



# When Social Workers Are Given Dual Mandates: Child Maintenance and the Complexities of Family Situations in the Ghanaian Child Protection System

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## Abstract

Custodial parents, often single mothers, face challenges regarding child maintenance, including a lack of financial commitments from non-custodial parents for their children's welfare. The evidence suggests that there is a strong link between child maintenance and poverty as well as other family violence issues. In addition to their primary child and family protection duties, child protection practitioners in Ghana have a mandate to assess child maintenance concerns. This dual responsibility may have the advantage of promoting holistic child and family practices, but it could also negatively impact families when practitioners overly focus on one responsibility at the expense of the other. We sought to understand and show whether families who reported child maintenance concerns to the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Ghana experienced challenges beyond child maintenance and whether practitioners identified these primary protection concerns in their

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assessments. Findings from qualitative in-depth interviews with seventeen parents show that these families experienced domestic violence, marital conflict and child abuse and neglect beyond the scope of a standard child maintenance case. The findings highlight the importance of child protection workers conducting comprehensive family assessments to resolve 'hidden' family difficulties when establishing child maintenance arrangements.

**Keywords:** case management, child maintenance, child protection, child support, neglect, social work mandate

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## Introduction

Child protection systems in various jurisdictions often have the statutory mandate to intervene in the lives of families to safeguard the welfare of vulnerable children (Gilbert, 2012; Connolly and Katz, 2019). Regardless of the structure or format (Connolly and Katz, 2019), practitioners within child protection systems have the primary mandate, through statutory powers, to address the concerns of vulnerable families and children who are either at risk or have experienced adversity (Lonne, 2013; Benbenishty *et al.*, 2015). In most statutory child protection systems, practitioners are primarily involved in investigating concerns of abuse and neglect and developing interventions, including family support and out-of-home care arrangements, to safeguard the welfare of children in need (Gilbert, 2012; Bywaters, 2019; Connolly and Katz, 2019). In addition to these widely established responsibilities of child protection practitioners, those in Ghana also have the duty to assess child non-maintenance cases and make maintenance arrangements. Child maintenance (also known as child support) refers to an arrangement made by a social service organisation to ensure that non-custodial parents, following separation, divorce or the end of other relationships, are mandated to make periodic financial contributions to the custodial parent for the maintenance and care of the child (Skinner and Main, 2013; Hakovirta and Jokela, 2018). In some cases, this may also involve married couples living together. In most developed countries, the assessment, collection and transfer of child maintenance payments are handled by different professionals and in institutions outside the child protection system, such as the court, or a designated organisation, such as the Child Maintenance Service in the UK.

Embedding child maintenance assessment and payment processes within the Ghanaian child protection system gives child protection practitioners a dual role, which could sway their focus to only maintenance cases to the neglect of the main primary protection concerns, such as identification and assessment of child abuse and neglect. Recent

evidence suggests that more than 80 per cent of cases addressed by the main state agency responsible for child protection in Ghana, the Department of Social and Community Development (DSWCD), are categorised as child maintenance cases (UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, evidence from recent Ghanaian studies revealed that parents, specifically mothers, made reports to the DSWCD because they had assurances from other mothers that their partners (mostly fathers) would be made to make maintenance payments (Abdullah *et al.*, 2020; Awortwe *et al.*, 2020). However, growing international evidence on the complexities of child protection concerns (Stevens and Hassett, 2007; Jenkins *et al.*, 2017) and the cumulative occurrence of child maltreatment (Emery *et al.*, 2022) may suggest that cases classified as child maintenance in Ghana may be preceded by or be an outcome of other protection concerns (such as child neglect and abuse). The associations between child maintenance and accidental neglect and parental poverty are particularly strong (Hakovirta and Jokela, 2018; Hakovirta *et al.*, 2020). Thus, a failure to critically assess the holistic situations of families beyond the primary maintenance they have outlined could lead to child protection practitioners losing sight of some key protection concerns in the family. We argue that child maintenance may only constitute a tip of the concerns and needs of families that come to the attention of child protection practitioners in Ghana. Thus, we sought to explore the holistic familial situations of families involved with the DSWCD and whose cases were solely categorised as child maintenance issues. The aim of this study is to unravel the complex situations faced by families with child maintenance concerns to inform holistic family assessments of the Ghanaian child protection system.

### Child protection system in Ghana: Dual focus on maintenance and protection concerns

Since its establishment in 1946, DSWCD has been the main statutory organisation in Ghana responsible for direct intervention to address child protection and family welfare issues (ISSOP, 2020). Each of the 261 administrative districts in Ghana has a DSWCD local office. The core activities and functions of the DSWCD are categorised under three thematic areas: 1) child rights, promotion and protection (CRPP), 2) community care and 3) justice administration (Department of Social Welfare, 2015; Ministry of Gender, Children & Social Protection, 2020). Child maltreatment cases, including abuse, neglect and abandonment, and caregiving for orphan children, fall under the CRPP cluster. Child protection practitioners (mostly trained social workers) in the DSWCD have the primary mandate to investigate suspected cases of abuse and neglect and develop interventions to safeguard the welfare of vulnerable

children. Child protection practitioners assess each child protection concern before they develop a case plan, including an intervention plan for the child (Department of Social Welfare, 2015). In some cases, they collaborate with the family court to make decisions involving the placement of children in out-of-home care facilities, such as children's homes (Frimpong-Manso, 2018). These practice processes are similar to the mandates and duties performed by child protection practitioners in other jurisdictions, such as the USA, Australia, the UK and Canada (Connolly and Katz, 2019; Parton, 2019; Herrenkohl *et al.*, 2020).

However, unique to the Ghanaian child protection system is that child protection practitioners in the DSWCD are also given capacity to assess child maintenance cases reported by families (Department of Social Welfare, 2015). Most custodial parents in Ghana (mostly single mothers) who have maintenance concerns seek recourse from the DSWCD to ensure that the non-custodial parent (mostly fathers) is mandated to make financial contributions to the maintenance of the child (Abdullah *et al.*, 2021; Awortwe *et al.*, 2020). Following the assessment of maintenance concerns, child protection practitioners at the DSWCD allocate maintenance fees and ensure that the non-custodial parent pays the maintenance amount directly to the parent or through the DSWCD for onward transfer to the resident custodial parent (Awortwe *et al.*, 2020). Although child maintenance can be classified broadly amongst child welfare concerns, the practice whereby child protection practitioners assess, determine and supervise maintenance payments is unique to the Ghanaian child protection context. This embedded or conflated practice may give child protection practitioners the opportunity to assess the holistic situation of families and unravel the adversities, such as unintentional neglect, that are likely to co-occur with child maintenance. On the other hand, it may risk swaying the attention of practitioners to only child maintenance issues given that parents are more motivated to seek recourse from the DSWCD due to the high likelihood of securing money from non-custodial parents (Abdullah *et al.*, 2020; Awortwe *et al.*, 2020). We sought to understand and show whether these families, who contact the DSWCD on concerns of child maintenance, experience challenges beyond child maintenance and whether practitioners are able to identify these primary protection concerns in their assessment.

### Child maintenance: Assessment and payment procedure

Globally, child maintenance (otherwise known as child support) is a common pathway for ensuring that shared and obligatory parenting duties are met (Cancian *et al.*, 2008, 2011; Hakovirta and Jokela, 2018; Hakovirta *et al.*, 2020). This ensures that non-custodial parents are mandated to contribute a quota of their income to support their children's

care and well-being. It is usually paid by non-custodial parents (mostly fathers) to the custodial parent (mostly mothers who are single parents), or whoever provides primary care. There is a great degree of variation in the way in which child maintenance is assessed and practised across the world. Skinner and Davidsons' (2009) review of child maintenance practices across fourteen European and North American countries revealed several nuances, including variations in the assessment procedures and agencies responsible for child maintenance. In jurisdictions such as Belgium, Austria, Canada, Germany, Sweden and France, the court has the sole authority to determine formal child maintenance payments, including how much a parent should pay maintenance fees (Hakovirta *et al.*, 2020). In most states in the USA, the court is used to enforce maintenance orders and ensure compliance (Cancian *et al.*, 2011; Vogel, 2020). The Child Maintenance Service (CMS) in the UK and the Services Australia in Australia handle child maintenance issues, including the determination of fees and payment procedures.

In Finland, Germany and Spain, a guaranteed child maintenance system operates in which the State, through social transfer systems, pays child maintenance to the custodial parent and, in turn, collects it from the non-custodial parent (Skinner *et al.*, 2007). The guaranteed approach regularises maintenance payments, promotes compliance and ensures that issues of lack of payment and lack of willingness to pay are addressed (Vogel, 2020). This process ensures that all maintenance payments are received by the custodial parent for childcare (Skinner *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, child maintenance in these jurisdictions (Germany, Finland and Spain) is considered by either the court or designated agencies outside the main child welfare system, although they may work in hand at some point. The presence of designated agencies (such as the CMS in the UK) to handle child maintenance/child support issues ensures that maintenance concerns are assessed separately from other child and family welfare concerns. Children who may be subjects of physical abuse or sexual abuse may receive services/interventions from agencies (often statutory child protection agencies) different from those with child support or child maintenance concerns. This suggests that in such jurisdictions, concerns about one form of child protection concern (e.g. child abuse and neglect) being subsumed under another (e.g. child maintenance) will be curtailed.

In contrast, child maintenance, including investigations, maintenance amount decisions, payment processes and compliance mechanisms, is often handled by the main state agency responsible for child and family welfare, the DSWCD. It is therefore not surprising that 80 per cent of recent cases handled by the DSWCD are labelled child maintenance concerns. Child maintenance has become a major concern amongst single-parent families (after separation/divorce or end of other relationships); however, children/parents living in single-parent households may experience stress,

complexities and disadvantages beyond maintenance issues (Barnhart and Maguire-Jack, 2016; Kroese *et al.*, 2021). It is therefore necessary, as part of best child protection practices, to unravel the complex situations, needs and concerns of families who make contact with DSWCD and whose cases have been labelled ‘child maintenance concerns’. We argue that children who are subjects of child maintenance investigations could also be experiencing other forms of violence/maltreatment due to the unique familial context in which they find themselves. Therefore, it is important to explore the familial situations of these families who are in contact with the DSWCD for child maintenance.

### Beyond child maintenance: Concerns of vulnerable families

There is growing empirical evidence on the co-occurrence of child maltreatment and family adversities (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, factors that increase the vulnerabilities and challenges experienced by families may be complex, interwoven and linked sequentially, with one form leading to another, and could be experienced together within the family context (Cyr *et al.*, 2013). The interconnection of forms of adversity experienced by vulnerable families provides theoretical grounds for considering the complex familial situations of families that come to the attention of child protection workers. The robust empirical findings on the link between child maintenance and parental and child poverty (Cancian *et al.*, 2011; Hakovirta and Jokela, 2018) support the above claim (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2007, 2011; Ford and Delker, 2018; Le *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, it is important to hypothesise that children with child maintenance concerns may be at risk or have experienced other types of maltreatment in the family context. Children who are subjects of child protection investigation often find themselves in intricate/complex family contexts that pose risks of harm (Shlonsky and Friend, 2007). Children in divorced and single-parent families may experience cognitive, behavioural, attachment and mental health difficulties (Clarke-Stewart *et al.*, 2000). As a result, children may suffer as much poverty as their single parents (Hakovirta *et al.*, 2020), resulting in a general decline in their well-being (Amato, 2000; Amato and Sobolewski, 2004).

Children who live with parents who are separated or divorced due to intimate partner violence (IPV) are more likely to experience abuse from either the non-resident parent or the custodial parent after separation, including during the child maintenance process (Casanueva *et al.*, 2005). Child maintenance meetings may rekindle relationships between separated/divorced partners, which could create avenues for disgruntled partners to abuse each other or their children. For example, frustrations and stress resulting from lone parenting may influence lone parents to abuse their children (Slack *et al.*, 2011). A recent study by Tegler *et al.* (2022) showed

that child maintenance arrangements could be an avenue for non-custodial parents to further abuse custodial parents because the maintenance arrangement initiates and rekindles contact and interaction between the parents. Even if not directly abused, children may indirectly experience cognitive and emotional trauma from witnessing violence (Kitzmann *et al.*, 2003). Some non-custodial parents use child maintenance as an avenue to control the finances of the custodial parent. Studies have revealed that some non-custodial parents in Sweden have used child maintenance payments as an additional opportunity to verbally abuse custodial parents (Eriksson, 2011; Tegler *et al.*, 2022). IPV in any form is detrimental to the health and well-being of victims and children. It is known to have behavioural effects on the victims and children who witness or experience it. Shlonsky and Friend (2007) advocate for child and family social workers to 'see double' by focusing both on the child and their familial situation as a best practice approach.

## Methods

### Participants and procedure

We employed an exploratory qualitative approach to explore the complex situations and problems experienced by families involved with the DSWCD in child maintenance concerns. Seventeen parents, aged thirty to forty years, were purposively sampled after a review of child maintenance case records from the DSWCD. Over 500 case files on child maintenance registered between 2019 and 2021 from DSWCDs in two districts in Ghana were reviewed and utilised to sample parents for interviews. This case review enabled the researchers to obtain first-hand knowledge of the characteristics of parents and children. During the review, particular attention was given to the divergence and convergence with respect to the nature of child maintenance cases reported, the case management process used, the number of times parents engaged with the DSWCD on the same case, and the family composition. The maximum variation sampling technique was used to ensure heterogeneity within the sample (Carter and Little, 2007; Levitt *et al.*, 2017). Following the maximum variation approach, twenty parents were sampled based on a combination of key characteristics: the number of children who were subjects of the child maintenance case, with whom and where the children were staying, whether parents had remarried, whether other protection concerns/mal-treatments were captured in their narratives and whether children's views were consulted as part of case management. Parents who were married and divorced, those who were not legally married but had common law marriage, those who were separated and those who had lived together for years were the critical maximum variation criteria.

Custodial parents of the twenty selected cases were contacted by two research assistants to introduce them to the study and schedule interviews with them. Three participants withdrew from the study for personal reasons. The final sample included seventeen custodial parents, all females. The research obtained ethical clearance from the University of Hong Kong. In addition, each participant was asked to sign a voluntary informed consent form before participating in the interviews. The consent form documented the objective of the study and the researchers' commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of the information they would obtain from the participants. It also detailed the participants' right to voluntary participation and to withdraw from the study anytime without consequences. Each participant was given an incentive of GHS 30.00 for their time spent.

### In-depth interviews

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to conduct in-depth interviews with custodial parents to explore their familial situations and victimisation experienced by their children. The use of a semi-structured interview guide provided researchers with the flexibility and capacity to explore issues surrounding their family conditions. The semi-structured interview guide contained open-ended questions and prompts. The prompts were mainly follow-up questions to elicit detailed responses, examples or requests for descriptions of key events. Two research assistants were trained on qualitative data collection and the study objectives. Key questions on the interview guide included the following: (1) What problems did you encounter in your relationship? (2) What are some abusive and adverse situations in your family prior to DSWCD involvement? (3) In what ways do these negative practices impact your children? Researchers effectively employed the techniques of follow-up questioning, probing and paraphrasing to deepen the narratives and ensured that detailed and diverse information was obtained. The interviews were conducted at the residences of the participants in the vernacular language Twi. The interviews for the project started in December 2021 and ended in February 2022. All interviews were audio recorded after participants' consent was obtained. The audio recording process enabled the researchers to maintain focus on the interviews without being distracted by the need to take notes. The interviews lasted an average of eighty-five minutes per participant.

### Data coding and analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researchers checked the audio recordings with the transcripts for accuracy. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis procedure was used. Analysis

began by reading through the transcripts several times for familiarisation. Codes were later developed by reading through lines of paragraphs. Codes such as ‘need support from man’ and ‘child unhappy with separation’ were developed. The codes were later collated, and similar codes were combined to form potential themes. The researchers reviewed the themes to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The former was to ensure that data within themes reflected similar ideas, whilst the latter was about ensuring clear distinctions between themes. At the end of the analysis, we identified a global theme of ‘child maintenance as an iceberg’ with its related and distinct subthemes.

## Demographic information of the study participants

As shown in Table 1, all the resident parents were females. This is not surprising, as most parents who report cases of child maintenance to the DSWCD in Ghana are mothers (Abdullah *et al.*, 2021; Awortwe *et al.*, 2020). The majority of the parents were separated from their partners because of conflicts in their relationships. As shown in Table 1, twelve of the parents had partners in another relationship with children (PARwC), whilst two parents had partners in another relationship without children (PARw/oC). Their involvement in other relationships somehow complicated the situation for children whom they had from their previous relationships.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of parents.

Item	Classification	Number
Sex	Female	17
	Male	0
Age, years	30–35	6
	36–40	5
	41–45	6
Relationship status (custodial parent)	Married	1
	Divorced	2
	Separated	14
Custodial partners' additional relationship info	PARwC	12
	PARw/oC	1
	Not applicable	4
Number of children under their care	1–2	8
	3–4	6
	4–5	3
Occupation	Self-employed (Petty trading)	15
	Civil servant	2

PARwC = parents who had partners in another relationship with their children.

PARw/oC = parents who had partners in another relationship without children.

## Findings

### Child maintenance as an iceberg

According to the interview data, the child maintenance issue seems to be only a part of the problems encountered by families. There were other problems or difficulties experienced by families who contacted the child protection agency with child maintenance concerns. Although the immediate concern of families with child maintenance cases may seem to be about making arrangements for monetary contributions to be made by the non-custodial parent, there appears to be much more going on in these families. The analysis focused on issues that are often neglected in current case management practices for DSWCD in Ghana. Themes of marital discord, IPV, child abuse and neglect are key protection concerns appearing in these families.

### Marital discord: Together but apart

Of the seventeen participants, fourteen were separated, two were divorced, and one was married at the time of the interviews. Regardless of their relationship or marital status, parents are obligated by law to be responsible for the well-being of their children. The obligation towards children's well-being and development binds parents through a shared goal irrespective of their relationship status. However, for some of the families in the study, their marital discord affected their ability to adequately respond to the needs of their children. Inter-marital issues that were commonly identified to impede parents' ability to care for their children included extramarital affairs, remarriage, denial of paternity, pregnancy out of wedlock and lack of parents' commitment to each other. As a result, many of the parents were often focused on disagreements and misunderstandings in their relationship and paid little attention to the needs of the child(ren). Most families chose to separate on the grounds of infidelity and extramarital affairs.

*The man [noncustodial parent] has been having an affair with the other lady so that it brought up all the issues. He even has a child with that lady without telling me, so we are no longer together. (P9)*

*The time we brought the case to social welfare, I knew he [noncustodial parent] was with a woman and had two children. (P10)*

Extramarital affairs were seen to contribute to frequent cases of separation. Unfortunately, when separation occurs, it becomes a challenge to have both partners equally involved in sharing and performing their responsibilities with their children. Most custodial parents made a case with DSWOs because of the non-custodial parent's lack of financial

support to the family, but a comprehensive look at the families' situation will suggest that there may be broader issues.

## History of IPV

Most of the respondents (fifteen of seventeen) reported experiencing various forms of victimisation from their partners. This often took the form of physical violence and psychological aggression. There seems to be a significant strain in such families, which often results in verbal abuse between the partners. Disagreements over how to divide parental responsibilities were frequently the cause of verbal exchanges. For many of the families, assaults came from the custodial parent constantly asking for financial support from the non-custodial parent to meet the child's basic needs. Usually, it was the non-custodial father assaulting the resident mother.

*Last year, during COVID-19, he [noncustodial parent] had a fight with me and told my eldest child to tell me to leave the house before he returned... he can even hit me with something because I haven't left the house. Therefore, I went to a friend, and she gave me her store to stay in (P2)*

*It is a fight... the things he [noncustodial parent] was saying were threatening. If you will threaten me, then you have to go to the police. (P1)*

Many families with child maintenance cases struggle with financial stability and/or poverty. With fifteen out of seventeen resident parents engaged in petty trading without a regular or steady income, it became challenging for them to meet the needs of their children as single parents. One respondent with four children reflected on her financial challenges as a single parent.

*Their feeding is not easy at all. In the morning, I could manage and get something for them, but eating in the afternoon and evening was the main challenge. Sometimes I had to borrow from my mother to be able to feed them lunch and support. (P7)*

Because of the financial challenges that resident custodial parents experience, they seek child maintenance from non-custodial parents by submitting complaints to the DSWCD in Ghana. However, this approach does not seem to be successful in the long run. For most of these families, child protection intervention may lead to non-custodial parents honouring maintenance payments only for a few weeks/months.

Interview respondents shared that requests for child maintenance are often met with abusive responses from the non-custodial parent: 'If I call him for money, he [noncustodial parent] insults me'. (P5)

## Children caught between parental violence

With respect to IPV, there were several instances where participants reported that children were witnesses to abusive incidents or were abused themselves. Children were victimised by either parent. According to many of the participants, this often took the form of a projection where the parents transferred frustrations from their relationship to the children. Children are occasionally mistreated as a result of the custodial parent's aggravation of the non-custodial parent's absence.

*When he comes on weekends and the child wants to talk to him about some issues he has, he shouts at him, "leave me alone!" "leave me alone!". Therefore, the child is unable to talk to him. (P12)*

*And the youngest, if I ask her to wash my ice chest and she refuses, I will tell her if she doesn't do it she should wake up early and go to her father for money to school. I only say that to scare her. (P15)*

Relationships between parents were often unhealthy, and parents often blamed each other for being neglectful, leading to their involvement in child protection. The strain between parents was commonly transferred to children.

*"Sometimes I get angry at the children with issues that are not provocative. Because I am the only one suffering, and they tell me that their books or bags are torn. (P5)*

Child protection practitioners working on child maintenance cases should seek to assess the potential for physical and psychological harm to children. Whilst IPV may be considered an issue between partners, the ripple effects on children cannot be ignored. Children can suffer direct and indirect emotional and physical abuse as a consequence.

## Supervisory neglect

Because the parents lived separately, the children had to share their time between the parents' different residences. Most parents (thirteen of seventeen) reported that when children spend time with a non-custodial parent, it is likely that the child was not given the needed attention. This happens because the non-custodial parent may already have other children in a new relationship that they had to provide for. Moreover, during parental separation, physical contact between children and the non-custodial parent may be reduced, which in turn impacts the bond between the child and the non-custodial parent.

*Sometimes he [noncustodial parent] calls me late in the night to ask me if they are with me because as late as 11 pm, they have not come to sleep*

*yet. He will then tell me to advise them. Therefore, I told him he is the one living with them. (P14)*

Their separate living arrangements did not enable them to provide adequate supervision for their children. The custodial parent is often the one who seems to blame the non-custodial parent for supervisory neglect.

*Because you [noncustodial parents] don't take care of the child you don't know how the child has grown and looks now. The child is truly tall and looks after the father ... That's why I wanted to exclude his name from the child's name because there is no use. (P17)*

Non-custodial parents with children from other relationships faced challenges in being equally invested in the lives of their children from their multiple relationships.

## Discussion

This research sought to understand and show whether these families, who contact the DSWCD on concerns of child maintenance, experience challenges beyond child maintenance and whether practitioners are able to identify these primary protection concerns in their assessment. This study makes an important contribution that could lead to a revamp in the Ghanaian child protection system in terms of the assessment of cases and adherence to best international practices.

The custodial parents in this study indicated that their situation was complicated by marital problems, such as partner involvement in extramarital affairs, pregnancy out of wedlock and lack of commitment to the relationship. It is generally accepted that factors leading to marital separation, such as extramarital affairs, initiate the process of child maintenance (Skinner and Main, 2013; Awortwe *et al.*, 2020; Vogel, 2020), as maintenance becomes a key pathway to ensure that the non-custodial parent contributes to the care of the child. It has also been established that families dealing with marital divorce could experience trauma and emotional distress before, during and after the divorce (Slanbekova *et al.*, 2017). It is possible that the trauma and emotional distress will persist at the time families seek recourse from the DSWCD for child maintenance. Cohen *et al.* (2016) reported that children also experienced emotional trauma when the family was disrupted or experienced adverse experiences such as divorce. In this study, interparental friction and conflict arising from these factors were noted to affect parents psychologically and emotionally and to undermine their commitment and ability to adequately care for and protect their children. Our findings suggest that children whose parents suffer from psychological distress and emotional trauma caused by marital discord are at risk of experiencing direct or

indirect victimisation and abuse. Witnessing or experiencing IPV at home impacts children's health and physical well-being, including their quality of life (Stiller *et al.*, 2022).

The custodial parents highlighted that they experienced physical assault and verbal abuse from the non-custodial parent in their bid to ensure that the non-custodial parent performed their parental duties. The intensity of the abuse appears to increase when the custodial parent confronts the non-custodial parent to pay the agreed child maintenance money. It appears that the recourse to obtaining child maintenance fees provides further avenues for non-custodial parents to abuse their ex-partners. Evidence from Sweden has shown that child maintenance could have counter-predictive effects on custodial parents, especially when it mandates frequent contact between partners (Eriksson, 2011; Tegler *et al.*, 2022). Some custodial parents experienced insults from making contact with the non-custodial parent for child maintenance. Whilst being aware of these consequences, custodial parents are forced to make contact with non-custodial parents for child maintenance in cases where financial payments are agreed upon to be made directly to the custodial parent. It can be argued that when maintenance payments are facilitated through the DSWCD, such verbal assaults can be minimised. Single parents, who are mostly petty traders, find it difficult to take care of their children alone due to the increased burden of caregiving. Indeed, one of the rationales for child maintenance is to address parental poverty and ensure that custodial parents are financially supported in taking care of the child(ren) (Skinner and Davidson, 2009; Skinner and Main, 2013; Hakovirta *et al.*, 2020). Vogel (2020) raised concerns about assessing not only non-custodial parents' ability to pay but also their willingness to pay. This study adds that it is also important to consider and guard against the aftermath effects of verbal assaults that could arise after the child maintenance arrangement has been made by the DSWCD.

Furthermore, the custodial parents suggested that familial discord and violence, including physical and verbal abuse between parents, negatively impacted the children. The findings from this study show that custodial parents transfer frustrations from the abuse they experience to their children. It is therefore safe to say that families and children in contact with the DSWCD on child maintenance concerns can be victims of IPV and child abuse and may suffer from psychological trauma. The traumatic effects on the neglected child(ren) may be exacerbated in situations where the non-custodial parent fails to show affection to the children because they had children in their new relationship. These situations, including the lack of commitment to children in previous relationships, complicate and worsen the conditions of parents who have custody of their children. It is important that child and family social workers in the dual-focused child protection system in Ghana are abreast of these

complexities to tailor their intervention to address the holistic situation of families.

### Implications for child and family social work practice

The practice whereby child protection workers have the additional mandate to assess child maintenance concerns may present an opportunity for practitioners to understand the holistic situations of families and develop targeted intervention measures. In contrast, practitioners operating in such dual-focused systems may also skew their attention towards one responsibility, such as child maintenance concerns, to the neglect of their core child protection mandate. The findings from this study have significant implications for the dual-focused child protection system in Ghana and lessons for similar child protection systems.

First, it is important that child protection practitioners in the Ghanaian system also assess signs of parental experience of IPV during the child maintenance assessment. Most importantly, factors such as partner involvement in extramarital affairs, pregnancy out of wedlock and remarriage are key predictors of unhealthy familial relations. This is an indication that the custodial parent may have experienced physical or emotional trauma. A holistic assessment of the familial situation should be conducted to uncover these symptoms to inform intervention. Such assessment processes should involve the children who are the centre of the child maintenance arrangement. When children are involved, it is possible that they can provide deeper insights about their own victimisation experience as well as provide information about happenings within the family.

Secondly, child protection practitioners in the Ghanaian system should develop holistic interventions to address the trauma that may be experienced by the custodial parent and the child. The intervention would be less effective if the custodial parent is left out of the intervention because frustrations from the unresolved trauma could initiate another episode of maltreatment against the child(ren). Thirdly, a set of protection orders should accompany child maintenance arrangements to ensure that contacts between the custodial and non-custodial parents are regulated. Most importantly, their communication should centre on the child and be devoid of insults and aggressive conduct.

Furthermore, with respect to the operation of the child protection system and the dual role of child protection practitioners, we advocate for the establishment of a centralised child maintenance agency in each district to facilitate the payment and transfer of child maintenance to custodial parents. Such agency should be separated from the DSWCD to ensure that child and family social workers have the necessary capacity to address core child protection issues, such as abuse and neglect. It is

evident that the continuous operation of this dual-focused child protection system could be detrimental to vulnerable children in Ghana given that child protection workers are more likely to prioritise child maintenance concerns and fail to unravel the core child protection concerns that are implied within child maintenance issues.

## Limitations

The findings of this study are limited to the views of custodial parents in Ghana. However, analytic insights from the study provide a strong foundation for examining the topic outside the Ghanaian context. The experiences of IPV and other forms of maltreatment could be bidirectional. Thus, further studies should consider the views of non-custodial parents and children who are subjects of the child maintenance arrangement. Quantitative studies to establish the relationship between trauma and IPV amongst families in contact with the DSWCD for child maintenance are needed to substantiate the current findings and provide robust empirical evidence to support intervention. Additionally, quantitative studies that highlight the intersection of child maintenance and poverty and test the impact of child maintenance arrangements on conflicts amongst parents are highly encouraged.

## Conclusion

The holistic family situation of families presenting with child maintenance cases underscores the social workers' dual focus, that is, dealing with child protection concerns and the non-payment of maintenance. We argue that a pre-occupation with the non-payment of maintenance amongst social workers could lead to the invisibility of other protection and well-being concerns like family violence, child abuse and neglect, which may lead to problematic outcomes for the families whom social workers want to support. There are three takeaway points from the foregoing: (1) social workers conduct a comprehensive assessment of the families' situation without only focusing on the non-payment of maintenance; (2) a separate unit is created within DSWCD dedicated to assessing child maintenance cases; and (3) an assessment framework is created to guide decision making on child maintenance cases, making room to assess other child protection concerns simultaneously.

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