

Hope in the time of Quarantine: Does Family Formation become Survival during Cumulative Crisis, Uncertainty, and Despair?

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For 6 weeks in January and February of 2020, I was able to travel to Freetown, Sierra Leone, with the support of the IRIS award, to conduct preliminary field work identifying the impact of quarantine on the reproductive lives of young adults. This research asks the following questions: 1) Did young adults maintain or adapt their reproductive beliefs and practices when experiencing an acute threat to survival? and 2) What importance did young adults give to the concepts of uncertainty and survival when they were simultaneously thinking about starting a family and avoiding infection? This research agenda seeks to understand whether and how young adults situate themselves, their families, and their reproduction within their communities as part of both individual and community survival. In doing so, my work contributes to a broader, long-standing question in social science: do people understand family formation as inherent to the survival of themselves, their communities, and their nations? If so, how do they maintain, adapt, and talk about practices of family formation as a means of survival? The work I conducted in 2020, with the help of the IRIS award, was conducting a set of informational interviews with key stakeholders in the reproductive and youth sectors (and young adults themselves), alongside informational interviews with influential community leaders (both young adults and religious leaders). These scoping interviews allowed me to set the stage for in-depth interviews with young adults in Freetown in the future, and informed major themes and interview questions developed.

For the first two weeks of this travel, I interviewed representatives at reproductive organizations (international and national NGOs, U.N. agencies, and clinics) where I had already established contacts through existing professional networks. I used these networks to get snowballed recommendations for others to interview. In the final four weeks of travel, I worked with a local driver to establish connections with the local Christian and Muslim communities in order to be able to interview religious leaders about important issues facing young adults in Sierra Leone. Finally, I interviewed young adults from varying socioeconomic backgrounds about their lives, their professional aspirations, and their childbearing and partnership aspirations. Across all these interviews I focused on the experience of quarantine during the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak. Although Ebola itself was devastating, the quarantine itself left people destitute and on interrupted life course trajectories for schooling, childbearing, and getting married.

Throughout the in-depth interviews I conducted, interviewees were often eager to talk about the devastation that the Ebola epidemic/quarantine had wreaked on an already-poor country, and how the epidemic had long-lasting effects on young adults ability to return to education, on their family formation, and on their mental health. Most talked about the collective trauma of Ebola, especially as a cumulative experience following a ten-year civil war that ended in 2001. For example, Samuel (pseudonym), a youth worker, stated that:

“[Young People] are the most affected people so far, most because, here, you have a lot of young people depending on, on their parents, their caregivers and when one breadwinner dies in the family it’s like a whole lot of young people in that family have to suffer...they were the set of people within the population that died the most from Ebola. Just like it happened during the war. *They were the fighters; they were the targets.*”

Respondents additionally focused on the severe hit the economy had taken due to the civil war, Ebola, and a later mudslide, and how the education provided in universities is mismatched to what the economy is able to offer young people. Across respondents, interviewees talked about how university attendance is seen as an equalizing stepping stone to middle or upper class trajectories—when this trajectory is not achieved, young adults, particularly men, feel a severe mental and emotional impact about the mismatch between their aspirations and achievements. Most respondents link this mismatch to drug and alcohol use, homelessness, joblessness, teenage pregnancy, sex work, etc., and to a larger collective experience of social despair that neither the government nor foreign aid is set up to mitigate. For example, Sascha (pseudonym), an international NGO worker said:

“Youth empowerment is a very funny thing. It is kind of like women’s empowerment. If you’re empowering someone to ask for more in a context where they can’t ask, it’s not very empowering...Youth...are kind of treated as powerful entity but with no actual power...But when you really think about it, the adolescent is maybe at the center, but not in terms of power and decision-making. The adolescent is at the center, but kind of trapped. By all those people who are surrounding them.”

Another respondent from a UN agency said “Adolescents have a huge amount of access to the world. They see how other people live. And they want that for themselves....”. Another important point that emerged from these interviews was that the majority of volunteers who responded to the Ebola epidemic were primarily low-paid youth volunteers. These volunteers not only performed the essential “dirty” of waste disposal and burials; they also gained extensive epidemiological and community

building skills that have been left to languish. This has further exasperated the feelings of despair, interrupted life courses, and feelings of being unable or unwilling to start a family.

The IRIS Graduate Summer Fieldwork Award allowed me to develop these findings from my interviews to develop a research protocol with in-depth interview guides for use in a small-scale study among low-income young adults in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I continue to work remotely with research partners in Freetown, and plan to collect data from September 2020 to May 2021.