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The impact of absent fathers on the well-being and development of teenage girls: A semi-systematic literature review

Thembelihle B. MAKHANYA, Mfundo Mandla MASUKU, Zinhle MTHEMBU and Themba BALOYI

ABSTRACT

This article presents a semi-systematic literature review exploring the impact of absent fathers on the well-being and development of teenage girls, guided by resilience theory. The review critically analyzed 43 studies published between 1990 and 2024 across multiple databases using a structured search protocol and inclusion criteria. The semi-systematic approach was chosen for its ability to synthesise diverse empirical and theoretical insights while identifying underexplored areas in existing literature. Resilience theory was employed to move beyond deficit-focused narratives by illuminating the adaptive capacities of teenage girls in contexts of paternal absence. While several well-documented outcomes, such as early sexual activity, low self-esteem, and mental health challenges, were confirmed, this review uncovers novel findings, including the nuanced role of extended families and community-based social fathers in African settings as protective buffers. The study also highlights how girls' navigation of cultural norms, kinship roles, and informal support networks contributes to emotional resilience and developmental continuity. These culturally embedded adaptation strategies are underreported in existing literature. The review concludes by recommending the development of localized interventions and policies that recognize context-specific expressions of resilience. By foregrounding the lived realities of teenage girls in under-researched regions, this review contributes original insights into gendered vulnerabilities and strengths in father-absent households.

KEY TERMS: absent father, teenage girls, resilience, wellbeing, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Although there are single-father families, most children grow up in single-mother-headed households. Child development is traditionally viewed as a collaborative effort between fathers and mothers in ensuring their children's well-being. The absence of one parent can significantly disrupt this balance. For this study, absent fathers refer primarily to biological fathers who, despite having impregnated the mother, are unavailable to fulfill parental responsibilities. A father who is absent because of work or studying cannot be the same as a father who is dead, divorced, or abandoned (Langa and Malose, 2014). Few studies have explored the impact of absent fathers on the well-being of teenagers (Tau, 2020), and there is even less focus on the impact of absent fathers on girls' development. East et al. (2006) and Campos (2010) share that there is a paucity of literature that addresses the impact of a father's absence on children and adolescents, particularly girl children. Sironga, (2018: IV) argued that "the probability of poor psychosocial wellbeing due to parent-adolescent relationship increased when one is female than when one is male". Thus, it is important to explore foundations that ensure family resilience (Walsh, 2016) for the well-being of an adolescent girl growing up without a father. The impact of an absent father on the well-being of a teenage girl presents an area in need of further investigation. For societal development, East et al. (2006) suggest a need for researchers to dwell on the under-researched spheres. Hence, the current review aims to explore the impact of absent fathers on teenage girls' well-being and uncover prevention and intervention strategies that ensure resilience. The lack of research on fathers and the well-being of children deprives the public of the positive role of fathers who are involved in raising their children. Understanding dynamics influencing teenagerhood and absent fathers is crucial, as parenting approaches significantly impact child development and can influence future parenting (East et al., 2020). By addressing this understudied area, this review contributes to a significant gap in literature. It provides valuable insights for policymakers, social workers, and other professionals working with adolescent girls affected by fathers' absence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of resilience guides the review discussion, offering a comprehensive framework to explore the impact of absent fathers on teenage girls, while also identifying strategies that foster resilience. Resilience theory is holistic, as it addresses the individual, family, community, and wider societal structures (Van Breda, 2001; Carlson et al., 2012). Ungar, (2008) stresses the importance of adopting resilience theory when working with children under stress. The focus is on positive adaptation strategies during adversity to ensure positive development. This holistic approach is relevant for understanding the complex dynamics of father absence in African societies, where extended family and community play significant roles in child-rearing. According to Ungar (2008:8) resilience can be understood based on three categories namely,

"Capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being; individuals' physical and social ecologies to provide these resources; and individuals, families and communities to navigate culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared".

Brown (2006), Carlson et al. (2012), and Van Breda (2018) argued that for resilience theory to be effective, one needs to acknowledge vulnerability, life adversity, develop critical awareness, and build relationships that are mutually empathic. Teenage girls face unique challenges when growing up without a father. These may include increased economic hardship, social stigma, and cultural expectations that can be difficult to navigate without paternal support. Resilience theory becomes especially pertinent here, as it emphasizes positive adaptation strategies during adversity (Ungar, 2021). This focus is crucial when working with young girls under the stress of father's absence, acknowledging both their vulnerability and their potential for resilience. In the African setting, this could translate to a teenage girl's ability to seek support from extended family members, engage with community resources, or participate in cultural practices that provide emotional and social support.

In the African context, resilience is not only an individual trait, but a collective phenomenon rooted in cultural values and communal practices. The isiZulu concept "*ukumelana nezimo*" or the Sesotho equivalent "*boitelo ba maikutlo*", both roughly translating to *the capacity to endure or to rise above challenges*, capture the essence of resilience as understood in African languages (Makhanya & Mzinyane, 2023). In African communities, resilience is often seen in terms of relational support, *ubuntu*, where survival and healing are grounded in interdependence, solidarity, and spiritual wellbeing (Mupedziswa, 2020). This expands the Western individualistic framing of resilience to include community-based coping, ancestral connection, and indigenous knowledge systems. Resilience in African societies is often measured not through psychological scales alone but through observable behaviours: the ability to return to school despite hardship, participation in communal rituals, caregiving responsibilities undertaken by adolescents, or a young girl's capacity to build life-affirming relationships with social fathers (e.g., uncles, grandfathers, or spiritual mentors) (Ratele, 2015; Ungar, 2021).

These culturally meaningful indicators challenge Western-dominated measurements and highlight the importance of social and symbolic capital in resilience processes. Thus, resilience for fatherless teenage girls in African contexts involves navigating life through alternative familial structures, cultural practices, and spiritual

coping strategies. Rather than focusing solely on what is absent, it is about what is present, community, custom, and connection. For African practitioners, this means recognising and working with the local expressions of strength and care embedded in extended family systems, rites of passage, and storytelling. This localised understanding is vital for developing relevant social work interventions that affirm the identities and capabilities of African girls in contexts of paternal absence.

METHODOLOGY

Approach

This study employed a semi-systematic literature review to address the research question of what the impact of absent fathers is on the well-being of teenage girls. The semi-systematic review allows for a comprehensive exploration of existing literature, addressing the reported scarcity of studies on the impact of absent fathers and the well-being of teenage girls, while enabling the identification of gaps in current knowledge (Snyder, 2019).

Criteria

To ensure thoroughness and replicability, a structured search strategy was implemented using different databases (see Table 3) below. The primary search terms used were 'teenage girl', 'absent father', 'resilience' and 'wellbeing'. Both qualitative and quantitative studies (including empirical and review studies) focusing on teenage girls and addressing the impact of father absence on wellbeing were included.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Qualitative, Quantitative and review studies	Social media
Focus on fatherhood and teenage girls	Family dynamics excluding teenagers and fatherhood.
Written in English / isiZulu	Rendered in any other language

Detailed records of all search activities were maintained, documenting the search strategy, number of results, and specific approach for each database. The selected studies were analyzed to identify key themes, methodologies, and findings on the impact of absent fathers on teenage girls' wellbeing, focusing on emotional and psychological effects, social and relational impacts, educational and developmental outcomes, and health and risk behaviors.

Data collection process and data items

The literature search was carried out between October and December 2023, focused on the findings between 1990 and 2024 to identify trends in the phenomenon studied. A data extraction form, created in Google Forms, was used to collect information from each published study regarding absent fathers, resilience, teenage girls and wellbeing, as outlined in the research objectives. The extracted data was piloted by two reviewers (Makhanya and Mthembu) using two sample articles. Following a collective review and discussion, the form was revised and improved based on the research objectives, inclusion, and exclusion criteria. This involved an iterative process of testing the form through database searches, evaluating the results, and refining the form until it effectively captured the desired outcomes for the review. After achieving a satisfactory form, the remaining articles were abstracted. All the reviewers (Makhanya, Mthembu, Masuku and Baloyi) met regularly online to discuss emerging findings, address any issues encountered during the abstraction process, and reach consensus on resolutions. The abstracted findings underwent multiple revisions and were synthesized into detailed outputs. Two reviewers (Makhanya and Masuku) conducted a constant comparative analysis, reviewing and amending the synthesized findings in consultation with Mthembu and Baloyi. The systematic literature review's design and analysis were also evaluated and reported.

Search results

A comprehensive search for relevant literature was conducted using publicly accessible databases. Resource

limitations, including access restrictions and paywalls, influenced the initial pool of identified records. As detailed in table 2 below, the initial search yielded 262 results. Following the removal of duplicate entries and studies not meeting the pre-defined inclusion criteria, 119 papers were reviewed. A subsequent rigorous screening process, applying all inclusion criteria, resulted in a final selection of 43 published studies for analysis.

Data extraction proceeded in two stages. Initially, abstracts were screened to identify potentially relevant studies. Subsequently, full-text versions of the selected articles were reviewed to determine their final inclusion. Following this initial data collection, a comprehensive full-text screening was conducted to ensure adherence to all inclusion criteria. An analysis of the selected articles' references was performed to identify additional relevant studies. Data synthesis employed thematic analysis, a well-established methodology for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within textual data (Snyder, 2019).

Table 2: Database of search results

Databases	Total number of results	Peer-reviewed paper	Included for review
<i>Sage Journals</i>	43	10	5
<i>Google Scholar</i>	57	34	7
<i>PubMed</i>	62	26	3
<i>OECDiLibrary</i>	4	1	1
<i>Taylor & Francis Online</i>	3	2	2
<i>SRCD Online Library</i>	5	1	1
<i>AOSIS Library</i>	2	1	1
<i>AJOL (African Journals Online)</i>	9	3	3
<i>IRR (Institute of Race Relations)</i>	1	1	1
<i>HSRC Research Output Repository</i>	6	6	4
<i>SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online)</i>	8	3	2
<i>Sabinet</i>	20	13	1
<i>JSTOR</i>	25	5	2
<i>Springer Nature Link</i>	7	3	1
<i>ScienceDirect</i>			1
<i>Scholar Works</i>			1
<i>APA PsycINFO</i>			1
<i>USIU-Africa</i>			1
<i>ResearchGate</i>			2
<i>Academia</i>			1
<i>Perlego</i>			1
<i>UAD Journal Management System</i>			1
<i>UKZN Research Space</i>			1

<i>Total</i>	<i>252</i>	<i>109</i>	<i>43</i>
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Characteristics of studies included for review

The geographic location where the articles and review papers on the effects of paternal absence on the well-being and development of teenage girls were assessed. The authors also assessed where and who publishes on absent fathers and on the well-being and development of teenage girls. Since this review paper was global in nature, when two different affiliations were mentioned in the study, only the first affiliation mentioned was categorized. The surveyed literature included High-Income countries such as United States, France, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Norway, New York, Canada and Israel and Low-Income, Lower/Upper Middle-Income countries including Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa. The results are illustrated in table 3.

Table 3: Studies characteristics

First Author	Country	Publisher	Year Published	Database
Brown, B	United States	Families in Society	2006	Sage Journals
Brown, S	United States	Walden University	2018	Google Scholar
Carlson, J. L	United States	OSTI.GOV	2012	Google Scholar
Chapple, S	France	OECD Publishing	2009	OECD Library
Campos, M. Y	United States	California State university	2010	Scholar Works
Demuth, S	United States	Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency	2004	Sage Journals
East, L	Australia	Routledge	2020	Taylor & Francis Online
East, L	Australia	Journal of Child Health Care	2006	Sage Journals
East, L	Australia	Contemporary Nurse	2007	Taylor & Francis Online
Ellis, B. J	United States and New Zealand	Child Development	2003	SRCD Online Library
Freeks, F. E	South Africa	AOSIS Publishing	2022	AOSIS Library
Gaillard, C	South Africa	Africa Journal of Social Work	2024	AJOL (African Journals Online)
Haimi, M	Israel	Journal of Clinical & Medical Genomics	2016	Google Scholar
Hagerty M. K	United States	Archives of Psychiatric Nursing	1992	PubMed
Holborn, L	South Africa	South African Institute of Race Relations	2011	IRR (Institute of Race Relations)
Langa, M	South Africa	Wits University Press.	2014	SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online)

Madhavan, S	South Africa	Journal of Family Issues	2014	Sage Journals
Madhavan, S	South Africa	Journal of Family Issues	2012	Sage Journals
Makhanya T	South Africa	Social Work/maastkaplike werk Journal	2018	Sabinet
Makosa, N	South Africa	African Journal of Social Work	2024	AJOL (African Journals Online)
Makusha, T	South Africa	Culture, Health & Sexuality	2015	HSRC Research Output Repository
Meintjes, H	South Africa	South African Child Gauge	2015	HSRC Research Output Repository
Mott, F. L	United States	Springer	1990	JSTOR
Nduna, M	South Africa	Journal of Child and Family Studies	2012	Springer Nature Link
Nobles, J	Mexico	Demography	2013	PubMed
Ntarangwi, M	South Africa	CODESRIA	2012	JSTOR
Qureshi, M. A	Pakistan	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	2014	UAD Journal Management System
Ratele, K	South Africa	South African Journal of Psychology	2012	ResearchGate
Shitindi, E. M	Tanzania	G-Card (Gitoya Centre for Academic Research and Dissemination)	2022	African Journals Online
Snyder, H	Norway	Journal of Business Research	2019	ScienceDirect
Spjeldnaes, I. O	South Africa	Fathering	2011	APA PsycInfo
Swart, S	South Africa	South African Child Gauge	2015	HSRC Research Output Repository
Sironga, N	Kenya	United State International University	2018	USIU-Africa
Sikweyiya, Y	South Africa	BMJ Open	2016	PubMed
Swart, S	South Africa	HSRC Policy Brief	2013	HSRC Research Output Repository

Tau, F	South Africa	Journal of Family Issues	2020	UKZN Research Space
Ungar, M	Canada	Oxford University Press	2021	Google Scholar
Ungar, M	Canada	University of Toronto Press	2008	ResearchGate
Van Breda, A. D	South Africa	South African Military Health Service	2001	Academia
Van Breda, A. D	South Africa	Social Work/maatskaplike werk Journal	2018	SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online)
Walsh, F	New York	Guilford Press	2016	Perlego

FINDINGS

Single-mother households face double challenges when it comes to raising adolescents, and this leads to developmental dilemmas in the navigation of complex dimensions of health care matters (Shitindi and Lubawa 2022; Freeks., 2022). Guided by resilience theory, the discussion offers a robust framework for understanding the complexities of father absence among teenage girls. It allows for nuanced exploration of risk factors, protective mechanisms, and potential interventions that are culturally relevant and contextually appropriate (Brown, 2006; Ungar, 2008 Ungar, 2008; Van Breda, 2001).

Table 3: Main findings and conclusions of the reviewed literature

Author/s and year	Main finding/s	Main conclusion and/ recommendation
Brown, (2018)	Lack of father care leads to financial and emotional hardships	Father absence leads to a loss of male guidance. Health care professionals to provide for coping mechanisms.
Brown, (2006)	The major theoretical categories include vulnerability acknowledgement	It is important to build psychoeducational group work in building resilience to shame
Carlson, Basset, Buehring, Collins, Folga, Haffender, Petit, Phillips, Vemer & Witfield, (2012)	The emergence of resilience as a critical component of a comprehensive risk management strategy and the acknowledgement that critical infrastructure is an important component of regional resilience have necessitated the development of a sound methodology to assess the resilience of the Nation's critical infrastructure	The application of the concept of resilience at the critical infrastructure and community/regional levels needs the development of a working definition for the measurement of resilience
Chapple, (2009)	Existing literature on sole parenting lacks effect.	Policymakers need to be concerned about family structure
Campos, (2010)	Campos' work considers the short-term benefits to the root causes of father's absence and coping mechanisms for single-mother	A more critical approach would have involved questioning the underlying assumptions about family structures and exploring alternative models of support

	households	that go beyond the traditional nuclear family paradigm.
Demuth and Brown, (2004)	Parental absence relates more to adolescents' delinquent	Controls to be in place to prevent adolescent delinquent behavior. Need for parents to be close, involved, supervise and monitor the adolescent.
East, Hutchinson, Power, and Jackson, (2020)	Men raised without fathers felt unprepared to be fathers but did not want their children to experience father absence	Support is needed for fathers who experienced father's absence
East, Jackson, and O'Brien, (2007)	Daughters who experience absent fathers develop disrespect and lack of interest to their fathers	Insights are provided to nurses and health care professionals on the impact of father absence
East, Jackson, and O'Brien, (2006)	Father absence and other factors have negative outcomes on the adolescent	Absence of father is an independent variable on the wellbeing of developing children and adolescents. There is a need for strategies to improve father-absence
Ellis, Bates, Dodge, Fergusson, Pettit, and Woodward, (2003)	Absence father increased rate of early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy	Need for support policies supporting father presents in families and being involved in their children
Freeks, Peters and Louw, (2022)	Colored fathers are present in the lives of their children	There is a need to allow for exploring and providing alternative ideas of being a father.
Gaillard and Mpontshane, (2024)	Children without biological fathers require support	Different government officials need to work together to address the issue of poverty affecting children.
Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier, (1992)	A sense of belonging is defined as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that people feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment.	Sense of belonging has important applicability for clinical use as well as continued theory development in psychiatric nursing
Haimi and Lerner, (2016)	Meeting arrangements after divorce do not meet the requirements of children	Management of divorce matters is necessary to improve children's experiences.
Holborn, and Eddy, (2011)	Many South African children are not growing up in safe and secure families	Need for improved research on aspects of family breakdown and its effects
Langa, and Malose, (2014)	The results reveal that many of the adolescent boys in the study did not know their fathers or their fathers had separated from their mothers	Young adolescent boys' positive voices about future fathering and fatherhood could be supported.
Madhavan, Richter, and Norris, (2014)	The study revealed that after dissolution (1) children who were in the 3 to 5 life stage at the time of dissolution faced substantially higher odds of having no contact compared with those who were in the 0 to 2 group and (2) children who were in the 6 to 11 group experienced lower	This work can help inform the development of policy to strengthen the role of fathers in their children's lives by identifying critical time periods in children's and fathers' lives in which fathers are more likely to disengage

	odds of intermittent contact.	
Madhavan, and Roy, (2012)	There is a growing recognition in both contexts that the optimal approach to strengthening the position of Black fathers requires an acceptance of responsibility from government as well as families and communities	The analysis can help inform policy debates about strengthening father involvement in both contexts
Makhanya and Mathias, (2018)	Findings indicated that high unemployment, non-payment of maintenance and cultural damages, and disputes with mothers and maternal families significantly impacted father-child contact.	All the participants wished to be more involved with their children and their conception of fatherhood extended beyond being just a provider to more nurturing roles.
Makusha, and Richter, (2015)	Among unmarried, non-resident parents, women control father-child contact and involvement, with mothers and/or their families either facilitating or inhibiting father involvement	The study found that cultural gatekeeping had a huge impact on father involvement, with the non-payment of <i>inhlawulo</i> or <i>lobola</i> regulating father-child involvement
Makosa, Tanga and Ekobi, (2024)	Children with absent fathers experience different negative challenges.	Life skills programmed and training need to be provided for single mothers
Meintjes, Hall, and Sambu, (2015)	Young people are disproportionately affected by poverty	Track children's wellbeing on annual basis
Mott, (1990)	Substantial proportions of children born by young mothers never had biological father residing at home	Need to consider dynamics of father absence or presence in child's life.
Nduna, and Jewkes, (2012)	The findings revealed interconnections between structural factors such as death, poverty, unemployment and gender injustices to cause distress	Strengthening of families, improving financial security, extension of social grants and no-fee school policies are needed to alleviate distress in young people in this area
Nobles, (2013)	Father migration is higher than children born in rural areas and by less educated mothers.	Reaching adulthood ultimately advantaged by remittances and regional development gains remains an important subject for future research.
Ntarangwi, (2012)	There is a value in African strategies of parenthood	Raising a child should be the community project
Qureshi, and Ahmad, (2014)	Children with present fathers show better academic performance than children with absent fathers	Father presence is significant for academic performance of a child
Ratele, Shefer, and Clowes, (2012)	Single mothers experience manifold challenges in supporting their adolescent children.	Support mechanisms need to be in place to support single mothers.
Swart, and Soudien, (2015)	Education and employment are central factors in interpreting intergenerational transition of poverty	Entry into the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship are critical.
Swart, Bhana, Richter	African black man involvement in the	Promote a broad understanding of

and Versfeld, (2013)	lives of children is hampered by the culture's expectations.	fatherhood beyond financial provision
Shitindi, and Lubawa, (2022)	The study revealed that single mothers experienced manifold challenges in supporting their adolescent children	The study recommended that support mechanisms from government and non-governmental organisations be in place to empower single mothers with prerequisite tools that will help them become economically stable
Snyder, (2019)	In the paper questions can be raised about the quality and trustworthiness of these types of reviews.	Common pitfalls and how to get literature reviews published
Spjeldnaes, Moland, Harris, and Sam, (2011)	Discrepancy between experiences of being fathered and future aspirations for responsible fatherhood	Guiding children about personal issues into manhood was seen as the most important father-responsibility, yet the legal framework presented obstacles to initiate future responsible fathering.
Sironga (2018)	There is a positive relationship between parents and adolescents' psychosocial well-being. But adolescents feel that parents do not understand their thoughts	There is a need of parenting programme that respond to adolescents needs
Sikweyiya, Nduna, Khuzwayo, Mthombeni, and Mashamba-Thompson, (2016)	There is a high prevalence of GBV in the world	There is a need for more empirical studies on GBV in Sub-Saharan Africa
Tau, (2020)	Absent father can be experienced in both negative and positive ways	Future studies to look at the impact of role models in supporting children with absent fathers.
Ungar, (2021)	Innovative methods of resilience based on different experts	The resilience of multiple systems is a better way to understand processes of change and sustainability.
Ungar, (2008)	Linking personal characteristics and environment we live in to position individuals in their environment	
Van Breda, (2001)	Resilience theory addresses different spheres such as individual, family and community	Few life domains of life that have not been touched by resilience such as military deserve attention.
Van Breda, (2018)	Resilience theory is of great relevance in South Africa at a time when it continues to translate social development theory into practice	Resilience theory is not without its critics, Though the theory itself remains resilient in the face of the criticisms
Walsh, (2016)	The chapter had various conclusions	The conclusions were mainly on providing the guidelines for strengthening resilience

The causes of absent fathers

Family dynamics influence the well-being of children (East *et al.*, 2020). Mothers are traditionally viewed as compulsory parents required for the well-being of a child. The superior importance of mothers influences their readily availability even as research participants on parenting, which undermines the role of fathers (East *et al.*, 2006; Haimi and Lerner, 2016). But Freeks *et al.* (2022) believe that fatherhood without motherhood lacks positive representation, which is a narrative that deserves deconstruction. Countries with constrained economic resources

see high prevalences of father-absence (Nobles, 2013). Non-marital childbearing leads to a lack of co-parenting (mother and father); hence the high number of absent fathers. But also, some fathers are absent due to death, and grief, isolation and trauma which affect children's wellbeing (Gaillard and Mpontshane, 2024). Furthermore, absent fathers increase the risks of depression, learning difficulties, violent behavior, and suicidal thoughts due to affected mental health among children (Haimi and Lerner, 2016).

The prevalence of father-absence

Children coming from poor families carry an additional burden of absent biological fathers (Gaillard and Mpontshane, 2024). The United States and Africa report a high rate of single-mother households (Shitindi and Lubawa, 2022; Spjeldnaes et al., 2011; Swart et al., 2013; Swartz and Soudan, 2015). According to Meintjes, Hall and Sambu (2015), the children living with their fathers are about 3.3% in comparison to about 39.5% of those living with their mothers and 34.7% living with both parents in South Africa. In KwaZulu-Natal, a slightly higher proportion (4.3%) of children live with their fathers only whilst 43.8% live with their mothers only (Meintjes et al., 2015). The findings on South African fathers shows that between 1996 and 2009 the percentage of fathers who were absent whilst alive increased from 42% to 48% and the proportion of fathers who were present decreased from 49% to 36% (Holborn and Eddy, 2011). Hence, countries with a high rate of single parents are worried about its effects on the well-being of children (Chapple, 2009). Based on its prevalence, it is crucial to acknowledge vulnerability, life adversity, to develop critical awareness, and build mutually empathic relationships (Brown, 2018).

The impact of father's absence on the wellbeing of a teenage girl

Absent fathers are a growing socio-economic concern affecting the psychosocial well-being of children not only in South Africa but worldwide (Makosa et al. 2024). Demuth and Brown (2004) investigated the causes of delinquency among adolescents, looking at the notion of parental absence versus both parents or the influence of parental gender, found that more delinquent behaviors come from adolescents residing in single-parent-headed households. The United States and New Zealand longitudinal study conducted by Ellis et al. (2003) discovered that, due to absent fathers, daughters are at high risk of early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy. According to Jain et al. (2020), the quality of the father-daughter relationship plays a crucial role in shaping adolescent girls' sexual risk behaviors and mental health outcomes. The absence of a father figure can deprive teenage girls of crucial male role models, potentially affecting their understanding of healthy relationships and gender roles (Madhavan et al., 2014).

Girls growing up without fathers' experience challenges in forming secure attachments and maintaining healthy relationships later in life (Nduna and Jewkes, 2012). Furthermore, father absence can lead to delayed developmental milestones, including cognitive and social development (Makusha and Richter, 2015; Ratele et al., 2012; Makosa et al., 2024). Father absence has also been linked to increased risks of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, among teenage girls in African contexts (Sikweyiya et al., 2016). However, some teenage girls with absent fathers demonstrate resilience and achieve positive outcomes, often with support from extended family networks and community structures common in African contexts (Madhavan and Roy, 2012; Mott, 1990).

Addressing this challenge requires comprehensive approaches considering the unique aspects of African family structures and societal norms. But the desire to grow in a two parent family ranges among children (Chapple, 2009). There is thus a need to explore different African cultures' perceptions and response to father absence, and how this impacts the resilience of teenage girls. For instance, in some African societies, uncles or male community leaders may step in to fulfill certain paternal roles, potentially serving as protective factors (Ntarangwi, 2012).

DISCUSSION

The impact of father absence on teenage boys and girls is complex and gender-specific, with both groups experiencing negative consequences, though in different ways. Without a father figure, girls struggle with understanding gender roles, educational aspirations, and healthy relationships, which can increase their vulnerability to early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and exploitation, particularly in patriarchal societies. The absence of a father also removes a crucial source of protection, guidance, and advocacy, leaving girls without necessary support in navigating education and future life decisions. In African contexts, this issue is compounded by cultural expectations and socioeconomic factors (Makhanya and Mathias 2018), which highlight the need for a nuanced approach that considers both the emotional and structural challenges that fatherless teenage girls face.

Evidently, South Africa has a high rate of father absenteeism, which is linked to complex socio-political factors and post-apartheid economic challenges. In contrast, in first world countries such as the United States, the

primary cause of father absence is divorce, with parental conflict and the disruption of family transitions leading to negative impacts on children (Makhanya and Mathias, 2018). The increasing prevalence of absent fathers, particularly in single-parent families, raises concerns over the detrimental effects on children's well-being. The lack of paternal figures in the lives of adolescent females has significant and extensive implications for their development and well-being, influencing numerous dimensions including emotional health, interpersonal connections and social standing. This study confirms that paternal absence correlates with heightened risks of premature sexual engagement, teenage pregnancy and delinquent behavior. Furthermore, the absence of a paternal role model can impact girls' perceptions of relationships, attachment, and gender roles, potentially shaping their future interactions with men.

Girls growing up without fathers often internalize their father's absence, perceiving it as abandonment and a reflection of their own inadequacies, leading to emotional challenges such as poor self-esteem, depression, and behavioral issues (Sewpaul, 2021). However, while these negative effects are prevalent, they are not inevitable, and many teenage girls show resilience despite the absence of their fathers. Resilience strategies offer significant potential to mitigate these challenges, empowering teenage girls to overcome the adverse effects of father absence. Creating safe spaces for girls to share their experiences and feelings with peers in support groups can enhance emotional wellbeing and provide valuable coping mechanisms. Furthermore, cultivating positive relationships with family members, community figures, and mentors can help fill the void left by an absent father. Encouraging academic development and fostering a strong sense of cultural identity are also crucial for promoting self-sufficiency and resilience.

Educational support and addressing cultural barriers are key to ensuring that girls have the tools they need to thrive. Resilience theory emphasizes the role of the enabling environment, suggesting that collective responsibility and community support play a critical role in helping teenage girls navigate adversity. Brown (2006) and Van Brenda (2018) use resilience theory to confirm that to have responsive resilience, it is essential to acknowledge vulnerability, confront life adversity, cultivate critical awareness, and build mutually empathic relationships. While some interventions, such as mother-daughter counseling programs, attempt to mitigate the effects of father absence, they may inadvertently overlook the essential role fathers can play in a child's development (Campos, 2010). Such interventions, though valuable in the short term, may fail to address the root causes of father absence and the long-term impacts of the missing paternal influence.

Additionally, these approaches may unintentionally reinforce gender stereotypes by focusing primarily on mother-daughter bonds without considering the broader family dynamics or the needs of sons. Therefore, a more comprehensive and gender-sensitive approach is needed to address both the emotional and structural dimensions of this issue, emphasizing the importance of positive, supportive environments that involve both mothers and fathers. The complexities surrounding father absence in African societies underscore the need for context-specific approaches that address both the cultural and socioeconomic factors influencing these outcomes. Therefore, resilience theory is particularly relevant in this context, as it highlights positive adaptation interventions during adversity. The African context of ubuntu, which says, 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Ntarangwi, 2012), is not captured as a valuable source of child well-being in the reviewed literature.

Thus, the Eurocentric focus is more on family as a single structure, not functioning within the environment of the extended family and community, as in the African value system. Thus, African value on social fathers, role of extended family and community networks is excluded as a fundamental parental guide in the child's wellbeing (Ntarangwi, 2012). This suggests a need for more context-specific exploration in researching the absence of fathers and its impact on teenage girls for effective and sustainable intervention strategies. In the African context a father might not mean a biological parent but a male provider. As argued by Brown (2018), context which challenges transferability, lack of generalization of findings might suggest a need for context-specific research.

CONCLUSION

The literature offers limited gender-specific evidence on the impact of absent fathers, often generalising teenagers' experiences. This highlights the need for research grounded in the lived realities of teenage girls, particularly in African contexts. While this review affirms known challenges such as emotional distress and disrupted development, it also focuses on how girls demonstrate resilience. In African contexts, resilience is more than coping; it is the ability to *ukumelana nezimo*, to rise above challenges, supported by extended families, community ties, and cultural practices. It is not an individual trait alone, but a shared process rooted in care, belonging, and identity. This review shifts the focus from deficits to strengths, showing how teenage girls adapt through informal support systems and cultural resilience. Future interventions must recognise these local strengths and promote culturally grounded strategies that support girls' development despite the absence of a father.

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