cultural fostering arrangements that alleviated some of the challenges and responsibilities associated with motherhood.

The weight of motherhood was expressed through the interlocutors' desire to connect emotionally with their children and provide the best possible future for them. This desire was also marked by maternal sacrifice as my interlocutors prioritised raising their children in a nurturing environment, even when this resulted in a temporary or permanent separation.

While the intersection between schooling and motherhood was incompatible in previous generations, education in contemporary Adonkia, like many other African societies, was regarded as a 'salvational' tool that could deliver families from generational poverty, suffering and misfortune (Stambach 2010, 372). I argue that their pursuit of social becoming and self-realisation was a means for the girls to prove their seriousness and determination, set an example for their children and repay their parents, who eventually reaped the reward of their own sacrificial investment through their daughter's success and social achievements.

While employment and financial freedom were not always guaranteed due to economic and structural instability, during their transition the girls were still capable of maximising the opportunities they were afforded as they strategically negotiated and sometimes 'wilfully waited' for divine opportunities to emerge (Eisenstein 2021, 460).

Lastly, the social navigation of motherhood in impoverished communities reveals the generational shift in interpretations of good mothering. While the older generation may emphasise 'seriousness' and long-term strategic planning and expect teenage mothers to demonstrate these, the girls themselves may redefine their social navigation and definition of 'good' mothering to align with modern values and social change.

8. Conclusion

This study has explored how girls navigate uncertainties related to teenage pregnancy and motherhood in Adonkia, a small impoverished community in the Western Area of Sierra Leone. The thesis fills the gaps in the contemporary literature on teenage reproduction in Africa from an ethnographic approach by contributing to the anthropological debates on sexuality, gender, kinship and schooling. It critiques the limitations of the prevailing discourses within public health and development studies. The ethnography challenges the local and global portrayals of teenage reproduction by offering alternative narratives of how girls face competing social transitions as they grapple with their identity and issues related to respectability and kinship care within moralising frameworks.

As the introduction argues, moral panic regarding teenage pregnancy and motherhood has resulted in negative social, political and religious framing of this phenomenon based on marginalising and generalising narratives that fail to account for the diverse experiences of those who experience it. Studies have demonstrated how these negative discourses perpetuate gender inequality in society and in various religious and public institutions (Ringsted 2004; Bratton 2010; Massaquoi et al. 2021).

In Sierra Leone most of the existing research on teenage pregnancy has been conducted by NGOs and development organisations, creating a predominantly biomedical and epidemiological public health focus on the reproductive health concerns and economic challenges that emphasises the stigmatisation and ridicule accompanying their experience of pregnancy and motherhood. Public health research in the country conceptualises teenage girls' sexuality based on portrayals of passivity and victimisation, emphasising the social consequences and subsequent misfortune that teenage pregnancy and motherhood brings (UNICEF 2015; Denney et al. 2017; UNFPA 2020; S. Blake 2021).

While recent literature on reproductive health in other sub-Saharan African countries takes a more holistic approach to addressing the cultural and social issues related to teenage pregnancy, education and sexuality (Salo 2004; Mkhwanazi 2010; Chili and Pranitha 2017; Nkani 2017; Moodley 2021), in Sierra Leone these issues have not yet been addressed in academic literature.

The three research questions introduced in the introduction focused on how girls navigate three significant stages of pregnancy and mother: the early stages of pregnancy, during their pregnancy, and as mothers. First, I questioned their navigation of their sexuality, kinship dynamics and the moral complexities related to the early stages of pregnancy; then I examined how cultural gender norms, moral tensions and religious value systems influenced their navigation of their sexuality and their response to social judgement as the pregnancy progressed; and lastly, I explored the girls' navigation

of their educational aspirations, motherhood, and kinship support in their process of 'social becoming'.

The first two chapters situate my research, the existing literature and the relevant concepts. They discuss and identify the key debates, gaps and concepts that inform the empirical chapters. The third chapter links Sierra Leone's past and recent history to the religious, kinship, educational, and political structures that have shaped the country's social norms and discourses on teenage sexuality, pregnancy and motherhood Chapter 4 describes my fieldwork experience and the methodology I used to explore the perspectives and daily lives of my interlocutors and members of their social networks, and discusses how my positionality and ethical concerns during and after completing my fieldwork influenced my research experience.

Chapter 5, Discovering Pregnancy, discusses how girls and their families navigate the news of the pregnancy, arguing that the local interpretation of misfortune determines the quality of the compassion and understanding that pregnant teenagers receive from their parents, from healthcare workers, and from others in their social network. Chapter 6, Being Pregnant, continues the discussion on kinship involvement, highlighting the *ansa belle* negotiating process and the significance of holding men accountable through the cultural practice of getting them to acknowledge their paternity. The chapter proposes that the girls' uncertainty about financial and educational matters can be mitigated or exacerbated by the genitors' willingness to recognise or deny paternity.

Chapter 7, Motherhood and Life after Childbirth, contends that teenage mothers strive to overcome the uncertainty and the negative social images associated with reproductive misfortune by pursuing respectability through 'good' mothering and educational achievement within a framework of reciprocity, social support, fostering practices and fluid constructs of motherhood.

This chapter presents an overview of the contributions that the thesis makes to the fields of anthropology, public health, development and African studies, it concludes by presenting possible future research directions to advance knowledge about this topic.

8.1. Revisiting the Public Health and Development Discourse

While public health narratives pathologise teenage pregnancy and frame it as a social concern, ethnography contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the trajectory from pregnancy to motherhood, which is understood throughout this thesis as a social process and a flexible framework

that leaves room for negotiation, restoration, disappointment, religious beliefs, social support, resilience and imagined futures.

The conceptualisation of reproductive misfortune in this thesis contributes to our understanding of uncertainty and social reproduction. Rather than perceiving misfortune as a negative individualised experience, the empirical chapters demonstrate the shifting collective diagnosis and religious meaning-making that acknowledge the challenging and generative trajectories girls and their families navigate in their pursuit of security. This double framing challenges the negative portrayals and broadens the discourse on teenage reproduction by revealing the strategic measures at play in everyday life.

As the introduction argues, a central theme of this research is the exploration of teenage pregnancy from a kinship and cultural perspective, revisiting the biomedical frameworks and public health discourse focusing on health risks and socioeconomic challenges. While health concerns are usually at the forefront of teenage pregnancy, Chapter 5 reveals that in Adonkia, local moral and spiritual interpretations of misfortune are just as important as concern about the girls' physical health. In this community the response to teenage pregnancy is determined not only by the health risks but also by the obligations of kinship as girls and their families search for meaning amid uncertainty. The findings illustrate the importance of shifting the public health discourse centred on the pregnant individual's behaviour to a more general understanding of the social environment and the significance of the moral and spiritual interpretations influencing their decision-making and the ensuing positive and negative consequences. As girls and their families reframe the 'problem' and the notion of reproductive misfortune through religious interpretations, kinship restoration and social reproduction and mobility,

meaning, restoration and social reproduction, their lived reality demonstrates their flexible approach to processing the uncertainties related to teenage pregnancy.

The moral focus captures the subjective and intersecting spiritual and ethical frameworks that are commonly overlooked in public health intervention and reproductive health research in Sierra Leone and other sub-Saharan African settings (Sijpt 2018; Amakor 2020; Blake 2021). These cultural framework reported in the thesis can contribute to the public health literature as NGOs and international organisations establish interventions and national policies based on a locally grounded approach and cultural sensitivity. The findings also demonstrate how both healthcare workers and teenage girls are affected by the ambiguities of reproductive health policies and ethical dilemmas about abortion.

While religious and public health discourses are often intertwined, especially in relation to sexuality and reproductive health issues, their narratives frequently focus on the extremes, depicting girls as either innocent passive victims or promiscuous sexual agents. By situating the research on sexuality and reproductive health within a community, my analysis further demonstrates the value of understanding how religious leaders and healthcare professionals influence the ambiguities of the ethical discourse and attitudes to abortion and sexual morality.

Although healthcare and religious institutions may offer pregnant teenagers support, care and moral guidance, they also have the opposite effect by reinforcing judgment, social stigmatisation and punitive measures. Similar to the parental response, these morally charged spaces can reinforce or alleviate pregnant girls' and teenage mothers' feelings of uncertainty and misfortune. The dichotomy between support and judgment in institutional settings has also been identified in Nigeria (Amakor 2018), Brazil (Steele 2011) and among African Americans in the US (Kaplan 1997).

This empowering and moralising contention has also been described in educational policy promoting girls' access to education in Sierra Leone and other African countries while at the same time marginalising or discriminating against pregnant girls and teenage mothers (Ringsted 2008; Denney et al. 2017; Pot 2019; Salvi 2019).

Johnson-Hanks (2005) argues that Cameroonian schoolgirls who were determined to complete their education considered a secret abortion a preferable alternative to pregnancy, which cannot be hidden. I also identified this pattern, which speaks to the link between education and teenage pregnancy and the importance of personal reputation and social respectability, among my interlocutors. While the public health model promotes girls' empowerment through education, it also perpetuates social pressure and discourages girls such as Fanta in Chapter 5, who internalised her pregnancy as a moral and social failure. As I argue in Chapter 7, the emphasis on girls' education and women's empowerment since the end of the civil war has increased the perception and value of education in the country.

8.2. Shifting Gender and Kinship Norms

The empirical findings highlight and describe experiences of pregnancy and motherhood among teenage girls in contemporary Adonkia in relation to local gender norms and expectations. This ethnographic focus contributes to African studies by highlighting social change and the significance

of tradition, kinship and religion not just as a cultural backdrop, but as fluid and contested systems that shape how girls process and manage their social worlds and lived realities.

The power of institutional structures and the projected and imposed gender biases were both thoughtfully managed by religious leaders and resisted by some teenage mothers. The cultural decline in the practice of initiation rites has resulted in more subjective interpretations of masculinity and femininity, with young people inclined to perform some aspects of gender in alignment with more modern value systems and emergent ideals while rejecting some traditional practices. Ansa belle, a practice that has continued and evolved since the precolonial period in Adonkia, is a practice that reinforces the social construction of masculinity and fatherhood and which considers the responsibility and financial provision for the child. As the desire to marry early continues to decrease among young men and women, *ansa bella* has become an essential practice symbolising moral order and accountability on the part of the genitor that counteracts the local stereotype of the irresponsible father.

The uncertainty engendered by a teenage pregnancy renders schooling a more significant investment than marriage in ansa belle negotiations. This finding illustrates a contemporary shift and the value and security to be found in education, despite the structural instability in society and limited employment opportunities. The perceived value of education highlights the shifting tolerance for and justification of the use of contraceptives among the older and more conservative generation. However, the moral discourse about girls' sexuality in Adonkia demonstrates the dichotomy between empathy and blame, passivity and resistance, as girls navigate gender inequality in their sexual relationships and in social spaces. Similar findings on the generational shift in interpretations of masculinity and femininity among African teenage parents have been identified in South Africa (Blake 2017; Chili and Pranitha 2017; Mkhwanazi and Bhana 2017) and Kono, Sierra Leone (McLean 2019).

As reviewed in the introduction, although many studies have explored the dichotomy between schooling and teenage pregnancy across Africa (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Bratton 2010; Salvi 2019), despite growing social change in Sierra Leone there is limited research addressing the contemporary values and understanding of education in a small community such as Adonkia. My findings contribute to wider debates in development studies on motherhood and schooling, showing how education is imagined as the solution and the trajectory towards social redemption despite the uncertain realities that rarely guarantee the linear path of upward mobility that development discourse presents. The girls' social navigation towards education after pregnancy counteracts the narrative associated with passivity and the negative dichotomy between schooling

and motherhood in Adonkia. The generational tensions and kinship dynamics illustrate the moral expectations attached to teenage mothers as girls weigh up their opportunities and assess the risks and sacrificial investments that they and their children face. The tensions between family support and social control highlight the challenge of navigating the transition between schooling and motherhood.

Throughout the thesis I argue that the generational shifts and constructs of marriage, education and youth have influenced the value of education and increased support for girls' schooling. However, due to social pressures and gender norms girls are still expected to restore their social status through their moral performance and maturity as they negotiate their social position and strive towards respectability. Similar to other findings in the US and South Africa, this thesis demonstrates the significance of intergenerational relationships and idealised interpretations of 'good mothering' (Kaplan 1997; Blake 2017).

The narrative of the girls not only provides a snapshot of their lived realities but also offers insight into their thoughts, actions, hopes and imagined futures, which humanises a group that is often marginalised in national and global public health discourses. The thesis offers a contextualised understanding of interrelated social dichotomies among these young girls, their families and their social worlds. Without negating girls' harsh realities, it points to their resilience as they navigate uncertainty in pursuit of a brighter future for themselves and their children.

As debates related to teenage reproduction continue to evolve in academic and non-academic spaces, it is important to centre the perspectives and lives of those directly affected. The narratives shared throughout this thesis remind us that pregnancy and motherhood among teenage girls are fluid and flexible transitions that are socially situated and morally negotiated conditions which necessitate nuanced and context-sensitive engagement.

8.3. Suggestions for Future Research

Although I discussed the pressing topic of unsafe abortion in Chapter 5, I was unable to explore it fully because of the cultural taboo regarding abortion. From a medical anthropological perspective, future research could investigate the moral contentions and ambiguities of unsafe abortion and post-abortion care to gain insight and understanding on how healthcare workers provide reproductive healthcare for girls dealing with an unexpected pregnancy. In a context where abortion is illegal, it is crucial to identify experiences of emotional and psychological distress and the gap between the health

system and public health policy in order to enable adequate support and counselling for young women contemplating abortion.

Chapter 6 briefly touches on the study's empirical findings on fatherhood. A growing body of research challenges the narrative of absent fatherhood among African men (Hunter 2002; Chili and Pranitha 2017; Mkhwanazi and Bhana 2017; McLean 2019). However, there is very little research on young fathers in relation to teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone and other African countries. Young men have often been portrayed from the perspective of teenage girls as their boyfriends or the fathers of their children. I only engaged with a few teenage fathers briefly, and most of the information I received about them came from secondary sources depicting them as irresponsible or negligent. Mike's narrative in Chapter 6 reveals a different picture, showing that some teenage fathers are able and willing to acknowledge their paternity and accept the role and responsibilities of fatherhood despite feelings of anxiety and worry. I strongly agree with Tom Beardshaw's statement on the need for 'explorations of the diversity of men's thoughts and aspirations in relation to their children and partners to develop a greater understanding of what motivates men in families' (2006, 307). Further ethnographic exploration of the experiences of teenage fatherhood and how young men construct their masculinity and dominant ideas of manhood would contribute to contemporary literature on teenage parenthood. Chapter 6 discusses how the challenges around male accountability and perceptions of gender inequality and transactional sexual relationships were a pressing concern in the community; future research could incorporate local intervention strategies for eliciting male engagement and involvement. Building on the experiences of the Institute of Gender Research and Documentation (Ibrahim and Susan 2022) to address gender-based inequality, the research should explore how it is possible to 'soften patriarchy in exchange for slightly better outcomes for women and girls' (ibid. 2022, 3). A practical approach could include discussions around male accountability, sexual relationships, sexual consent versus coercion, and the role and responsibilities of fatherhood.

Another interesting topic for future research is the experience of gender-based violence among teenage mothers both during and after pregnancy. As expressed in Chapter 4, this became a serious ethical concern for me as girls informed me about instances of emotional and physical abuse they had suffered during my fieldwork period and a case of serious sexual assault a few days before I was due to leave Sierra Leone. The experience of sexual and gender-based violence is not unknown to Sierra Leonean women. Young women in particular were subject to high incidence of rape and physical violence during the civil war in 1991–2002 (Coulter 2009; Schneider 2019b). Given the current political interest in addressing the high rates of physical and sexual abuse, it would be interesting to

further investigate the socially embedded nature of gender-based violence in Sierra Leone's culture. This research could investigate the different forms of abuse and how it manifests in the lives of pregnant girls and teenage mothers, as well as the weak support structures and stigmatisation associated with reporting incidents of gender-based violence.

While this thesis has reported on both Islamic and Christian communities and their practices in relation to teenage pregnancy, I found evidence that some religious institutions and denominations took a more lenient view on it than others. Because of the majority Christian demographic among my key informants, most religious perceptions were seen through this lens. To gain more richness and depth regarding cultural and religious practices, future research could focus more specifically on the Islamic value system in majority Muslim ethnic groups and communities, which seemed more conservative than the general population in Western Area.

Based on the findings reported in this thesis, future research could also examine interventions to reduce teenage pregnancy through community-based programmes by addressing the gap regarding young people's access to comprehensive sexuality education. As a nurse suggested, community intervention could focus on a collective approach that included parents, healthcare workers, community elders and religious leaders to encourage a sense of shared responsibility and reduce the cultural expectations placed on female kin, especially mothers, who may be poorly equipped to discuss issues related to sex education with their teenage daughters (section 5.2).

In a contemporary urban context such as Adonkia, traditional ideals of abstinence and chastity are slowly being replaced by modernity and the Western influence. This raises the issue of whether policy and legislation should reflect cultural and religious value systems or respond and adapt to contemporary realities and the needs of the population. Research could investigate cultural discourses on comprehensive sex education, questioning perceptions and the prevailing belief that it might inadvertently undermine parental influence by disrupting traditional and religious values. Exploring this topic and the dichotomy between frameworks for sex education based on abstinence messaging and the rights-based approach may illuminate the challenges and omissions that lead to teenage girls becoming pregnant and inform public health, development and political discourse on teenage sexuality.

This thesis implies that given their power over teenage mothers, religious institutions punish and discriminate against young women who deviate from the moral standard. Future research could aim to observe or develop safe and non-discriminatory supportive networks for teenage mothers including mentorship programmes or assistance with psychological and financial needs. For instance women

who were once teenage mothers, like the nurse from Chapter 5. By encouraging them to share and exchange their experiences, such an initiative could increase girls' self-confidence and hopes for the future.

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1: Research Samples

Fieldwork (October 2021 -September 2022)	
Group	**Total #**
Religious leaders	5 Pastors 3 Imams 2 Respected Muslim elders in the community
Kinship	5 Parents 3 Boyfriend 3 Sisters 1 Grandfather 1 Mother-in-law
NGO Workers	12 national and international workers
Government officials	1 Ministry of Health 1 Ministry of Gender and children's affairs
Healthcare workers	6 Nurses/ Midwives
Others	1 School Principal 1 Journalist
Total	45

Appendix 2: Key Informants' Interview Guide

Introduction and context setting:

Thank you for taking time out to participate in this study. My name is Hamida Massaquoi. As I have explained in the Participant Information Sheet, I would like to talk to you about the local community/ national perceptions of pregnancy and motherhood. This interview will be based on a simple conversation, with no right or wrong answers.
If you do not mind, I will start recording now.

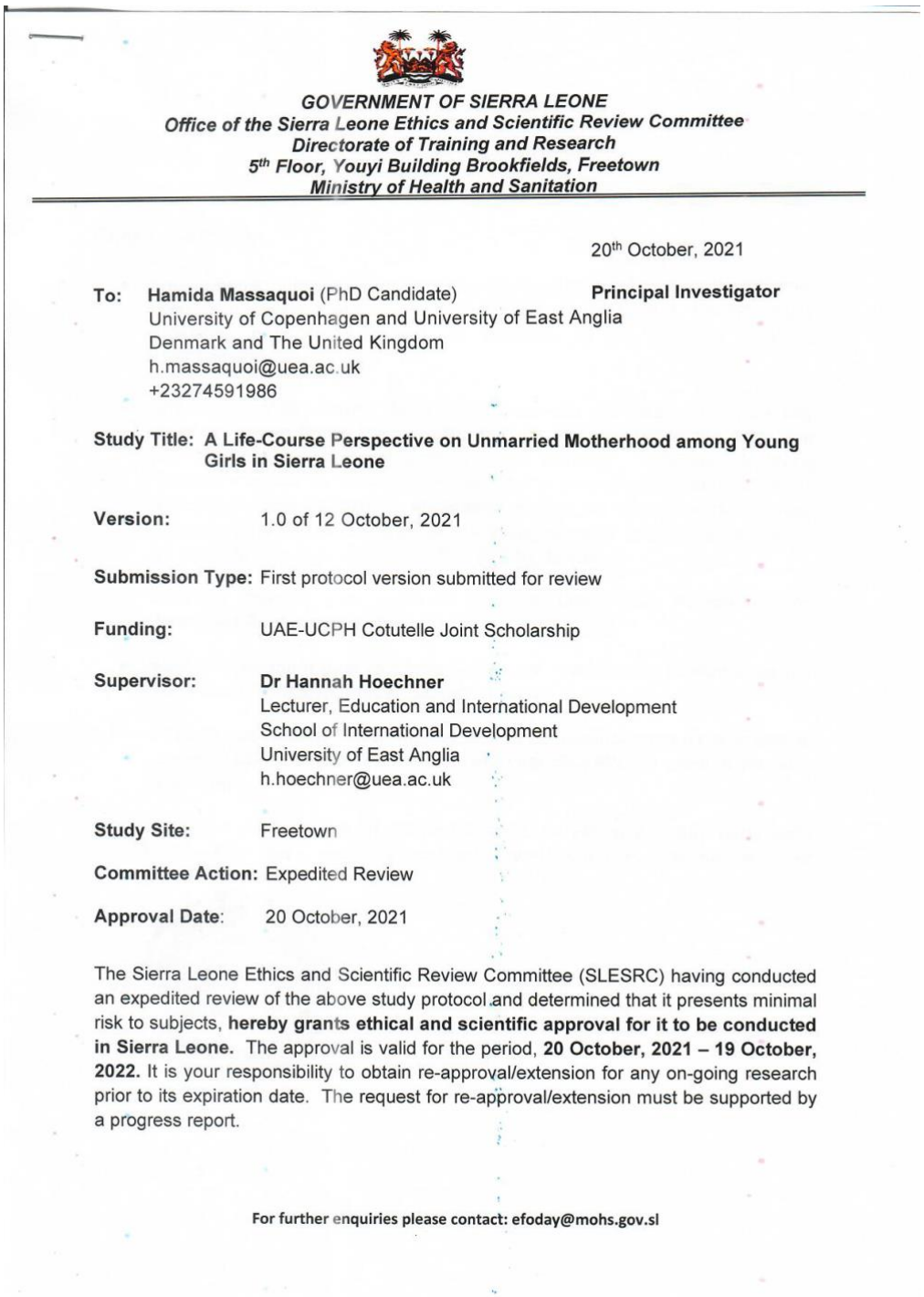
- What can you tell me about on pregnancy and motherhood among young women in Sierra Leone? *Can you explain in a bit more detail?*

- How do you think age and gendered dimensions of sexual morality and control and sexual or reproductive autonomy figure in discourse regarding pregnancy among young women?

- How do you think the community generally responds to teenage pregnancy and motherhood among unmarried teenage mothers?
  Is adolescent pregnancy and motherhood accepted in this community? Why? Why not? What are community views on girls getting pregnant at a young age?

- What do you think the areas of consensus, debates or disagreement suggest about normative expectations for girls' transitions through adolescence in this context?

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval from the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee



GOVERNMENT OF SIERRA LEONE
Office of the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee
Directorate of Training and Research
5th Floor, Youyi Building Brookfields, Freetown
Ministry of Health and Sanitation

20th October, 2021

To: **Hamida Massaquoi** (PhD Candidate) **Principal Investigator**
University of Copenhagen and University of East Anglia
Denmark and The United Kingdom
h.massaquoi@uea.ac.uk
+23274591986

Study Title: **A Life-Course Perspective on Unmarried Motherhood among Young Girls in Sierra Leone**

Version: 1.0 of 12 October, 2021

Submission Type: First protocol version submitted for review

Funding: UAE-UCPH Cotutelle Joint Scholarship

Supervisor: **Dr Hannah Hoechner**
Lecturer, Education and International Development
School of International Development
University of East Anglia
h.hoechner@uea.ac.uk

Study Site: Freetown

Committee Action: Expedited Review

Approval Date: 20 October, 2021

The Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (SLESRC) having conducted an expedited review of the above study protocol and determined that it presents minimal risk to subjects, **hereby grants ethical and scientific approval for it to be conducted in Sierra Leone.** The approval is valid for the period, **20 October, 2021 – 19 October, 2022.** It is your responsibility to obtain re-approval/extension for any on-going research prior to its expiration date. The request for re-approval/extension must be supported by a progress report.

For further enquiries please contact: efoday@mohs.gov.sl

GOVERNMENT OF SIERRA LEONE
Office of the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee
Directorate of Training and Research
5th Floor, Youyi Building Brookfields, Freetown
Ministry of Health and Sanitation

Review Comments:

- **Amendments:** Intended changes to the approved protocol such as the informed consent documents, study design, recruitment of participants and key study personnel, must be submitted for approval by the SLESRC prior to implementation

- **Termination of the study:** When study procedures and data analyses are fully complete, please inform the SLESRC that you are terminating the study and submit a brief report covering the protocol activities. Individual identifying information should be destroyed unless there is sufficient justification to retain, approved by the SLESRC. All findings should be based on de-identified aggregate data and all published results in aggregate or group form. A copy of any publication be submitted to the SLESRC for its archive

- ***Consider revising your topic to read: A Life-Course Perspective on Unmarried Adolescent Mothers in Sierra Leone***

- ***Note that pregnant girls in Sierra Leone are now allowed in school as per the current Radical Inclusion Education Policy***

- ***All participant contact information/consent documents must be amended to include +23278366493 for contact with the SLESRC in case there is a complaint***

- ***Note that consent age in Sierra Leone is 18 years, and any participant below that age must fill out an assent form, in addition to their guardian/parent's consent***

SIERRA LEONE ETHICS & SCIENTIFIC REVIEW COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Professor Hector G. Morgan
Chair

For further enquiries please contact: efoday@mohs.gov.sl

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval Letter From University of East Anglia

University of East Anglia

Study title: A life course perspective of unmarried motherhood among young girls in Sierra

Application ID: ETH2122-0215

Dear Hamida,

Your application was considered on 12th November 2021 by the DEV S-REC (School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

Please see the comments I have added in the application. These are suggestions only. It has also been suggested that you keep close contact with your supervisors and discuss ethical aspects of your research on a regular basis.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **30th September 2022**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the DEV S-REC (School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the DEV S-REC (School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the DEV S-REC (School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the DEV S-REC (School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you

need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the DEV S-REC (School of International Development Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Teresa Armijos Burneo

Ethics ETH2122-0215: Miss Hamida Massaquoi

Appendix 4: Conceptual Framework