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The Evolving Sociology of the Family in Sierra Leone: Changing Patterns Due to Economic Pressures, Technology, Aging Populations, and New Forms of Kinship in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the ways in which the sociology of families in Sierra Leone is changing considering economic pressures, accelerated adoption of technology, demographic shifts (including local aging), and the rise of “flexible” or “chosen” kinship networks. This is a secondary evidence synthesis (not a primary or mixed-methods field study): it integrates quantitative sources (national statistics, household surveys, and administrative indicators) with qualitative sources (ethnographies and case studies). Quantitative and qualitative evidence were combined through thematic synthesis, with country-level statistics used to contextualize and bound interpretive claims drawn from qualitative studies and wider West African literature. Using this approach, I explore specific routes that households adopt in response to these changes. Among the key results include splitting of households because of migration and precarity; the importance of cell phones and money transfers via cell phone in maintaining links; and foster care and other forms of caregiving becoming more common. A focus on the role of gender in these processes includes the importance of women’s contributions as income earners as well as caregivers in an increasingly aged society with limited formal social welfare systems. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations for policy makers, suggesting that there be a need to bolster and expand social protection programs, develop elder care programming, improve digital literacy, enhance consumer protection in mobile banking, and recognize the role of caregivers. In essence, the families in Sierra Leone are neither deteriorating nor stagnating; they are transforming in a dynamic way that calls for sociological study and proper policy formulation.

INTRODUCTION

In Sierra Leone, families and kinship networks have always been vital social organizing principles, mediating resource allocation, childcare, and eldercare through extended family duties, reciprocal exchange within the community, and kinship networks in localities (Bledsoe, 1990; Carsten, 2004). In recent decades, however, Sierra Leonean families have been under pressure due to various structural conditions such as economic marginalization in the post-conflict period, the demographic consequences of health emergencies (such as the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2016), rural-to-urban migration, quick dissemination of mobile phones and mobile money transfers, and localized demographic changes leading to aging communities.

The goal of this article is to explain the interplay of economic stressors, technological advances, aging population dynamics, and new kinship systems that transform the family in Sierra Leone. This article relies on interdisciplinary research within the fields of anthropology, demography, sociology, and development studies, and draws upon institutional statistics and ethnographic data to offer an overview of the issue. The discussion is guided by four research questions: (1) How do economic challenges (including migration and precarity) affect family structures and intergenerational dynamics? (2) How is technology (particularly mobile phones and mobile money) influencing financial exchange, communication, and the symbolism of

kinship? (3) How are households responding to aging and changing care needs under conditions of out-migration and limited social protection? (4) What emerging kin relations (e.g., fostering arrangements and chosen kinship) are developing, and how are they being reconciled with existing traditions of obligation?

The paper continues with a discussion of methodology, which outlines the research approach, followed by a literature review highlighting previous contributions to the subject. Then, the four research questions discussed above are presented and analyzed, followed by their discussion in relation to implications for theory, policy, and specific recommendations. Concluding remarks will then follow, as well as references according to APA 7th Edition guidelines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual framework – theoretical perspectives on kinship and changes in family dynamics

Studies on kinship reveal that relations between relatives are not stable and are defined culturally. In comparative studies, kinship was discussed as a classification system and a cultural idiom to express socio-economic relations between family members (Goody, 1973; Carsten, 2004). From an African perspective, authors have emphasized child fostering as a kinship practice through which children move between households to redistribute care, labor, and opportunity in response to education, work,

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and household shocks (evidence base includes Sierra Leone: Bledsoe, 1990).

Recent theoretical perspectives contextualize kinship within wider socio-economic changes: migration, precarity in the labor market, and the commodification of care shape kinship practices (Bremman & van der Linden, 2014; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Authors highlight the interaction between economic transfers and intimate symbolism: money is imbued with moral value, and mobile communication transforms the temporal logic of obligation (Haddad, 2013; Rivière, 2012).

Literature on Sierra Leone and West Africa

Household formation and migration: The literature on Sierra Leone and the region reports substantial internal and return migration associated with education, employment opportunities, and the aftermath of the civil war (Bangura, 2013; World Bank, 2018). Sierra Leone-specific quantitative evidence on mobility is available in national household surveys that include migration modules (e.g., Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018, Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey [SLIHS]). [SL] Migration often results in fragmented families and “skip-generation” families (with grandparents raising grandchildren while the parents migrate in search of employment) [WA-Comp]. Cases of urban fostering, moving children to the city due to educational or employment reasons, are extensively reported across West Africa (Bledsoe, 1990; Oppong, 1983) [SL/WA].

Remittances and mobile banking: GSMA and development literature report the widespread adoption of mobile telephony and mobile-money systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone (GSMA, 2020). Country-level remittance inflows are economically significant: the World Bank estimates personal remittances received at about 4.6% of GDP in Sierra Leone (World Bank, 2024). [SL] Mobile money technology facilitates regular and lower-value remittances, thereby establishing new financial connections between migrant populations and households in their place of origin (Aker & Mbiti, 2010) [Interp]. On the demand side, Global Findex reports mobile-money account ownership in Sierra Leone (World Bank, 2021, Global Findex). [SL] Ethnographic studies emphasize the functions of remittances in supporting livelihoods and preserving reciprocal obligations (Meyer & Brown, 2006) [WA-Comp].

Gender and household labor relations: Women in Sierra Leone more often engage in petty trading and informal services work while also fulfilling childcare and eldercare duties at home (UN Women, 2019; Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018) [SL]. Participation and economic gains in gender-labor arrangements affect the household’s negotiation processes and decisions on resource distribution (Care International, 2016; UN Women, 2019) [SL/WA]. While migration may reshape gender roles through generating additional revenue, it may also increase care burdens for those who remain when household members migrate [WA-Comp].

Old age, care provisioning, and social welfare: In contrast to its young population, Sierra Leone experiences localized aging in some rural communities due to out-migration and mortality patterns. At the national level, people aged 60+ constitute a small but policy-relevant share of the population (see Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015, Population and Housing Census). [SL] Low-income communities in West Africa lack access to formal pension systems or care facilities (HelpAge International, 2017) [WA-Comp]. In rural settings where migration results in the loss of productive adult members, elderly populations become more vulnerable (Harper & Hamblin, 2014) [WA-Comp].

New kin and choice: Urbanization and modern work practices lead to the emergence of “chosen families” and friends that at times perform kin-like functions (Carsten, 2004; Stack, 1974). Such groups may be important for recently migrated urban inhabitants, particularly young ones, through offering housing and job connections as well as social support.

Role of technology in family life: Researchers claim that digital media transform intimacy through facilitating new types of monitoring, comforting, and coordinating (Hine, 2015; Horst & Miller, 2006). The role of cell phones in Sierra Leone goes beyond economics: moral obligations are fulfilled, coordination of childcare is facilitated, and social stratification is established through mobile technology.

Gap statement (Sierra Leone evidence base and comparative literature)

Although migration and fostering have received much attention in West Africa literature, there are few integrative studies focused on Sierra Leone that combine economic dynamics, emerging technologies, aging population, and new kin relations. Analysis of links between large-scale processes, such as financial innovations, and micro-areal dynamics in individual families is necessary. The current article tries to fill this gap.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Approach and rationale

Considering the multidimensional, multiscale dynamics of changes in family organization in Sierra Leone, this research employs a triangulated secondary evidence synthesis approach. Instead of conducting an original field study, which would be limited to one location, the paper incorporates evidence from diverse sources for an extensive, empirical investigation. Quantitative materials (e.g., census/survey indicators and administrative statistics) were used to characterize levels and trends, while qualitative studies (ethnographies, case studies) were used to interpret mechanisms and meanings. These strands were combined through thematic synthesis and compared for convergence/divergence (“triangulation”), and claims derived from broader West African literature are marked as comparative/interpretive where Sierra Leone-specific evidence is limited. The reasoning behind

this methodological choice is to ensure that multiple perspectives and types of information will be combined to validate inferences about trends and processes while recognizing their diversity across regions and social groups.

Sources of data

- Official national statistics: Sierra Leone Population and Housing Census (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015) and its follow-up household surveys and publications.
- Publications by international organizations: World Bank analyses and summaries of the country; reports by UNDP; UNICEF and WHO publications on country statistics related to population and healthcare.
- Academic literature: Anthropology, demographic, sociological, and development studies' journals containing scholarly articles and book chapters on family organization, child fostering, migration, and technology-enabled remittances in West Africa and Sierra Leone in particular (Bledsoe, 1990; Carsten, 2004; others).
- Grey literature and NGO reports: Local non-governmental organization reports and faith-based organizations, as well as international organizations working on social protection and development within Sierra Leone.
- Qualitative case studies: Ethnographic studies and qualitative papers that provide information about the micro-level dynamics of household decision-making, children's mobility, and elder care practices.

Search strategy, screening, and eligibility

Evidence-tagging convention used in this review

[SL] = supported directly by Sierra Leone-specific data/sources; [WA-Comp] = supported by wider West African comparative literature; [Interp] = interpretive inference (plausible mechanism or implication) that is not a Sierra Leone-specific empirical finding; [SL/WA] = both Sierra Leone and wider West African sources are used in combination.

Search period: Sources were searched between January 2020 and December 2025. The primary publication window targeted was 2015–2025 to prioritize post-Ebola and contemporary mobile-money and social-protection dynamics, while seminal earlier studies on Sierra Leonean kinship and fostering were retained for foundational concepts (e.g., Bledsoe, 1990). Inclusion criteria: (a) Sierra Leone-specific quantitative indicators (census, household surveys, administrative statistics) and/or Sierra Leone-based qualitative research; (b) peer-reviewed articles, books/book chapters, and high-quality institutional reports (e.g., Statistics Sierra Leone, World Bank, UNICEF/UN agencies); (c) direct relevance to at least one analytic domain (migration/household change, remittances/digital finance, fostering/child mobility, aging/elder care, gendered care labor). Exclusion criteria: (a) sources without an identifiable methodology or provenance; (b) pieces focused on unrelated sectors without a family/kinship, mobility, remittance, or care

component; (c) purely opinion pieces or duplicative publications. Screening yield: The search returned [n] records; after title/abstract screening [n] were retained for full-text review, and [n] sources were included in the final synthesis.

Analytical techniques

- Systematic literature search: Key words include “Sierra Leone family,” “kinship Sierra Leone,” “fostering West Africa,” “mobile money remittances Sierra Leone,” “aging Sierra Leone,” and “gender and household Sierra Leone.” These terms were employed in different databases and institutional web pages, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and documents published by the World Bank.
- Thematic synthesis: Findings extracted based on thematic analysis, focusing on key themes, including economic stresses and household restructuring; technologies and remittances/communication; aging and elder care; novel kinship systems and fostering; and gender and inequality.
- Comparative inference: In instances when there are fewer studies conducted in Sierra Leone, the paper uses insights from comparative West African studies while identifying where such comparisons are justified and where they require caution.
- Triangulation: Comparing institutional statistics with qualitative studies to uncover similarities and disparities between them (for instance, comparing country-wide statistics of migration with circular migration).

Limitations

While this study draws from various sources, it does not produce any new primary empirical survey data, which implies that the accuracy of the claims depends on the quality of existing material. Heterogeneity in Sierra Leone's population, namely, ethnic, regional, and urban-rural, suggests that results obtained from some samples might not be generalized for others. It is possible to say that there is less information on aging processes in Sierra Leone compared to youth migration and foster care literature, which complicates the conclusion-making process. Moreover, due to the rapid development of mobile devices and their penetration into different parts of the world, some sources could quickly lose relevance; therefore, every effort was made to find recent reports from official sources in the literature (between 2015 and 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of findings

Economic pressures and household reorganization

Drivers of economic pressure

The economy of Sierra Leone has been influenced by resource booms and busts, rebuilding after conflict, and health emergencies (Ebola). Unemployment, lack of formal jobs, and informal livelihoods such as petty trade, subsistence farming, and artisanal mining create

precariousness (World Bank, 2018). Urban costs of living, combined with limited access to education and formal employment, cause migration.

Sierra Leone-specific indicator: National household surveys include dedicated migration modules that can be used to document internal mobility patterns and their correlates (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018, Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey [SLIHS]). [SL] Claims below that draw on wider West African evidence are marked [WA-Comp] or [Interp].

Household Fragmentation and Migration Patterns

- Rural-Urban and Circular Migration: Young adults migrate to cities like Freetown or towns for employment and education. They maintain linkages to family back home via remittances and visits, and their movements may be temporary. Circular or seasonal migration allows for flexible household restructuring without complete family breakdown (Mazzucato & van de Vijver, 2013).

- Generational Household Split and Skip Generations: Migration of parents creates situations where grandparents become the principal care providers for children. It impacts the children's education, labor force participation, and socialization, while putting additional burden on the aging caregivers who are not necessarily physically and financially capable (HelpAge International, 2017).

- Multi-local Households: Migration and income diversification lead to multi-local households that consist of family members spread across locations. This makes the idea of fixed households irrelevant in practice and causes challenges in providing services to them.

Gendered implications

- Women as economic actors and caregivers: More women participate in the urban trade economy and service industries as sources of livelihoods, empowering them economically. However, together with domestic duties, it increases the "double burden" placed upon them, which may hinder chances of education and better-paid jobs (UN Women, 2019).

- Migration and masculinities: Migrating men may bring changes to the family hierarchy; while remittances may strengthen their provider role, long-term absence and unstable income streams may create conflicts regarding decision-making and partnership dynamics [WA-Comp]. Use of technology to enhance family communication and assistance

Rapid adoption of mobile connectivity and mobile money services

Sierra Leone-specific indicators: (a) personal remittances received are estimated at about 4.6% of GDP (World Bank, 2024) [SL]; (b) mobile-money account ownership is reported in Global Findex for Sierra Leone (World Bank, 2021, Global Findex) [SL]. Mechanisms discussed below are marked [Interp] where they are not Sierra Leone-specific empirical findings.

- Penetration rates: The mobile phones and mobile money services have grown in number; even within poor families, mobile phones, and SIM cards are not uncommon anymore (GSMA, 2020). Mobile money network services offer multiple possibilities for frequent small-value transfers, thus reducing transaction costs associated with physical remittance services.

- Effects on remittance: Mobile money facilitates a faster remittance system through increased coverage, frequency, and value of transferred money (as compared to fewer amounts of cash remitted less frequently). Regular payments are helpful in terms of improving household planning and maintaining living conditions back at home (Aker & Mbiti, 2010).

Social and emotional dimensions

- Staying close across distances: Consistent use of communication channels, phone calls, texting, social media, allows migrants to stay emotionally connected, coordinate child-care and educational expenditures, and ensure relatives are reminded of their duties. Consistent communication could reduce the emotional burden of geographical distance.

- Visibility and surveillance: The presence of digital footprints, communication logs, transactions, produces new kinds of moral accountability. For example, proof of sending remittances could affect how responsibility and filial piety are judged.

Digital inequalities

- Digital divide: Access to mobile technology and proficiency in its use are not equal among relatives. Elderly relatives, rural relatives who live far away, and poor relatives may lack such access.

- Mobile-money fraud and instability: Mobile-money scams and the vulnerability of informal digital financial systems pose risks to families dependent on electronic payments.

Aging populations, care arrangements, and social safety nets

Localized aging and caregiving pressures

Sierra Leone-specific indicator: Population age structure and the distribution of older people can be drawn from national population counts (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015, Population and Housing Census). [SL] Where arguments below rely on broader regional gerontology or social-protection literature, they are marked [WA-Comp] or [Interp] rather than treated as country-specific findings. Although Sierra Leone's age distribution remains relatively young nationally, outmigration and mortality trends due to certain issues such as health emergencies lead to the emergence of certain areas that are characterized by higher proportions of elderly people. These elderly people face various risks such as low financial resources, lack of social networks, and need for more intensive care (HelpAge International, 2017).

Elder care arrangements and responsibility

- Informal familial care: Informal and family-based care remain common practices regarding caring for elderly members. As a result of migration, elderly care becomes the responsibility of females or other relatives while in case when there is a lack of relatives, community members fill in the gap.

- Absence of any formal support: Pensions are rare as well as the availability of long-term care for elderly. In addition, social protection is just emerging in the country.

- Negotiation in care decisions: Negotiations about how to live, what kind of medical help will be provided, and resource allocation take place among members of a family.

Impacts on health and wellbeing

Elderly members who do not receive remittances from relatives and have poor health as well suffer from food security problems. While regularity ensures that mobile transfers facilitate buying medications and meeting basic needs, irregular transfers increase vulnerability among elderly people.

New types of kinship: flexibility, fostering, and chosen kinship

Fostering and movement of children

Sierra Leone-specific evidence: Child fostering is documented in Sierra Leone ethnography (Bledsoe, 1990) [SL] and can be contextualized with child living-arrangement indicators from national household surveys (e.g., Statistics Sierra Leone & UNICEF, 2018, MICS 2017) [SL].

- The reasons for fostering include economic difficulties, access to schools in urban areas, migrations of parents, and emergencies (such as the death of a parent due to diseases), forcing families to move children to relatives or foster families who live in urban areas for more education or better chances of employment.

- Outcomes: While children receive better access to education and employment, some may end up exploited, employed as child labor, and emotionally separated from their kin. This is because the process of fostering can range from temporary arrangements to help with schooling to permanent moves for purposes of work.

- Protection: The regulatory mechanisms are inadequate and cannot help protecting children against abuse or mistreatment during such arrangements.

Chosen kin and urban solidarities

Migrants in urban settings usually build new families consisting of friends or fellow tenants who offer housing opportunities and emotional support. Chosen relatives could fill in where natural kin were missing and, in some situations, could also build into an enduring system of reciprocity and obligation.

Obligations that were negotiated and reciprocity

Whereas traditional obligations within lineages were

considered unconditional, today more conditional obligations are emerging: remittances depend on the need and/or the performance (such as studying) and young migrants can negotiate restrictions on their financial obligations. Formalized by mobile money accounts and regular communication, negotiated reciprocities can also occur.

Discussion of the results

Interpretation of the findings

Based on the data gathered, several themes related to Sierra Leonean families coping with multiple overlapping challenges are revealed, such as:

1. The ability of flexibility and multi-locality: Household composition is becoming increasingly flexible, and individuals can be members of multiple livelihoods networks and simultaneously maintain households in rural and urban areas. Such flexibility is positive yet makes the task of delivering the services difficult due to the non-static nature of the households.

2. Technology as empowering and stratifying: Technologies, such as mobile phones and mobile money accounts, make possible various types of social interactions. However, access to these technologies depends upon education, income, and availability. Furthermore, technology involves new risks (theft, liquidity), which necessitates regulatory and educational efforts.

3. Gender roles and negotiation: The dual role of women both in entering the world of income generation and in their continuous caregiving duties draws attention to the existence of gender-based roles in the economy. The combination of economic opportunities for women without the provision of social benefits may increase their workload.

4. Aging and dependency in the absence of institutions: With age, local populations are facing more problems with caring for the elderly, which the kinship network cannot cope with because of the migration of young people. In the context of the absence of pension funds, it becomes necessary to address these issues at the policy level.

5. Alternative kinship systems such as social insurance and identity: Fostering, elective kinship relations, and negotiated reciprocity can be considered adaptive strategies in the development of alternative kinship systems. Such practices can be useful for protecting children and the elderly.

Policy implications

Synthesizing the results identifies some key areas of policy intervention:

- Social protection should be expanded and diversified to protect non-conventional families and older adults.
- Digital inclusion and consumer protection are needed to guarantee safety and equality of access to mobile remittances.
- Programming should incorporate gender

issues by addressing caregivers' burdens and empowering women economically.

- Child protection systems should acknowledge fostering practices.
- Foster care for older adults in local communities should be promoted.

Recommendations

From the above synthesis, the following policy recommendations are made to policymakers, civil society organizations, and development partners in Sierra Leone:

1. Expand social protection and cash transfer programs

- Develop cash transfer programs that are adaptable to multi-local families, whereby remittances may be sent to selected recipients using mobile money from different locations while taking care of the welfare of elderly people and fostered children.

- Provide both conditional and unconditional cash transfers with adequate monitoring without undermining the informal kinship system.

2. Enhance digital inclusion and consumer protection

- Offer digital literacy courses targeted at the elderly population, those in rural areas, and females to facilitate the secure use of mobile money transactions.

- Regulate and supervise the operation of mobile money agents to prevent scams, promote agent liquidity, and safeguard small-amount transfers.

- Conduct information drives and seminars highlighting the prevalent forms of mobile money scams.

3. Improve child welfare and foster placement processes

- Establish registries or foster recognition processes at the community level to respect children's rights while ensuring the flexibility of foster systems.

- Educate social workers and local chiefs about the standards of security and establish referral channels for abuse or neglect reports.

4. Empower community-oriented eldercare initiatives

- Establish community eldercare facilities that offer day care, basic medical check-ups, social interactions, and food services, especially in places where there is a significant population movement.

- Consider contributory or non-contributory pension schemes designed for informal workers and retirees without formal employment records.

5. Advocate gender equality in economic policy formulation

- Increase funding for affordable childcare services that are either community-based or provided by employers to alleviate the dual workload of working women.

- Offer skill-building courses and micro-grants to women-owned enterprises along with infrastructure improvements that save domestic work time.

6. Develop migration and urban planning policies that integrate kinship-based programming

- Account for the multiplicity of locales in urban

housing and education policies (such as allowing foster children from rural backgrounds to enroll in schools based on need rather than location).

- Support services for newcomers such as information centers, legal help, and integration projects that take into consideration the importance of chosen kin.

7. Conduct more research on family change

- Invest in longitudinal research projects that examine family dynamics, remittance transfers, the condition of the elderly, and the fostering process to facilitate policy modifications.

- Separate administrative and survey data by family unit, the presence of received remittances, and caregiving duties to account for variability.

CONCLUSION

The field of family sociology in Sierra Leone is developing because of a variety of economic, technological, demographic, and social factors. The emergence of multi-local families, who are dependent on remittance transfers facilitated via technological advancements and flexible kinship ties to address livelihood concerns and caregiving obligations, is one such development. Even though technology serves as an excellent means of maintaining relationships at a distance, it does not provide equal access. Localized ageing presents serious challenges for elder care within a framework of limited social protection.

The policy responses must therefore be comprehensive and include increased social protection measures, investment in digital inclusion and consumer rights, recognition and protection of new forms of family relations, and gender equality-based policies. Government-supported community innovations in cooperation with the development partners can ensure better integration of policies with local realities. Further research is needed to identify the changing patterns and test the effectiveness of policy responses.

Kinship in Sierra Leone is not disintegrating nor going back into some old traditions; it is adapting itself to new conditions. The adaptability of kinship system can be a valuable resource for policy makers and practitioners instead of trying to fit inflexible models which cannot fully represent reality. Social welfare policies in Sierra Leone must be able to incorporate the flexibility and dynamism of new kinship relations which have emerged through technological mediation in the country.

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