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Assessing Child Maintenance Cases in Ghana: What Do Social Workers Consider?

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ABSTRACT

While one of the key responsibilities of social services in Ghana is to conduct maintenance arrangements so that the nonresident parent is committed to making financial contributions to the well-being of the child, little is known about what informs social workers' assessments in child maintenance cases. The aim of this study was to determine what social workers consider when undertaking child maintenance assessments. A qualitative practice research study was conducted with 13 social workers and 12 parents involved in a child maintenance case with three agencies of the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Ghana. The study showed that corroborating the existence of nonpayment for maintenance in the family is the first step in assessing other factors, such as the parent's income, occupational status and maintenance amount. Even after the maintenance amount was decided upon, social workers were often unable to follow-up on nonresident parents to ensure that they complied with the maintenance arrangements. Given that no assessment instrument exists in Ghana for addressing child maintenance cases, the study's findings can provide useful information that can aid in the development of an instrument or framework to assist social workers in their assessments.

KEYWORDS

Child maintenance; child maintenance assessment; social workers; nonresident parents; Ghana

Introduction

Despite varying societal definitions and conceptions of childhood, most cultures share a common sense of parental responsibility, including providing care, guidance, protection, and support for a child's well-being and development. These responsibilities are affirmed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (ACRWC, 1990; United Nations, 1989), which emphasize children's right to adequate living standards for their physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development. One of the key ways of ensuring these parental responsibilities is through child maintenance.

Child maintenance, often known as child support, is a system in which nonresident parents

(non-custodial parents) contribute periodic financial support to custodial parents to meet their children's basic needs (Skinner & Davidson, 2009). Social service organizations rely on child maintenance arrangements to ensure that nonresident parents contribute to the care and maintenance of children in their previous relationships (Eydal & Friðriksdóttir, 2012; Hakovirta & Jokela, 2018; Skinner & Davidson, 2009). As a signatory to both conventions (UNCRC and ACRWC) and to comply with the provisions of the 1998 Children's Act (Act 560), ensuring adequate provision of resources to care for children experiencing parental neglect is a major intervention pathway employed by social workers working for the Department of Social Welfare in Ghana (Abdullah et al., 2020; Awortwe et al., 2020; Laird, 2011).

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According to Ghana's 1998 Children's Act (Act 560), parents are primarily responsible for providing the needs of the nearly 12 million children under 18 years, regardless of their marital status. A parent or guardian as well as social welfare officers may apply to a Family Tribunal for a maintenance order against a person responsible for maintaining a child under the Act (s.48). A Family Tribunal can order a parent to provide a periodic or lump sum payment based on factors such as a social welfare officer's report, the parents' income, living costs, and the child's rights under the Act (Laird, 2011). Since 2014, Ghana's Child and Family Welfare Policy (CFWP) has been guiding the country's child protection system, utilizing traditional values to address the social problems, and only resorting to court coercion as a last resort (Frimpong-Manso & Mawudoku, 2017).

While current evidence is unavailable, anecdotal and past estimates suggest that social workers face a significant caseload primarily involving child maintenance disputes. In 2009, for example, 49% of the 10,000 cases handled by the Department of Social Welfare's child rights promotion and protection programmes were related to child non-maintenance, according to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (2014). However, several other child maintenance cases are handled by other mandated institutions such as the Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice and the Domestic Violence and Victims' Support Unit. While the Children's Act does not authorize social workers in the Department of Social Welfare and other child welfare organizations to make decisions on maintenance payments, this is what happens in practice (Laird, 2011). There is an increasing rate of child maintenance cases handled within the Department of Social Welfare, with decisions being made by social workers. As a result of this, it is *sine qua non* to examine what these social workers consider when assessing such cases.

Generally, child maintenance arrangements manifest when one of the parents becomes non-resident following divorce, separation, or marital problems, and when the nonresident parent fails to contribute (financially) to the care of children.

The process of child maintenance begins with a formal report by the resident parent (custodial parent) to the respective child welfare agency about the nonresident parents' neglect of parental duties (Awortwe et al., 2020; Cancian et al., 2008; Cancian & Meyer, 2018). Following a referral, social workers conduct thorough assessments to inform maintenance plans/arrangements. Ideally, the procedure should adhere to standard case assessment processes in child and family social work practice (Holland, 2010). However, there are no specific assessment procedures or processes designed to assess child maintenance cases in Ghana.

In Ghana, social workers examine and determine maintenance amounts without a systematic approach (Awortwe et al., 2020; Laird, 2011). As a result, little is known about what goes into the determination of child maintenance payments and the indicators considered in the assessment of child maintenance cases in Ghana. Differences between Ghanaian practices and processes, in part, create gaps and impacts on efforts to ensure compliance with maintenance orders (see Abdullah et al., 2021 for details). This study aimed to explore the key processes and factors considered in the assessment of child maintenance cases in Ghana. We hope to generate detailed information for the development of standard criteria to assess maintenance cases in Ghana.

Assessment of child maintenance cases: The indicators

The components of child maintenance assessment highlight two main domains: 1) parents' capacity and 2) the needs of children. Child protection workers assess parents' (mostly fathers') capacity to pay child maintenance fees using a formula (Hakovirta & Jokela, 2018; Noyes et al., 2018; Skinner & Davidson, 2009). The assessment formula often prioritizes parents' income, the number of children they care for, and the time spent with their children (*cf.* Hakovirta & Jokela, 2018; Noyes et al., 2018; Skinner & Davidson, 2009). The inclusion of the income of both parents might have stemmed from the evidence that lone parents with high levels of income have greater tendencies to reduce or avoid maintenance

payments (Skinner & Meyer, 2006). This finding suggests that parents' willingness to pay for child maintenance goes beyond their financial capacity (Vogel, 2020). Vogel (2020) revealed that compliance with child maintenance payments is influenced by both the willingness and capacity of the nonresident parent. Awortwe et al. (2020) revealed that cultural factors, including, notions of matrilineal inheritance and stressful relationships among families, influence Ghanaian fathers to stop child maintenance payments. Other studies also show that punitive measures by child support systems, for example, denial of access to children, may motivate parents to evade child support and decrease their willingness to pay (Cancian et al., 2013; Miller & Mincy, 2012).

Frameworks or formulas for assessing child maintenance also take into account parents' daily expenditure and family expenditure. Skinner and Davidson (2009) studied evidence from all 14 countries and revealed that nonresident parents' expenses for second families are considered in the assessment of child maintenance cases. Having additional children increases nonresident fathers' ability to pay for child maintenance (Sinkewicz & Garfinkel, 2009). Non-custodial parents' level of debt decreases their willingness and ability to maintain their children (Maldonado, 2005). Additionally, the assessment captures how much effort and money the nonresident parent incurs in making contact with the child, and the number of nights a child spends with each parent. In 10 of the researched countries, including Australia, Austria, New Zealand and the UK, child maintenance amounts are canceled completely when children spend equal amounts of time with both parents (Skinner & Davidson, 2009). The above maintenance approach promotes equity in child maintenance payments. To date, evidence from studies on child maintenance in Ghana (see Abdullah et al., 2020; Awortwe et al., 2020) has failed to highlight the indicators of child maintenance assessment. The lack of a standard case assessment framework for child maintenance cases in Ghana suggests that assessment is subjective and guided by discretionary powers and subjective biases of the social workers. We argue that the proliferation of subjectivity in the assessment of child maintenance cases could lead to

incorrect and ineffective maintenance intervention plans. It can also jeopardize the professional standards of social work practice.

Some nonresident fathers felt unfairly treated by the maintenance regime in Ghana as they blamed social workers for failing to listen to their concerns during the assessment (Abdullah et al., 2021; Awortwe et al., 2020). Nonresident fathers' concerns about unfair treatment are supported by mothers' claims that fathers are forced to make maintenance payments when cases are reported to social services "... *they would be made to provide money to take care of the children*" (Abdullah et al., 2020, p. 9). Hence, it is important to make efforts to regularize the assessment processes in child maintenance to eliminate these biases. This study aimed to explore the processes and factors considered in child maintenance assessments in Ghana through in-depth interviews with frontline social workers who are involved in handling child maintenance cases.

An approach to child maintenance in Ghana

According to Ghana's Children's Act, 1998 (Act 560), the Family Tribunal (FT) is the organization legally mandated to issue maintenance orders to nonresident parents. The involvement of the FT means that the nonpayment of maintenance fees becomes a criminal offense, with defaulters liable to a penalty. However, in practice, most maintenance cases are handled by social workers outside the FT who are unable to enforce punitive measures on defaulters because of the lack of legal backing. In fact, previous research revealed that many families would prefer to first address nonpayment of maintenance within the family, before going to social workers, with the FT being a last resort (Abdullah et al., 2020; Awortwe et al., 2020). The practice of initially addressing nonpayment of maintenance within the family is part of Ghanaian norms and cultural practice which values respect to family elders and family ties. It is only when deliberations within the family fail to meet expectations that a complaint is made to social workers. The complainant who reports the case to social workers rarely refers the case to FT because they believe such action may become counterproductive. For example, some

families argue that if the nonresident parent is handed a hefty fine due to noncompliance they would not be able to pay as they are struggling financially (Awortwe et al., 2020). As a result of this, social workers who take a more civil approach to dealing with maintenance cases are the preferred contact.

Method

Practice research approach

We employed a qualitative practice-oriented research approach, or practice research, to guide the design and exploratory knowledge generation process (Uggerhøj, 2011). Practice research is a method that aims to generate scientific knowledge from and with practice (Uggerhøj, 2014). This approach is based on the philosophical foundation of ensuring effective practice and the implementation of scientific knowledge. For research findings to be effectively implemented, they must be co-developed and investigated collaboratively with users of scientific knowledge (Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008). The principle of collaboration and co-development of scientific knowledge is highly valued in practical research. Researchers using practice research frameworks are required to co-develop parts or sections of the research process together with professionals, who are users of scientific knowledge. In accordance with the practice research approach, this study asked five social workers to comment on and contribute to the design of the interview instrument. The social workers provided insight from their practice on questions that would be useful for generating evidence on the indicators of assessment in child maintenance cases. Additionally, they provided feedback on the coding and implications that were made from the interviews. The five social workers were identified by the third author, with whom they have a previous working relationship. All the social workers have at least 3 years experience of working with child maintenance cases and agreed to contribute toward the development of the interview guide. Three of them worked in leadership positions while three were frontline practitioners. The rigor and quality of the study's findings have

improved through the collaborative practice research approach.

Participants and procedure

Following a review of aggregate child maintenance cases handled by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development (DSWCD) in Ghana, we recruited 13 social workers from three DSWCD offices, each located in the Greater Accra, Ashanti, and Eastern regions of Ghana. The selected DSWCDs (one each in Sunyani, Accra and Kumasi) handled the highest number of child maintenance cases between 2019 and 2021. Case records of the child maintenance cases were reviewed to generate initial insight into the assessment indicators and inform the design of the interview instrument. The researchers reviewed records of more than 500 child maintenance cases. In addition to the social workers, 12 parents were recruited to share their experience with the assessment process.

Specifically, we explored the views of both social workers and custodial parents to develop a comprehensive understanding of child maintenance case practices and outcomes in Ghana. We interviewed social workers to gain insights into the process, considerations, and challenges associated with case outcomes. We also spoke to custodial parents to understand how challenging and satisfactory families find the process. By gathering data from decision-makers and those experiencing the system, this dual-pronged qualitative approach enabled a rigorous assessment of what is working versus needing reform.

Parents were purposively selected as follows. First, we recruited parents with the highest number of visits to the DSWCD for child maintenance cases (minimum 3 times) and the highest amount of time spent engaging with social workers on accounts of child maintenance (minimum six months). The parents were purposely selected after they were categorized into the following groups: 1) married and divorced, 2) married and separated, and 3) never married but had common law marriage.

Three research assistants (all master's students in social work) were trained on how to conduct qualitative interviews and passed a certification

exam. The research assistants made contact with the social workers at the agency to introduce them to the study and obtain their permission to work as codesigners, in line with the practice research method. All frontline social workers from the three social work agencies agreed to participate in the research, and five social workers volunteered as codesigners/implementation partners. The five social workers were engaged in designing the interview questions.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Hong Kong. Prior to their participation in the study, all the research participants provided their written consent by providing informed consent. The consent letter detailed the participants' right to withdraw from the study and information pertaining to how their identity would be concealed and how the information obtained would be protected. Each participant was given a token from GHS 30.00 as compensation for their time spent, and those involved in the codesign process received greater compensation from GHS 50.00.

Participants

There were 25 participants in total, 13 social workers and 12 parents. Nine of the social workers were females and four were males. The social workers were aged between 29 and 47 and had at least 2 years of experience working with families presenting cases of child maintenance. All 12 parents were females who were also the resident parents. Only one of the participants was married, eight were separated, and three were divorced. The majority of them were self-employed, engaged in petty trading and had relatively unstable incomes.

Data collection

We conducted in-depth interviews with the social workers and parents to explore the processes and indicators of assessment in child maintenance cases. A semi-structured interview guide code-signed with social workers was used to guide the interviews. According to Silverman (2013), using a semi-structured interview guide facilitates deeper exploration. It also enables researchers to

effectively utilize interview tools such as probing and paraphrasing to elicit further information from research subjects. The interview guide was designed in line with the objective of the study. The key questions on the interview guide included the following: What family/parental factors do social workers consider in determining child maintenance amounts? How does the nonresident parent's relationship status influence child maintenance outcomes? What makes it difficult for nonresident parents to honor maintenance arrangements? Interviews with the social workers were conducted at offices within the DSWCD using English, whereas parents' interviews were conducted at their residence using the Twi language (local language). Participants selected the interview location and preferred language for the interviews. The interviews were conducted between December 2021 and February 2022. Each interview lasted an average of 70 mins. All interviews were audio recorded after the participants provided consent.

Data analysis

All the recorded interviews were transcribed into a Word document to facilitate analysis. Data analysis was conducted by the first author following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure for conducting thematic analysis to generate findings for reporting. The beginning phase involved reading through the transcribed interviews several times for familiarization. In a later step, codes were developed by closely reading through paragraphs of transcripts. Codes such as "father's occupation," "relationship problems," "social workers not effective" and "non-payment of maintenance" were created. All the codes from the interviews were written down and subsequently merged with each other by combining codes that communicated similar ideas. Potential themes were created through this process. The themes were later refined to ensure that the codes and extracts connected to the themes reflected the appropriate meaning. Themes were well developed to ensure heterogeneity such that no two themes communicated the same idea. The final themes were discussed with the five social workers to share their ideas and feedback. Based on

the interview guide they co-designed, the social workers were satisfied with the results and agreed it responded to questions they have developed.

Results

This section looks at how social workers handled child maintenance cases in terms of the processes involved and the factors they considered when making decisions.

Key processes and indicators for child maintenance cases

Both social workers and parents shared their experiences with the factors that they considered before making decisions on maintenance cases. These factors often focus on the financial expectations from the nonresident parent. Because social workers have the professional responsibility to present final decisions regarding this matter, the analysis presented here mostly comes from social workers' practices.

There is the beginning phase of *gathering and corroborating complaints* where social workers get to know about the family's case, including who is not being responsible, what aspects of the child's needs are being neglected by the partner and how to resolve the absence of financial contributions. Often, the resident parent serves as the complainant because he or she makes the claim to the DSWCD that the nonresident parent has not been providing financial support for the child. The nonresident parent (respondent) is expected to respond to those claims. Social workers use the responses given by nonresident parents to determine whether they have been financially involved in children's wellbeing. This is how a resident parent described their case and how social workers handled the case at the beginning.

I told them he hasn't done anything for the child for the past 17 years. Therefore, they asked me how much I want him to pay for the upkeep of the child (P6).

Let's say it is a mother who comes to lodge a complaint about the child's father failing to maintain the child. We interviewed the mothers, and then, we invited the fathers to check if what she was saying was true. We sat them both together and let the complainant know

about the complaint that was made. In addition, we ask him for his response and listen to what he has to say (SW3)

Social workers listen to the statements of both resident and nonresident parents and decide whether there is actually a case where the nonresident parent is not being financially responsible. Usually, the social worker gathers the views of the nonresident parent to corroborate claims made by the resident parent. A social worker described some of the things they considered to decide whether the nonresident parent was neglectful.

There are certain criteria we need to look at, such as when was the last time he sent money. If he paid school fees. When was the last time, he provided certain necessities such as clothing, and from there, we look at how much is spent on the child. Then, we agree on how much they are supposed to pay for maintenance (SW4).

Social workers work to trace the nonresident parent's recent involvement in meeting the basic needs of their children. If they find a pattern of lack of financial support from the nonresident parent, then the social workers move to setting a maintenance amount that is to be regularly paid by the parent.

The *occupational status of the (non-) resident parents* appear to be the first assessment criterion used by social workers in deciding child maintenance cases. It is important for social workers to know the occupation of the nonresident parent so that they can know how much can be contributed regularly. Similarly, it is important for social workers to know the occupational status of their resident parent. It is not just their occupational status; several factors also influence the decision on the amount to be paid for maintenance. The situation is reflected upon by a social worker.

We agree on the amount of work the man [non-resident parent] is doing and the economy. We also consider whether the woman is working too. We agree that payment will be weekly, monthly or every two weeks. When the payment is made, we give the receipt and then record it. Then, we call the woman to come for it. (SW1)

We look at what work the man [non-resident parent] is doing and the woman too. Because if the woman has a good job, then we will not ask too much from the man (SW4)

The implication here is that, if the economic situation is challenging, such as a high cost of living, widespread poverty, or low-income levels, then social workers are likely to agree on a budget-friendly amount for the nonresident parent. Similarly, if the resident parent has a job with stable income, the nonresident parent might not be expected to pay a significant amount. This is because the resident parent is expected to supplement income from their job.

When talking about *financial contributions to be made by the nonresident parent*, social workers make use of the word “shared,” suggesting that each parent should do their part to meet the financial needs of their children. However, it seems that “shared” does not necessarily mean “equal” in regard to these financial obligations. For example, a social worker clarified.

Therefore, if there are three square meals, the woman should eat one portion, and the man should eat the rest of the meals. He is also required to pay school fees and buy books and other things necessary for school (SW5).

Social workers seemed to suggest an equal division of financial responsibility, but their practices show otherwise. It is often the father (nonresident parent) who is expected to make a larger financial contribution. The financial strength of the father is a key factor that social workers consider. They make the assessment by asking the father their occupation, and the social workers use the information to assume what the father is likely to earn from their job in question. This enables the social worker to decide what amount to propose as maintenance. The social workers indicated that they did not ask about the father's salary because they believed that to be confidential information but that they could make visits to their workplace to confirm their occupational status.

We make them understand that it is a joint responsibility, but often, men have to take a larger share and women support them so we look at all these things to ensure that the child is adequately maintained (SW1).

The social workers argued that the wellbeing of the children is a priority; therefore, there is no room for excuses from the nonresident parents.

This was also intended to indicate that the financial needs of children should be met by their parents even if they have no job.

Whether you work or not, you need to provide. Even if you're not earning much, you must provide so that the child will be adequately maintained. (SW3)

Some will tell you they are not working. Don't they eat? How do they feed themselves? As long as they are able to feed themselves, they should also provide for their children (SW7)

Considering that many of the families with child maintenance cases live in poverty, social workers used these statements to guard off parents who used their economic situation to avoid financial obligations.

The *maintenance amount* is determined on the day the case is settled. Generally, there is no rule about how much is set aside for a child's maintenance per day. Social workers use their discretion on the matter. Putting together daily expenses by the number of children in the family is often performed. One of the social workers described what the process of deciding maintenance amounts looks like.

Sometimes the man complains that their job is not going well; we ask them how much they can afford. Maybe the man says he can afford 5GHS per day, we say that's not good. Because let's say if the child is spending 12 GHS a day, then we ask the man how much he can afford from that. If he says maybe he can afford 8GHS, then we ask the woman for support. Sometimes we ask the woman to take breakfast and take lunch for the children, and the woman also takes supper. However, if the woman is not working, that is where the problem comes, the man will have the entire cost. However, we encourage the woman to get something doing to support the man (SW1)

Clearly, deciding on the maintenance amount is a negotiation involving back-and-forth discussions with the social worker and parents. As seen in the participants' narratives, deciding on the amount is ultimately based on the social worker's discretion considering a range of parental circumstances. Sometimes, social workers collect further information by talking to the children, asking them how much they spend in a day. This enables the social worker to have some idea about how much money can be considered adequate to meet the child's needs.

While there was no specific amount that applied to all child maintenance cases, the social workers appeared to agree on a range from 8 to 12 GHS per day for each child. In most cases, social workers are likely to arrive at 10 GHS per day for a child.

In a typical case, we calculate the 12 GHS maximum a day and the 10 GHS minimum a day for each child. So that becomes a guide for us. Even if we are not able to meet the target, the woman will also support since this is a joint responsibility (SW3).

Therefore, daily, we can take 10 GHS, so the man can pay 300 GHS per month. It is not fixed; some people can pay as much as 600 GHS monthly, while others pay 300 GHS monthly. It all depends on the job the man is doing (SW7)

There is a significant degree of flexibility that comes with determining the maintenance amount, taking into consideration a number of personal and family factors.

The inadequacies of the department of social welfare and community development

The participants felt that social workers' intervention to ensure compliance with child maintenance arrangements was not successful in the long run. This sentiment was particularly reported by the parents, who indicated that in most situations, after the resolution of a child maintenance case, the nonresident parent seems to be committed to the arrangement for only a few occasions but, thereafter, that contributions stop coming.

A lack of *follow-up and monitoring* was the main reason why parents felt that interventions by social workers were unhelpful for them in the long run. Follow-up and monitoring were performed in various ways. First, parents wanted social workers to regularly check up on nonresident parents who were defaulting, determine why they were defaulting on payments and ensure that they honor the arrangements. Second, the parents mentioned the tendency for some nonresident parents to lie about their job status, particularly because some men have the tendency to lie to social workers that they had no jobs with the expectation that social workers would be more lenient when deciding the maintenance amount.

Therefore, they indicated that social workers should perform tasks to confirm the accuracy of the employment information nonresident parents provide. Also, parents wanted social workers to follow-up on and monitor the developmental progress of the children. For example, to determine whether a child has been attending school where the case involved the child being absent from school because the nonresident parent did not support school fees.

Finally, the parents indicated that sometimes it can be difficult to have the nonresident parent present at the DSWCD for the case session. The practice is that social workers usually send a summons letter to the resident parent, who reports the case, to be forwarded to the nonresident parent. However, sometimes nonresident parents refuse to respond to the call. Therefore, the parents felt it was better for the social workers to hand the letter in-person to the nonresident parent. They believed this would suggest some urgency in the matter and foster compliance.

I expected social welfare [DSWCD] to follow-up and determine if he was indeed not working. I am saying this because there is a couple I know who had an argument and the man said even if you take me to social welfare and they ask me to pay 200 GHS I can tell them I'm not working (P8)

After they settle, they do not follow-up to determine whether the person is paying the money. People will tell him if she takes you to social welfare; you can pay for the first three months and stop, and they will do nothing to you. He himself also said the same thing. (P5)

It seems that the resident parents were frustrated about the social workers' inability to follow-up on the cases to ensure that nonresident parents continued to honor their monthly payments. Because of this frustration, most of the parents felt that there was no need to seek social workers' intervention in such matters. However, few parents found social workers' intervention useful: "...the moment the issue is brought to social welfare [DSWCD], even if he has 10 peswas he would bring it". However, in general, the longevity of such outcomes is troubling for parents.

The social workers seemed to acknowledge their inability to conduct regular follow-ups and monitoring.

Inadequate funding, logistics and human resources were key barriers impacting social workers' ability to conduct follow-up and monitoring. Two social workers described the challenges these resources were lacking.

We call the man [non-resident parent], and in some cases, if we don't reach them, we go to their house and check. However, we don't have the funds to do that always because you have to take transportation to the place and all that (SW1)

We [social workers] need more funds because sometimes we need to do follow-up to a place that is far from here. We also need a risk allowance. Because sometimes we send workers on follow-up at a community and there are wee smokers harassing the workers. There was a time when some service personnel were beaten by a man, and this was serious. Sometimes there are risks involved; we don't want to go to such places, and we leave the cases like that. (SW5)

Social workers have intentions to follow-up on cases, but they are limited by the resources they lack. These factors were believed to be beyond their control, particularly for those on the front lines. Most of the social workers did not have the vehicles to easily move around whenever there was the need to follow-up on a case. There are also other risks to their safety that they anticipate, as they felt they were not protected enough to visit neighborhoods that are violent.

Because of the inadequacies identified, several of the interviewed parents thought of sending their case to the *Family Tribunal (FT)*, which is the last resort for child maintenance. Once the case is sent to the FT, the parents feel that defaulters can be mandated to make payments, and if they refuse, it becomes a crime. However, the parents also had internal conflicts about sending their case to the FT. Internal conflicts arise over the cost of sending a case to FT and the desire to avoid imprisoning the other partner, leaving them financially struggling to bear parenting burdens.

They gave me a letter to take to the family tribunal so that is where I have to go (P1)

Even for this family tribunal, you can't go there without having money. Lawyers will demand money. I don't know whether the government has lawyers, so I left the letter in my room (P3)

While some of the parents wanted to resort to the FT to mandate nonresident parents make contributions, they were limited by their finances. The FT can maintain order to bind the nonresident parent to compliance. However, this is not an easy route, and most parents prefer the case to be resolved at the DSWCD.

Discussion and implications

This study explored the processes and indicators of assessment in child maintenance cases. There is no standard assessment framework that is specifically designed to guide the assessment of child maintenance cases in Ghana (Awortwe et al., 2020; Laird, 2011). As a result, social workers rely on their discretionary powers and subjective judgment in determining which information to seek from parents and what conclusions to draw from such information, including recommendations on how much a parent pays as child maintenance fees. This study aimed to explore the assessment process for child maintenance cases to inform the design of a framework for assessing child maintenance cases in Ghana.

The social workers in this study indicated that they begin their assessment by collecting detailed information from the parents who have made the complaint and corroborating it with the nonresident parent. The process of gathering information enables social workers to substantiate claims of neglect on the part of the nonresident parent. A study by Tufford et al. (2015) reported that social workers employ validating techniques as part of their assessment processes to substantiate claims of child neglect before making decisions on intervention measures. Social workers can establish the extent (in terms of frequency and gravity) of neglect through the robust information gathered. Evidence from the child and family assessment framework (cf. Holland, 2000, 2010) and the general framework for assessment in social work (Kirst-Ashman, 2012) identify information gathering as the crucial phase of the assessment process. Major "needs" were overlooked if adequate data were not collected. It is, therefore, resounding that social workers in this study begin their assessment of child maintenance cases with information gathering. Social workers pay key

attention to issues such as the last time the non-resident parent has provided money to the child, the number of times he/she has provided clothing, or the child's school fees. The focus of their initial assessment falls within the focus of child maintenance cases: which is to identify how the nonresident parent financially commits to the care of the child(ren). Manful et al. (2020) reported that evidence and claims of failure to meet any of the above basic needs should warrant maintenance.

The present study showed that social workers assess the occupational status of parents, especially nonresident parents, as key indicators. This enables social workers to determine the nonresident parents' capacity to pay for child maintenance. Vogel's (2020) study in the U.S. revealed unemployment among the key barriers to parents' compliance with child support payments. These findings, which corroborate findings from studies in the U.S. and Ghana (Abdullah et al., 2021; Cancian et al., 2011), suggest that assessing the occupation or employment status of the nonresident parent will enable social workers to increase their capacity to pay for maintenance. However, the social workers had diverse views and practice experience. For some, the assessment should also focus much on the occupational status of the resident parent, while others disagreed, as they argued that what matters most is the respondent (nonresident parent). However, they all agreed that, irrespective of their work status, men (who are, in most cases, the nonresident parent) will be required to make child maintenance payments. This means that, no matter the situation, men are most likely to be culpable and made to pay for child maintenance when they are reported to the DSWCD for non-maintenance. The evidence has wider implications. First, it confirms the cultural notion that men are breadwinners of families and should be responsible for financial obligations, while women take care of family chores (Nukunya, 2003). Second, female parents could take advantage of this seemingly gendered judgment on the part of social workers to extort money from men, even when they have not committed any offense of child non-maintenance. Evidence from some Ghanaian parents showed that they reported their partners because of the certainty of securing

judgments in their favor "...they would be made to provide money to take care of the children" (Abdullah et al., 2020, p. 9).

It also appeared that societal norms and beliefs about secrecy surrounding salaries received by employees makes it challenging for social workers to make firm decisions about how much should be paid as maintenance. Information about the salary earned by an employee is considered private for most people. This norm appears to have been unconsciously legitimized by social workers who avoid asking how much a nonresident parent earns. In families like these with strenuous relationships, partners would not like to open up about their earnings with each other in the fear that it may be used as a caveat, either by a social worker or the resident parent. In addition to this, many of such families work within the informal sector with irregular earnings (Laird, 2011), therefore, using their earnings alone to make decisions about how much to pay can be counterproductive.

The social workers indicated that they consider maintenance amounts as part of their assessment. Because there is no framework or guideline for determining how much a nonresident parent should pay for maintenance, social workers collect information on the income of both parents and children's daily expenses as well as the expenditure of families as indicators of how much the nonresident parent should pay for maintenance. Indeed, it is the duty of child protection social workers to assess parents' (mostly fathers') capacity to maintain children (Hakovirta & Jokela, 2018; Noyes et al., 2018; Skinner & Davidson, 2009). In jurisdictions such as Denmark, New Zealand, the UK, Austria, Canada (Ontario), Germany, and the USA, child maintenance amounts are usually calculated based on the income of the non-custodial or nonresident parent (Hakovirta & Jokela, 2018). These countries mostly have standardized formulas for calculating child maintenance (Hakovirta & Jokela, 2018; Noyes et al., 2018; Skinner & Davidson, 2009) using indicators such as parents' income, number of children they care for and the time they spend with their children. Narratives from this study showed that social workers consider these elements in their personal judgment of maintenance

amounts, except for the time parents spend with their children. The evidence suggests that although there is no standard formula for calculating maintenance amounts in Ghana, the indicators considered by social workers in their assessment of maintenance are not far from those implicit in maintenance calculators. Therefore, efforts to regularize assessments in child maintenance will be feasible.

Actual amounts for child maintenance vary based on the individual discretion of the social workers. Overall, the study showed that nonresident parents are willing to pay between GHS 8.00 and 12.00 for each child per day, with an average of 300.00 GHSs per month. After careful consideration of other key indicators such as duration of neglect, occupation of parents, number of dependent children in the care of the nonresident parent. Findings from 14 countries studied by Skinner and Davidson (2009) revealed that nonresident parents' expenses for second families are considered in the assessment of child maintenance cases. Consideration of parents' expenditure on second families is very important since having additional children may increase nonresident fathers' inability to pay for child maintenance (Sinkewicz & Garfinkel, 2009). Because there is no standard for child maintenance or formula for calculating child maintenance, actual maintenance amounts are often determined through negotiation among the three parties (social workers, resident and nonresident parents).

Furthermore, the social workers revealed that their assessment is often inconclusive due to the lack of resources to make home visits and follow-up on clients. As a result, crucial assessment and intervention measures are omitted because social workers are unable to follow up on clients to corroborate their claims, monitor the safety and conditions of the family environment, check the progress of children, and facilitate compliance with maintenance payments. Similarly, parents expressed deep frustrations with the lack of follow-up and monitoring by social workers after initial child maintenance case resolutions. They indicated this enables nonresident parents to default on arrangements after a few months without accountability. Parents wanted ongoing

check-ins by social workers to confirm employment status and income of nonresident parents, ensure payments are continuing, and monitor the wellbeing and school attendance of affected children. However, social workers acknowledged logistical and financial barriers that prevent robust follow-up measures. Together, these insights demonstrate a troubling gap between what parents expect in terms of accountability and support, versus what social workers are realistically able to enforce long-term under current resource constraints.

The literature on assessments of child and family social work (Holland, 2000, 2010) and social work in general (Harder, 2005) underscore the importance of follow-ups and home visits in the assessment and delivery of interventions. Issues of logistic, human and financial constraints in social work practice are common among researchers in Ghana (Abdullah et al., 2021; Avendal, 2011; Laird, 2002, 2011). It is important for social work agencies to develop other innovative cost-effective means to undertake crucial activities such as follow-ups.

Conclusion and recommendations

Social workers' ability to conduct comprehensive and robust assessments is an important component of an adequate structure for addressing child welfare concerns, including child maintenance. Owing to the lack of a standard assessment framework for child maintenance cases in Ghana, this study explored the processes and assessment indicators in child maintenance cases to direct the formulation of an assessment framework for child maintenance cases. The study findings revealed gathering and corroboration of information, parents' occupations and determination of maintenance amounts are among the key processes for making decisions. However, these assessments are impeded by the lack of logistic and human resources available for follow-up. Additionally, parents are unable to complain to the FT to ensure compliance with child maintenance due to court charges. Based on the evidence discussed in this study, we make the following practical recommendations:

1. There should be holistic intersectoral engagement between DSWCD, FT, parents, academics and stakeholders to develop a specific framework for assessing child maintenance cases. A separate child maintenance service unit dedicated to these patients could be created within the FT.
2. The framework should include a standard child maintenance calculator to enable social workers to make standard conclusions on maintenance amounts. A mobile device for maintenance should be developed to enable swift and effective implementation. A maintenance calculator should be developed such that it corresponds to changes in the standard of living and the cost of child care.
3. Parents' expenses for second-generation families are considered in the assessment of child maintenance.
4. In addition to the factors identified in this study, maintenance calculations should include estimates of family expenditure, the amount of time children spend with each parent and parents' history of compliance with child maintenance arrangements.
5. There should be proper coordination between the DSWCD and FT. The cost of referral of child maintenance cases to FT should be scrapped. Parents should have the right to seek recourse from the FT to demand maintenance payments at no cost to them.
6. Social workers should make use of community child protection committees to conduct follow-ups and home visits.

Limitations

This study is limited by the views of the 13 social workers and 12 parents interviewed. Analytically, insights from the narratives provide a strong foundation for generalizing across social workers in Ghana. This study may be limited by the views of the residents' parents. Resident parents who have encountered the DSWCD for child maintenance may have different experiences with the assessment process. The study's findings can be

deepened with evidence from nonresident parents. Further research should employ a quantitative technique to test the proposed assessment framework before implementation. Finally, our study did not show how demographic characteristics like ethnicity, age, gender, marital status and level of education may have impacted what the social workers and parents made of the assessment process. Quantitative studies could consider if these variables shape their perceptions of what is considered during child maintenance assessment and how.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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