

Raising Children in Precarious Spaces: Coping Strategies of Young Mothers in Urban Slums of Accra, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study examined coping strategies of young mothers raising children in urban slum communities in Accra, Ghana. Guided by Jack's Ecological Influences Framework and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, interviews were conducted with 20 young mothers aged 18–35 in Old Fadama and African Eleven. The findings revealed five strategies: spiritual coping and religious reliance; adaptive food management strategies; psychological endurance and emotional regulation; community-based support networks; and informal financial management and credit utilization. Environmental stressors, including crime and social disorder, shaped mothers' parenting experiences and created tensions in transmitting values to their children. These findings suggest that young mothers' coping strategies are shaped not only by individual resilience but also by the social, economic, and environmental constraints of urban slum life, underscoring the need for integrated interventions that address these structural conditions.

KEYWORDS

Coping strategies; Ghana; parenting; slum; young mothers

Introduction

Among life's most demanding yet fulfilling responsibilities, parenting plays a pivotal role in shaping children's growth trajectories and long-term life prospects (Carlson, 2012; Hoeve et al., 2009). Effective parenting entails fulfilling children's fundamental needs, including shelter, nutrition, health-care, and clothing, while also offering emotional warmth and a nurturing setting that fosters development from early childhood through adulthood (Amos, 2013). Nonetheless, environmental realities, social structures, and resource availability influence how parents raise their children, and the outcomes achieved (Virasiri et al., 2011).

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Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, accelerating urban growth has led a substantial proportion of low-income families living in informal communities where essential services stay chronically insufficient (Visagie & Turok, 2020). Studies reveal that slum conditions, including overcrowding, unsafe water sources, inadequate sanitation, disease exposure, food insecurity and restricted access to health services, intensify the vulnerabilities that mothers and children living in these areas experience (Cotton, 2013; Mekonnen et al., 2024; Nyika & Dinka, 2023; Zerbo et al., 2020). Young mothers in such settings often contend with elevated stress levels, greater exposure to gender-based violence, limited opportunities for economic participation, and reduced access to social protection (Oduro et al., 2012; Swart, 2012; Twintoh et al., 2021; Wado et al., 2020). Together, these factors erode their capacity to parent effectively and expose their children to heightened risks of poor health and developmental difficulties. The compounding effects of early motherhood, including interrupted schooling, social exclusion, and economic precarity, make it increasingly difficult for young mothers in such areas to adequately provide for their children (Fearnley, 2018). This is especially true for adolescent mothers, who lack financial autonomy and depend heavily on their own parents for basic survival (Balanda-Baldyga et al., 2020).

Comparable trends are evident in Ghana. Research indicates that slum communities are marked by environmental hazards, precarious housing, and restricted access to maternal and child health services (Awunyo-Akaba et al., 2016; Owusu-Ansah et al., 2016; Twintoh et al., 2021). Evidence further shows that children residing in slum areas, particularly in Accra, face elevated rates of infant and child morbidity, malnutrition, and reduced access to early childhood development opportunities relative to peers in non-slum urban and rural settings (Awumbila et al., 2014; Brempong et al., 2023). Young mothers, especially adolescents, also report considerable psychological distress, weak social support networks, and financial hardship, all which compromise their psychosocial wellbeing, caregiving capacity, and ability to provide stable developmental conditions for their children (Twintoh et al., 2021). These difficulties are further compounded by disrupted education and scarce income-generating options, giving parenting in slum environments increasingly perilous (Braithwaite & Lawson, 2014; Fearnley, 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention on maternal and child health in Ghanaian slums, research that specifically examines how young mothers navigate the demands of parenting in these harsh environments remains limited. For instance, Twintoh et al. (2021) explored childcare practices among teenage mothers but did not address coping strategies within slum contexts. Likewise, Owusu-Ansah et al. (2016) focused on access to maternal health services, while Awumbila et al. (2014) investigated the links

between rural-to-urban migration and poverty, and Brempong et al. (2023) investigated the challenges of young mothers raising children in the urban slums of Ghana. However, none of these studies directly examined the lived experiences or adaptive responses of young mothers.

This gap points to the need for qualitative inquiry that documents the strategies young mothers employ to sustain and support their children's upbringing amid the compounding adversities of urban slum environments in Accra identified a previous study (Brempong et al., 2023). Drawing on these gaps and relevant theoretical insights, the present study aims to examine how young mothers navigate the demands of raising children within the precarious spaces of two prominent slum communities in Accra: Old Fadama and African Eleven. The study has two central questions: What coping strategies do they adopt to sustain their children's upbringing amid the compounding adversities of slum living? And in what ways do ecological factors, at the individual, community and structural levels, shape these coping strategies? A deeper understanding of how young mothers raise children in such precarious conditions is essential for developing targeted interventions and evidence-based policy responses that meaningfully support vulnerable young mothers in resource-constrained urban communities.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by Jack's (2000) Ecological Influences Framework (EIF) for understanding parenting experiences of the young mothers who participated in the study. EIF builds on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. The framework foregrounds the interplay of multiple ecological layers, encompassing individual, interpersonal, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, including social support, services, and policies, in shaping parenting experiences. As such, understanding parenting requires examining each of these dimensions and their interactions across different levels and not just the parent's personal characteristics of the mothers. Jack's (2000) adaptation identifies several core components: the social ecology of families; the interplay between family stressors and protective factors; individual and structural influences on social support networks; and community-level variables that bear on parenting practices. Central to this framework is the concept of family social ecology, which reflects the balance between stressors and supportive forces within the family environment, including immediate physical surroundings and social exchanges with relatives, neighbors, peers, colleagues, and faith communities.

The EIF has been applied in research examining family stress, coping, and parenting within contexts of poverty and social marginalization (Affandy & Azman, 2024; Attree, 2006; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Williams, 2010). Scholars have drawn on it to investigate parenting

challenges among low-income mothers in disadvantaged communities, demonstrating how scarce resources, prevailing social norms, and environmental pressures shape coping behaviors and decision-making (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffee, 2015; Twintoh et al., 2021). Its focus on ecological influences makes it well-suited to understanding how slum conditions, community support systems, and individual resilience collectively shape coping strategies among young mothers. Accordingly, the model offers a lens through which to examine the specific ecological forces affecting young mothers' child-rearing practices in slums, as well as the downstream effects of these forces on children's development.

Significance of the study

The study holds significance for several interconnected reasons. First, Ghana's urban slums are expanding at a rapid pace, yet the experiences of young mothers, a particularly vulnerable subgroup, remain insufficiently documented in the literature. Second, examining how young mothers manage in such precarious conditions' sheds light on resilience, informal social protection mechanisms, and adaptive practices within marginalized communities. Finally, the study's findings are intended to inform targeted interventions aimed at enhancing maternal well-being and improving child developmental outcomes. Given the increasing number of young mothers living in informal settlements across Ghana, the evidence generated by this study is critical for designing context-sensitive responses that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those addressing poverty reduction, health, and gender equality.

Methodology

Study design

This study examined the coping strategies of young mothers residing in urban slums in Accra. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing face-to-face in-depth interviews. This design was considered proper as it enabled an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences, subjective meanings, and the complex social dynamics associated with parenting in deprived urban settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

Study sites

Data was collected from two informal urban settlements: Old Fadama, located within the Accra Metropolitan Area, and African Eleven Accra in the Tema West Municipality. These locations were purposively selected due to their high population density, widespread poverty and presence of young mothers whose parenting experiences are insufficiently documented.

Commonly referred to as “Sodom and Gomorrah,” Old Fadama is the largest informal settlement in Accra and Ghana, covering approximately 146 hectares between the Odaw River and Korle-Gonno (Housing the Masses, 2010). Originally established as a refuge for Konkomba and Nanumba migrants displaced by the 1994 conflict,¹ the settlement has expanded considerably over time, largely due to the availability of low-cost housing. It currently hosts an estimated population of about 150,000 residents (Kritz, 2026). The community is predominantly inhabited by petty traders, scrap dealers, and head porters, many of whom originate from northern Ghana. Living conditions are characterized by poor sanitation, inadequate drainage systems, frequent flooding, recurrent fire outbreaks, and elevated levels of crime and violence, often linked to unregulated construction and substandard housing materials (Awumbila et al., 2014).

Also known as “Kiosk Estate” or “Orlando Yard,” African Eleven is situated within the Spintex area of the Tema West Metropolis. The Tema Metropolis has a population of approximately 292,773 (GSS, 2021), with African Eleven settlement with a population estimated at 1,000 residents. The area derives its name from a formerly prominent local football team. Unlike Old Fadama, a notable proportion of residents in African Eleven are employed in formal jobs, particularly at nearby industrial establishments (E. Quartey, personal communication, January 2, 2021).

Sampling technique and sampling size

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation – young mothers raising children in slum environments (Etikan, 2016). Participants were identified through community gatekeepers, including local leaders, women’s group heads, and trusted community informants within Old Fadama and African Eleven. Eligibility was established through participants’ self-reports and confirmation from community members, particularly in relation to their motherhood status and place of residence.

A total of 20 participants were included in the study. The sample size was determined based on data saturation. Saturation was reached after approximately 16 interviews, at which point no new themes were emerging. Four additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic redundancy and ensure variation across the two study sites (Guest et al., 2006). In total, 27 eligible individuals were approached to participate in the study. Of these, 7 did not participate due to time constraints, lack of interest, or privacy concerns. All participants who consented to participate in the study were aged between 18 and 35 years and provided informed consent.

Eligibility criteria

Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria. Eligible individuals were young mothers aged 18–35 years with at least one biological child aged 0–5 years. This age range was selected because of the intensive caregiving demands of early childhood. Participants were also required to have lived in the study communities for at least one year, be able to communicate in either English or Twi, and be willing to provide informed consent. Individuals were excluded if they were above 35 years of age, had children older than five years, were temporary residents or visitors, or were unable to provide informed consent. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient and relevant experience with early childcare within the slum environment.

Data collection procedure

Primary data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed researchers to probe for detailed information. Researchers also employed observational techniques to document the physical characteristics of the slum areas, while the interviews captured perspectives and personal experiences (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This observational technique provided first-hand verification of issues described by participants.

The development of the interview guide followed a systematic and theoretically informed process. We began by conducting a focused review of literature on parenting in low-resource settings, coping strategies among young mothers, and the specific challenges of slum environments. Foundational works on ecological influences on parenting by Jack (2000), along with empirical studies on young mothers in deprived urban settings (Twintoh et al., 2021), guided the identification of the major thematic areas. Literature on slum health and wellbeing, such as Satterthwaite et al. (2020) and Awumbila et al. (2014), also provided direction for context-specific issues relevant to Ghana's informal settlements. Based on this review, we drafted an initial set of the interview guide. The guide was then reviewed by the researchers and supervisors, who are experts in qualitative social research, and they provided feedback on clarity, sensitivity, and content relevance. Their contributions helped to refine the language and strengthen alignment with ethical considerations for interviewing young mothers.

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews in locations chosen by the participants, including their homes, community spaces, and other private settings to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Data was collected over a three-month period, from May to July 2021. A total of 13 interviews were conducted in Twi and 7 in English, based on participants' language preferences. Twi interviews generally yielded richer and more

nuanced narratives, while some English interviews were more constrained in depth, likely reflecting differences in language fluency. The principal researcher facilitated the interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Recording helped overcome memory limitations and prevented interpretive biases that might emerge from simultaneous listening and note-taking.

Audio files and transcripts were stored on a password-protected laptop accessible only to the researchers, and backup copies were kept on an encrypted external drive. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to enhance credibility. NVivo 12 Pro software facilitated data management, coding, and theme generation.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) framework as outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008). The analytical process involved several stages.

First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve deep familiarity with the data. Initial observations were documented, focusing on key statements, emotional expressions, and descriptive elements. Each transcript was examined in detail to preserve the individuality of participants' experiences, with attention given to pauses, repetition, symbolic language, and emotionally charged responses. This process facilitated the identification of preliminary themes.

Second, the initial notes were interpreted to construct meaningful representations of participants' perspectives. Codes were then developed and applied across transcripts to identify recurring patterns. NVivo 12 Pro software was used to systematically organize and manage the coding process.

Third, related codes were grouped together to form broader themes. Similar concepts, such as economic hardship, lack of childcare support, and food insecurity, were clustered into overarching thematic categories. Where necessary, subthemes were created to capture variations within broader themes. For instance, economic coping strategies included subthemes such as petty trading, food rationing and participation in savings schemes. Relationships between themes were carefully examined and clearly defined.

Finally, the findings were presented in a thematic format, supported by verbatim quotations to illustrate key points. The discussion integrated these findings with existing literature and provided analytical interpretations.

To enhance the rigor of the study, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts and compared their results to ensure consistency. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Additional measures,

including peer debriefing and member checking with selected participants, were employed to strengthen credibility. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytical process to document key decisions.

Ethical approval

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the Humanities at the University of Ghana (Approval ECH121/20-21). Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and voluntary nature. Both written and verbal consent were obtained before participation.

Researcher characteristics and reflexivity

The interviews were conducted by the principal researcher, who has academic training in the social sciences and extensive experience in qualitative research. The researcher was not a resident of the study communities and was therefore positioned as an outsider. This positionality may have shaped participants' perceptions of the researcher, potentially as an educated or institutionally affiliated figure, which could have influence responses, particularly on sensitive issues such as parenting and livelihood practices. Participants may have engaged in socially desirable responses, emphasizing positive caregiving behaviors. To mitigate these effects, efforts were made to build rapport and trust, including clear communication of the study's purpose, assurances of confidentiality, and a respectful, non-judgmental interview approach. Reflexive practices were maintained throughout the research process, including ongoing self-awareness of potential biases and critical reflection during data interpretation.

Findings

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants indicate diversity across age, marital status, education, and employment. The majority of participants were within the 18–35 age range, predominantly single or cohabitating, and largely engaged in informal economic activities. Educational attainment was generally low, with many participants having either a basic education or no formal education. These characteristics reflect the socioeconomic vulnerabilities typical of slum populations and provide important context for interpreting the coping strategies identified in this study. [Table 1](#) below provides the socio-demographic details of young mothers and their children.

Young mothers raising children in urban slum environments encounter multiple and intersecting challenges that necessitate the adoption of diverse

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of young mothers ($n=20$).

Characteristics	Categories/Range	Frequency (N)
Age (years)	18–20	7
	21–25	4
	26–30	6
	31–35	3
	Married	2
Marital status of young mothers	Single	10
	Divorced	1
	Cohabiting	7
	Primary	2
Educational Level	Junior High	8
	Senior High	2
	Vocational	0
	Tertiary	0
	None	8
	Others	7
Occupational Status	Kayayei (Head portering)	2
	Trading	3
	Hairdressing	2
	None	6

Source: Field Data (2021).

coping strategies. The findings indicate that participants employed a range of adaptive strategies to navigate these constraints. Key strategies identified include spiritual coping and religious reliance, adaptive food management strategies, psychological endurance and emotional regulation, community-based support networks, and informal financial management and credit utilization.

Beyond these primary coping strategies, the findings also reveal broader contextual and relational dynamics shaping parenting experiences. These include the influence of environmental factors on parenting, tensions between moral and religious expectations and lived realities, and variations in coping strategies across different age groups.

Spiritual coping and religious reliance

Religious practices, particularly prayer and faith in God, emerged as significant coping strategies. Participants reported relying on spirituality as a source of emotional support, hope and psychological stability. This reliance was not only individual but also reinforced through participation in religious communities such as churches and mosques, which provided social belonging and moral reinforcement. Spiritual coping functioned as both an internal resource and a socially embedded support system, enabling young mothers to endure persistent economic and social hardships.

A young mother said:

...because we do not have anybody, so whatever happens, we accept our fate and rely on God for better days (Participant 15, 31 years old, Old Fadama).

This single young mother expressed how her faith in God keeps her hopeful despite her current struggles:

...I have this hope that God will make a way someday. I know one day I will leave this kiosk and stay at a better place, but for now, I do not have a choice but God, and I am waiting upon him (Participant 16, 26 years old, African Eleven).

Adaptive food management strategies

Participants adopted a range of adaptive strategies to manage food insecurity. These included structured meal routines, reduced meal frequency, delayed consumption, and meal skipping. Such practices were primarily aimed at maximizing limited resources, with a consistent prioritization of children's nutritional intake over that of the mothers. Although these strategies contributed to short-term survival, they were largely driven by necessity rather than nutritional considerations. The emphasis remained on food availability rather than dietary quality, reflecting broader structural constraints within the slum environment.

One young mother narrated the harsh realities of feeding her children on a limited budget and the difficult choices she had to make to ensure survival:

The children and I eat twice a day. That is the routine. We are seven in number. Eating thrice a day is expensive; even if we want to do that, we cannot. The strategy is that, mostly we eat breakfast at noon, and by 4pm or 5pm, when we get something to eat, we will be okay...As a three-week-old baby, you have to learn how to eat "dokunu"² I put it in water, mash it, and stick it on your mouth, and you lick it. It will get finished and you will be fit...for my children. When they were babies, I gave them the kenkey," dokunu" because there was no money and with the breastmilk, there is no water in it, so what will the child get from that? (Participant 14, 21 years old, Old Fadama).

This mother explained why she consistently maintained the same meals for her children. For her, it was a way to save money so she could set some aside to meet their other needs:

Our food has no variety, and that is for a reason. I am doing so because I do not know when I will be called to pay some fees or other payments, so I keep the little I get. Mm, with our feeding, I adopt a strategy... we mostly eat banku³ compared to rice, beans, and other meals, when my uncle gives us the money, I buy corn dough and cassava dough to prepare banku in the morning for them (Participant 7, 32 years old, African Eleven).

Psychological endurance and emotional regulation

As a coping strategy, several mothers demonstrated psychological endurance by deliberately ignoring social feedback, maintaining emotional detachment,

and tolerating criticism. This form of emotional regulation functioned as a protective mechanism, allowing participants to suppress distress associated with poverty and stigma. While this outward resilience appeared as indifference, it often masked underlying emotional strain. Through this process, participants created a psychological buffer that enabled continued focus on child-rearing responsibilities and long-term survival within a constrained environment.

One participant shared how she copes emotionally by staying focused on her child, who gives her the strength to endure difficult circumstances:

I sometimes behave unconcernedly. Because if you want to look at people and listen to everything, you will feel bad.... Whenever I face challenges, I tell myself that because of my child, I can go through any circumstance in life. So, he is the one who gives me courage (Participant 11, 20 years old, African Eleven).

For others, the presence of a supportive partner, even in limited ways, provided enough encouragement to endure their circumstances:

What motivates me is that the man I stay with, if he gets something, he shares it with me, and when there is nothing, he notifies me that there is nothing, so this motivates me. If I return to my mother's place, she has nothing to offer me...that is why I am still staying and enduring the hardships here (Participant 19, 16 years old, Old Fadama).

Community-based support networks

Informal social support systems played a central role in participant's coping processes. Support was accessed through interpersonal relationships with partners, relatives, peers, and community members. This support manifested in various forms, including financial assistance, childcare support, and advisory guidance. These networks functioned as an essential safety net, particularly in the absence of formal institutional support. However, access to such support was often contingent on social relationships and reciprocity within the community.

This young mother reported receiving financial assistance from friends at some point, which helped her provide for her child's needs.

Sometimes my friends who come around typically give money for the child's upkeep, so that is how we get money to buy clothes for the child (Participant 11, 20 years old, African Eleven).

This young mother received support from her friend, who she mentioned gave sound pieces of advice:

Over here, when something bothers me or I face a challenge, my sister, Mariama, helps me solve it. She advises me and I listen because she is older than me and her advice is sound (Participant 2, 35 years old, Old Fadama).

For this mother, when she fell ill sometime back, her husband and community members came to her rescue.

None of my family members came around, my husband was the one taking me to the hospital little by little, and the landlord made everyone around here contribute and gave me GHC1000.00 for treatment at the hospital until I became better. Yes, when someone is in need, they usually do it to help the person. The community members are supportive. That helps me cope (Participant 5, 27 years old, African Eleven).

Informal financial management and credit utilization

Some young mothers employed informal strategies to navigate economic instability. These included small-scale savings practices and reliance on credit arrangements with local vendors or community members. Participation in informal savings schemes such as susu groups, enabled access to lump-sum funds during emergencies, while credit purchases ensured continuity in meeting basic household needs. These strategies reflect adaptive financial behavior in contexts characterized by exclusion from formal financial systems, offering limited but critical economic flexibility.

One participant had this to say:

Sometimes I save with Adepa savings near KICC⁴ [Kingsway International Christian Centre], but when it gets to GHC40.00 cedi and above, I go for it because there is not enough money... Yes, it is like a susu company, so when I do not have money, I go back there to take my money... even the least I save I take it back in time of need because we do not have much to save more often talk less of what to spend (Participant 16, 26 years old, African Eleven).

This young mother resorted to purchasing food items on credit from her colleague, who is from her hometown.

I go to the woman from my hometown to buy food items on credit when my husband has no money. I think about my children, if I do not do that, they will starve the whole day (Participant 18).

Age-differentiated experiences

The study revealed variations in coping strategies across different age groups. Whereas younger mothers aged 18–20 years demonstrated higher dependency on others, limited parenting experience and greater emotional vulnerability, mothers aged 21–25 years exhibited transitional coping mechanisms, balancing dependence with emerging autonomy. In addition, older mothers aged 26–35 years showed relatively greater stability, drawing on accumulated experience and more established support networks. These differences suggest that age and life stage significantly shape parenting capacity and coping strategies within slum contexts.

Discussion

The study examined the coping strategies used by young mothers raising children in urban slum areas of Accra, Ghana. The findings identified several key strategies, including spiritual coping and religious reliance, adaptive food management strategies, psychological endurance and emotional regulation, community-based support networks, and informal financial management and credit utilization. Beyond these, the findings also revealed the influence of environmental factors on parenting, tensions between moral and religious expectations and lived realities, and variations in coping strategies across different age groups. These strategies were consistently observed across both study sites, underscoring their relevance within slum contexts.

A key finding was the prominent role of religious faith as a coping resource. Participants frequently relied on prayer to manage emotional distress and maintain hope amid persistent hardship. This pattern is best understood within the broader Ghanaian socio-cultural context, where religion plays a central role in daily life. Given that a large proportion of the population identifies with religious groups (GSS, 2021), spirituality often serves as a framework for interpreting life experiences and responding to adversity. Existing literature supports the role of religious coping in providing psychological comfort and resilience during crises (Amoah, 2017; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Ayifah et al., 2022; Korsah, 2023; Okyere, 2018). Within this perspective, spirituality functions not only as a belief system but also as a practical coping strategy that fosters emotional stability. This finding supports Pargament's (1997) theory of religious coping and is consistent with evidence from other African contexts, where spirituality is widely used to manage hardship.

The study also found that food-related coping strategies were widely employed in response to economic constraints. Participants reported reducing meal frequency, delaying meals, and simplifying their diets as ways to manage limited food resources. While these practices helped ensure short-term survival, they also reflect broader structural inequalities affecting food security in slum environments. Similar patterns have been documented in other low-income settings, where households adopt nutritionally inadequate but necessary strategies to cope with scarcity (Kimani-Murage et al., 2014). From an ecological perspective, these practices illustrate how environmental constraints influence individual behavior. However, prolonged reliance on such strategies may have adverse implications for both maternal and child health.

Psychological resilience emerged as another important coping strategy. Participants described enduring difficult circumstances, managing emotional distress, and prioritizing their children's needs despite limited resources. Endurance-oriented coping strategies among women in slum settings were similarly identified by Swart (2013), illustrating how

psychological resilience enables young mothers to adjust to and manage structural constraints. This form of resilience aligns with the concepts of “hidden resilience” (Ungar, 2006), which emphasizes adaptive responses in contexts of chronic adversity. Within the ecological framework, such resilience operates at the individual level as a response to broader structural challenges. However, sustained reliance on emotional endurance may carry risks, including burnout and long-term mental health concerns (Biggs et al., 2024; Seff et al., 2025).

The importance of informal social support systems was also evident. Participants relied on assistance from neighbors, friends, partners, and community members for financial help, childcare, and emotional support. This finding reflects the broader African value of communalism, where social relationships play a critical role in survival (Asiamah, 2024; Gyekye, 1996; Owusu, 2019; Van Dijk, 2020). Previous studies in Ghana have similarly highlighted the role of social networks in coping with life challenges (Boadu et al., 2025; Cofie et al., 2018; Nukunya, 2016). However, access to such support was not uniform, as it depended on the strength of interpersonal relationships and the community’s socioeconomic conditions. This variability echoes Jack’s (2000) assertion that neighborhood-level resources in impoverished communities are unevenly distributed and depend heavily on social connectedness. Nevertheless, reliance on informal support structures underscores their relevance as buffers against poverty, particularly when formal state or organizational support is limited. Strengthening such communal networks could therefore play a vital role in improving the well-being of young mothers in slum settings.

Beyond social support, participants also exhibited notable financial resourcefulness through informal savings practices and strategic borrowing arrangements. The majority of young mothers reported involvement in “susu” savings schemes or maintaining personal savings reserves to cushion themselves against financial emergencies. Such informal financial arrangements provide individuals who are routinely excluded from formal credit systems with access to funds, particularly women who face disproportionate barriers to securing institutional loans (Adegbite, 2022). Additionally, some participants cultivated credit relationships with trusted members of their communities, enabling them to obtain food and other essential commodities during periods of acute financial strain. These adaptive practices reflect a sophisticated capacity for financial resilience, which resonates with those of Collins et al. (2009), whose financial diaries research illuminated the intricate money management strategies consistently employed by low-income populations across the globe. From an ecological standpoint, participation in informal financial systems can be understood as a creative response to exclusion from formal banking structures (Jack, 2000), demonstrating how social capital operating within microsystems can partially

compensate for institutional deficiencies at the macrosystem level. Nevertheless, these arrangements are not without their limitations. As Rutherford (2000) cautions, informal savings strategies frequently lack the security and stability of formal financial institutions, and dependence on credit arrangements carries the risk of entrenching debt cycles that may further erode the already fragile economic footing of these young mothers.

The findings further indicate that coping strategies are not merely individual choices but are shaped by broader ecological conditions. Environmental stressors such as crime, substance use, and social disorder operate at the macrosystem level, shaping community norms and influencing parenting practices. Mothers are therefore required to balance immediate survival needs with the challenge of guiding children in environments where negative influences are prevalent. This highlights the interconnected nature of individual, community and structural factors within the ecological framework.

Additionally, tension was also observed between religious values and environmental realities. Although spirituality provides emotional support, its role in shaping behavior may be constrained by the structural conditions of the slum environment. Finally, variations in coping strategies across age groups suggest the importance of adopting a life-course perspective when examining parenting in marginalized settings.

Study limitations

Some data loss may have occurred during the transcription of Twi interview data into English, particularly when direct linguistic equivalents were unavailable. To minimize this, careful attention was given to preserving the intended meaning by selecting the closest possible expressions and ensuring contextual accuracy. Additionally, certified translators from the University of Ghana's Linguistics Department were engaged to minimize inaccuracies and ensure fidelity to participants' original expressions.

Another limitation is that the study reflects the experiences of young mothers from specific slum communities, potentially limiting the transferability of its findings to other contexts. Parenting experiences are shaped by diverse cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic factors and may therefore differ across settings.

Although social desirability bias was mitigated to some extent through the principal researcher's observational techniques to document participants' physical characteristics and surroundings, the reliance on individual interviews still introduces the possibility of bias. Participants may have presented themselves in a favorable light, emphasizing responsible caregiving while underreporting socially undesirable behaviors. Further research could address these limitations by incorporating focus group discussions or

participatory approaches, which may provide deeper insights into shared norms, behaviors, and community dynamics.

Conclusion

This study provides nuanced understanding of the complex coping strategies employed by young mothers raising children in urban slum environments in Accra, Ghana. The findings demonstrate that these mothers navigate significant socioeconomic and environmental constraints through a combination of spiritual coping and religious reliance, adaptive food management strategies, psychological endurance and emotional regulation, community-based support networks, and informal financial management and credit utilization.

Importantly, the study shows that these coping strategies are not isolated from individual behaviors but are shaped by broader ecological dynamics. Environmental stressors such as crime, violence, and social disorder significantly influence parenting practices, while also shaping children's behavioral development. Furthermore, the study reveals a persistent tension between mother's aspirations to instill moral and religious values and the realities of the environments in which they live. Age-related differences further indicate that coping capacities are influenced by life stage, experience, and access to support systems. While these strategies demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, they also reflect the precarious conditions under which parenting occurs in slum settings. Many of the identified coping strategies, such as food rationing and reliance on informal credit, serve as short-term survival strategies with potential long-term implications for maternal and child wellbeing.

The findings point to the urgent need for comprehensive and context-specific interventions that address both structural inequalities and individual vulnerabilities. Strengthening social protection systems, improving access to essential services, and supporting community-based networks are critical for enhancing the well-being of young mothers and promoting positive developmental outcomes for their children.

Notes

1. The struggle for paramountcy and autonomy, ownership and control of land, struggle for acceptance and self-esteem and need for separate cultural identity are among the various causes that occasioned this exodus.
2. Dokunu is a typical Ghanaian dish made from fermented white corn, which is widely consumed throughout the country by Ga people from southern Ghana.
3. A Ghanaian dish made from fermented white corn and cassava dough.
4. Kingsway International Christian Centre is a Church headquartered in London with branches worldwide. This branch of KICC is located in Spintex in Accra, Ghana.

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Author contribution statement

Portia Nana Ama Brempong, Samuel Eduaful and Phoebe Afram contributed equally to the Conceptualization, writing and drafting, design and analysis and interpretation of the data. Portia Nana Ama Brempong did the collection of data, transcribing and writing of the article while Samuel Eduaful, Kwabena Frimpong-Manso and Phoebe Afram contributed to the, revision and writing of the original draft, refining, reviewing and fine-tuning the manuscript in line with the reviewers' comments. All authors have read and agreed to the final version to be published and to be accountable for all aspects of the work with no conflict of interest.

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