



## East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

[ejass.eanso.org](http://ejass.eanso.org)

Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

**EANSO**

EAST AFRICAN  
NATURE &  
SCIENCE  
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

### Collaborative Parenting: Fatherhood and Motherhood Role Transformations Amidst COVID-19 Crisis and Implication on Child Well-being in Mukono District, Uganda

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2950>

#### Date Published: ABSTRACT

05 May 2025

#### Keywords:

Fatherhood,  
Motherhood,  
Parental Role Identities,  
COVID-19,  
Collaborative Parenting.

The major occurrences of COVID-19 in Uganda and their impact on parental roles in Uganda are not negligible. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, with in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study interrogated how collaborative parenting influenced motherhood and fatherhood role transformations amidst the COVID-19 crisis and its implication on child well-being in Mukono district, Uganda. While global literature documents these changes since the 18th century, empirical evidence in Africa, particularly Uganda, is limited. Conducted in the Nakisunga sub-county and Goma division, findings indicate that pre-existing parental role constructions influenced role evolution during the pandemic, affecting child well-being differently depending on whether parents fulfilled roles individually or collaboratively. The study highlights the importance of collaborative parental roles. Recommendations and implications of the theory are embedded.

#### APA CITATION

Nalwadda, P., Nalwadda, N. V., Bwenvu, G. & Mugambwa, J. (2025). Collaborative Parenting: Fatherhood and Motherhood Role Transformations Amidst COVID-19 Crisis and Implication on Child Well-being in Mukono District, Uganda. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(2), 41-52. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2950>

#### CHICAGO CITATION

Nalwadda, Proscovia, Nicolette V. Roman, Gerald Bwenvu and Joshua Mugambwa. 2025. "Collaborative Parenting: Fatherhood and Motherhood Role Transformations Amidst COVID-19 Crisis and Implication on Child Well-being in Mukono District, Uganda". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 8 (2), 41-52. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2950>

#### HARVARD CITATION

Nalwadda, P., Nalwadda, N. V., Bwenvu, G. & Mugambwa, J. (2025) "Collaborative Parenting: Fatherhood and Motherhood Role Transformations Amidst COVID-19 Crisis and Implication on Child Well-being in Mukono District, Uganda". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(2), pp. 41-52. doi: 10.37284/eajass.8.2.2950

**IEEE CITATION**

P., Nalwadda, N. V., Nalwadda, G., Bwenvu & J., Mugambwa "Collaborative Parenting: Fatherhood and Motherhood Role Transformations Amidst COVID-19 Crisis and Implication on Child Well-being in Mukono District, Uganda". *EAJASS*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 41-52, May. 2025.

**MLA CITATION**

Nalwadda, Proscovia, Nicolette V. Roman, Gerald Bwenvu & Joshua Mugambwa. "Collaborative Parenting: Fatherhood and Motherhood Role Transformations Amidst COVID-19 Crisis and Implication on Child Well-being in Mukono District, Uganda". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, no. 2, May. 2025, pp. 41-52, doi:10.37284/eajass.8.1.2950

**INTRODUCTION**

Parenting issues have significant attention worldwide in research (Cueli et al., 2024). However, there has been inadequate data concerning how parents cope with parenting dynamics during crises like COVID-19 restrictive times; whether parents succeeding in protecting children's well-being have to consistently work together in collaboration, or individually as they fulfil their roles. Collaborative parenting, an approach where both parents share a common parenting goal, hold shared responsibilities, and make and implement joint decisions regarding their children's well-being in such crises has not been well researched. This partnership is essential for providing a balanced and consistent environment for the child. Less literature is available on collaborative parenting globally, however, Tingting (2024), in his study that aimed at investigating how integrating mental health education with student management can foster college students' comprehensive growth found that the adoption of a collaborative parenting approaches markedly improved the mental health outcomes for the students, reducing depression and anxiety scores by 1.815 and 1.436 points, respectively. According to Halapan (2024), collaborative parenting has several positive outcomes on children including emotional stability, improved communication skills, consistent discipline, enhanced problem solving and stronger parent-child bonds. Additionally, Gežová (2011) illustrates that both mothers and fathers have similar abilities in caring for their children and achieving desired outcomes, noting that mothers serve as trustworthy confidants, while fathers act as reliable partners who instil self-assurance in their children as they grow into adulthood. In the same

line, scholars like Đurišić & Bunijevac (2017) underscore the benefits of collaborative parenting, stating that it not only addresses children's physical needs but also supports their comprehensive psychological and emotional development.

In Africa, and specifically Uganda, Parenting is the process of nurturing, socializing and providing for the child's holistic growth and development. This process is described by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) (2018) as a shared responsibility between both parents, mothers and fathers collaboratively. These two have the responsibility of holding a shared parenting goal towards the well-being of their children and hence linking their fundamental and basic unit of society – the family, to the extended family. The extended family in collaboration with the fathers and mothers serves their children as a socio-cultural and spiritual/moral base (MoGLSD, 2018) ultimately for their well-being.

Child well-being which encompasses the realization of children's rights and the fulfillment of opportunities for every child, is key in Uganda's policy frameworks. For example, the Children's Act (CAP 59) as amended, second schedule stipulates that (i) it shall be the duty of a parent to provide education and guidance, immunization, adequate diet, clothing, shelter, medical, and protection from discrimination and violence (MoGLSD, 2018). According to the MoGLSD (2018) still, there are six priorities for children's well-being including the conditions to learn and develop; a positive view of themselves and an identity that is respected; having enough of what matters; positive relationships with family and friends; a safe and suitable home

environment and local area; and opportunity to take part in positive activities to thrive.

Despite the well-elaborated parental roles and obligations above, most parents both globally and locally found themselves in a dilemma of playing their expected roles to ensure their children's well-being due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that came as measures to limit infection (Wu & Xu, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic had a global impact, affecting the health, social, and economic aspects of families (Opobo, 2021). Measures such as business lockdowns and school closures added to the challenges faced by parents, who had to juggle parenting, work, and childcare duties (Chen et al., 2021). These effects, along with increased marital conflicts, intimate partner violence, and intensified child-parent relationships, raised the risk of child maltreatment (Wu & Xu, 2020). This indicates that COVID-19 preventive measures while curbing the spread of the virus, had unintended consequences on parental well-being and their roles.

In the African region, the situation paralleled the global scenario, with limited data available. October et al. (2022) found that COVID-19 had negative effects, particularly psychological impacts on South African families. Other studies such as Engelbrecht (2023), reported increased stress, financial issues, depression, and domestic violence among respondents. Loss of income due to COVID-19-related factors, including job loss and business closures, led to parental role confusion in low-income African countries (Adebisi, 2021; Engelbrecht et al., 2023). Families coped by using savings, selling assets, reducing food consumption, and seeking assistance, resulting in family homelessness and compromised child well-being (Koos, et al. 2020). However, positive outcomes were also reported, including increased family time, improved communication, hygiene, health, and financial management (October et al., 2022).

In Uganda, the pandemic had a profound impact, particularly on notions of fatherhood and

motherhood roles. While many women engaged in low-income jobs, the pandemic's arrival and government measures disrupted family dynamics (World Bank Group, 2022). The government implemented measures such as border closures, school and worship place shutdowns, suspension of mass gatherings, and a nationwide lockdown. A curfew was also enforced due to rising COVID-19 cases (Sserwanja et al., 2020). While these measures helped control the pandemic, they had unintended consequences in households, leading to shifting notions of parental roles, family breakdowns, and increased domestic violence (Sserwanja et al., 2020). Lockdowns resulted in various challenges, including limited access to food, child labour, teenage pregnancies, education disruptions, housing issues, negative social behaviours, reduced income and employment, and health access problems (Nuwematsiko et al., 2022). Job loss and reduced income strained families, with some fathers abandoning their responsibilities as breadwinners, and mothers becoming demanding of jobless husbands. This created stress and anxiety within families, impacting children (Mwesigye et al., 2021 & Oromo, 2023). The economic impact was severe, as many small businesses laid off workers or closed down entirely. Government relief measures, like the Ugx 100,000 support, faced issues of corruption and distribution (Ojulu, October 27, 2021). Despite this empirical evidence, it is unclear how parents navigated keeping the well-being of their children and families, hence the aim of this study is to discover how collaborative parenting influenced motherhood and fatherhood role transformations amidst the COVID-19 crisis and its implication on child well-being in the Mukono district, Uganda.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was anchored in the feminist theory; the masculinity theory (Kessler, 1982) by Raewyn Connell, and the family stress model by (Conger et al., 1994)

The Feminist theory views society as a conflict between men and women with a belief that women

are oppressed and/or disadvantaged by various social institutions and highlights the social problems and issues that are experienced by women. It focuses on areas like; discrimination based on sex and gender, objectification, economic inequality, power, gender roles, and stereotypes. Feminists share a common goal in support of equality for men and women. The general features of Feminism include but are not limited to; An awareness that there are inequalities between men and women based on power and status; that these inequalities can create conflict between men and women; Gender roles and inequalities are usually socially constructed; and an awareness of the importance of patriarchy: a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women Potter (2001). In the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in Uganda and Mukono district in particular, women and men had to spend the entire time together, struggling to make ends meet and this impact either negatively or positively on the way they succeed or fail to address the challenges of this season.

Alternatively, masculinity has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (e.g., Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gallagher and Parrott, 2011; Smith, et al., 2015) and, situated in the context of traditional gender roles. For example, hegemonic masculinity (Kessler, 1982) encompasses the notion that men should be in a dominant position in society, whereas hostile masculinity purports that men feel distrust of women and insecure around women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005 Smith et al., 2015); both hegemonic and hostile masculinity legitimize men's control over women (Jozkowski, 2022). The precarious manhood holds that men's masculinity is tenuous, and thus men are consistently forced to demonstrate their masculinity to maintain their position of authority and dominance in society and over women (Bosson et al., 2013).). And finally, hypermasculinity describes exaggerated male stereotypical behaviour exercised against especially women (Jozkowski, 2022). Other scholars like Englar-Carlson and Kiselica (2013)

posit that to understand masculinity, the study focus should be put on the identification of masculinity strengths which they anticipate being more beneficial than focusing on the problematic elements of masculinity. According to them, men have six strengths related to interpersonal patterns including shared activities, male ways of caring including the use of empathy, generative fatherhood, a group orientation towards a common purpose, and the larger societal impact of fraternal organizations. In the sight of the COVID-19 challenges, men would use these strengths together with their wives to navigate them successfully.

The Family Stress Model was first proposed by (Conger et al., 1994). This model posits that economic hardship results in practical difficulties for families that manifest in greater economic pressure, which creates an environment that impairs the mental health of adults in the family as measured by increased depressive symptoms, which negatively affect their relationships with each other as indicated by caregiver relationship conflict (Cutrona et al., 2003). This conflict in turn spills over into their relationships with children in the home taking the form of more hostile and less warm parenting, which is associated with more negative outcomes for children (Conger, et al., 2010; Conger, et al., 1994). Markers of such hardship include low income, high debts relative to assets, and negative financial events (e.g., increasing economic demands, recent income loss, and work instability). These hardship conditions are expected to affect couples primarily through the economic pressures they generate including: (a) unmet material needs involving necessities such as adequate food and clothing, (b) the inability to pay bills, and (c) having to cut back on even necessary expenses hence changing the notions of motherhood and fatherhood in families.

As already noted, the economic decline during the last COVID-19 lockdowns in Uganda has placed significant pressure on many families in terms of financial distress, reduced employment



opportunities, and fewer resources to help family members pursue even basic needs like food and clothing. This, in turn, changed the perceived roles of mothers and fathers in the homes of Mukono district. According to Conger and Conger (2002), there are both contextual factors and sociocultural characteristics that form parent-child relationships. They say that the parent-child relationship does not occur in isolation. Sociocultural characteristics, including economic hardship, religion, politics, neighbourhoods, schools, and social support, also influence parenting. This means that parents who experienced such socioeconomic hardships, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns were more easily frustrated, depressed, and sad, and these emotional characteristics also affected their parenting skills.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach and specifically an interpretive phenomenological research design to identify and understand the role experiences of mothers and fathers (Creswell, 2018) in the context of COVID-19. The study population comprised fathers and mothers from families that had both parents living together during the COVID-19-related lockdowns and were affected by these restrictions in the two target sub-counties of Mukono district including Goma and Kyampisi. This study targeted 40 participants, 20 mothers, and 20 fathers, with 10 participants being selected from each sub-county per category. Participants were selected using purposive sampling from families that were affected by COVID-19 using the village gatekeepers with an aim of taking advantage of its techniques to use participants' experience, expertise, and responsibilities at work and in the family. The study sample included mothers and fathers living together or at least who had lived together during the COVID-19 lockdowns with children and were affected by the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions residing in either Goma or Kyampisi sub-counties, in Mukono district. While the single fathers and mothers who lived together

during the lockdowns but had no children or lived outside the Goma and Kyampisi sub-counties were excluded. Families that were not impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns were also excluded. This study used an interview guide to collect data from mothers and fathers allowing them to share their experiences and give in-depth information (Creswell, 2013). The interview guide was developed in consultation with experts and piloted to ensure quality control of study results. The data obtained from the field was inductively analyzed and interpreted in line with the interpretive phenomenological design, hence using thematic analysis to manage and analyze the data. Data was first organized and prepared, read through, coded, described, and arranged into themes and interpreted as suggested by Creswell (2018).

This study was carried out within the mandatory and necessary ethical procedures aimed at seeking and achieving administrative clearance from the district and target sub-counties, and village committees like the LCI, but also approval from the University Research Committee (REC). This study further conformed to the basic ethics principles and considerations of honesty, confidentiality, transparency, and respect for freedoms.

## FINDINGS

This study was intended to answer the question: how has collaborative parenting influenced motherhood and fatherhood role transformations amidst the COVID-19 crisis and its implication on child well-being in Mukono district, Uganda? The findings of this study indicate that for some fathers and mothers who carried out their roles individually, their roles changed negatively, creating adverse effects on the well-being of their families and children. While parents who carried out their roles collaboratively before the COVID-19 crisis had their roles remain unchanged or evolved positively contributing to the well-being of their families. Two key sub-themes emerged from the narratives of fathers and mothers including Collaborative

Positive parental outcomes, and Individualistic Negative parental outcomes.

#### **Collaborative Positive Parental Outcomes:**

Regarding the collaborative positive parental outcomes, most fathers and mothers attested to adapting their roles and, for some, these role changes resulted in positive outcomes. Specifically, for parents who previously shared their responsibilities collaboratively, transitioning between roles during the pandemic crisis was relatively seamless. Some mothers, who were formerly employed in formal jobs and had limited time to spend with their children, revealed that they excelled in their childcare role during the lockdown crises, forging stronger bonds with their children due to increased time together. Similarly, some fathers found that taking on the childcare role brought about positive changes within their families. They embraced new roles they hadn't previously undertaken. For instance, some fathers became educators to their children during the lockdown, while others became playmates, herbalists and healers, and even served as transportation providers to health facilities, utilizing their bicycles. The experience of staying at home allowed them to connect more with their children, fostering deeper relationships. Moreover, it brought immense joy to their children, as fathers could assist with tasks like fetching water, collecting firewood from the bushes, providing a sense of protection and care. Consequently, these mothers and fathers reported several positive changes in the identities of their children, saying that their children became more responsible after learning that situations can easily change; some became cleaner and more obedient than they were and learned to keep at home. Fathers also observed that their children learned saving. Fathers with younger children, however, observed no changes among their toddlers.

A father who assumed the role of a teacher shared his experience, stating,

I could get schoolwork for the different subjects and classes from the nearby church and instruct their elder brothers and sisters to teach the young ones in lower classes. I also took up the role of a teacher for my children in higher classes. I could mark their books and even give them new exercises.

#### **The Individualistic Negative Parental Outcomes:**

Regarding the individualistic negative parental outcomes, the altered role identities of parents, especially those who primarily fulfilled their roles individually, had a negative impact on their children's behaviour. This study's findings indicate that the changes in these fathers' and mothers' role identities due to COVID-19 restrictions resulted in adverse effects on their children's identities. The most noticeable changes were in terms of behaviour, with children showing negative emotional behaviours such as extreme fear, anxiety, anger, resentment, theft, and rudeness towards their parents. Some children withdrew from their surroundings in response to parental conflicts and restrictions. According to some mothers, their children exhibited conflict-driven behaviours like engaging in frequent fights with peers. Meanwhile, others rebelled against their parents and sought employment. A 35-year-old mother shared her experience, saying, *"My children developed a habit of loitering around the village whenever there was any laxity in my rules for protection."*

#### **DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to investigate how the roles of fathers and mothers were transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the subsequent impact on child well-being in Mukono District, Uganda. The findings revealed that, before the pandemic, mothers and fathers in Mukono adhered to culturally and gender-constructed parental roles, individually and collaboratively, with mothers focusing on childcare and household chores, and fathers primarily as economic providers. This aligns with the feminist theory where some fathers and mothers worked as opponents of each other as they worked their roles. These results echoed Gežová's

(2011) emphasis on the significance of both parental identities in the family, highlighting the importance of the existence of both parents' identities.

Further, this research highlighted the impact of economic hardships resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions crisis, especially on power dynamics between mothers and fathers, reshaping their role identities. This aligns with Conger et al (1994) family stress model, suggesting that environmental stressors affect parenting roles. Consequently, mothers faced a complex landscape, taking on additional responsibilities, including becoming sole breadwinners sometimes in addition to childcare and fulfilling house chores. Contrary to conventional masculine roles, some fathers transcended boundaries, engaging in household chores and childcare, challenging the notion of hegemonic masculinity. This shift fostered insecurity among husbands, challenging their traditional control, as noted by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Smith et al. (2015). More still, contrary to feminist theory, where women are often positioned as vulnerable, this study found instances where mothers assumed dominant positions, particularly when they became primary breadwinners. Moreover, findings show that financial means during the crisis determined dominant family roles, emphasizing that joint efforts by both genders can promote equity and equality in family responsibilities.

Further results show that despite economic challenges, some parents, especially those who previously collaboratively shared responsibilities, adapted positively, hence, positively influencing their children's behaviour. This aligns with studies such as Wu and Xu (2020), who found that pandemic restrictions provided opportunities for parents to spend quality time with their children. Additionally, Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) underscore the benefits of collaborative parenting, stating that it not only addresses children's physical needs but also supports their comprehensive psychological and emotional development.

However, for parents who before the pandemic crisis fulfilled their roles individually, the changes in their roles had negative impacts on their children's behaviour, consistent with Wu and Xu's (2020) findings regarding the potential negative effects of limited social support on parenting roles; posting that parents' anxiety and stress, could negatively affect their parenting roles, such as increasing psychological aggression, corporal punishment, or neglectful behaviours which in turn results in aggressive behaviours for children.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study in Mukono District, Uganda, explored the roles of fathers and mothers both before and during the COVID-19 lockdown and the subsequent impact on their children's identities. Before the pandemic, mothers and fathers adhered to culturally and gender-constructed parental roles, with mothers responsible for childcare and domestic tasks, and fathers serving as economic providers both individually and collaboratively. These roles were centred around ensuring the well-being of their children and promoting family development. The onset of the COVID-19 lockdown, however, led to economic challenges, prompting shifts in parental roles. Some fathers and mothers adapted positively to these changes, and this transition was particularly seamless for parents who previously shared responsibilities collaboratively. They embraced new roles, such as becoming teachers to their children, playmates, and providers of various forms of support. This had positive effects on their children's identities, making them more responsible, cleaner, and obedient. However, for parents who primarily fulfilled their roles individually, the changes in their role identities had a negative impact on their children's behaviour. Children exhibited negative emotions and behaviours, including fear, anxiety, anger, theft, rudeness, and conflicts with peers.

## Recommendations

The study's managerial implications underscore the need for policymakers to give special attention to amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals when implementing restrictions, such as those imposed in Uganda during the COVID-19 pandemic. In practice, both fathers and mothers from the families involved in this study found that their perspectives and concerns were not considered before or during the lockdowns, resulting in significant family grievances and strain. As a result, I recommend a more proactive approach to leveraging technology to establish transparent communication channels that can effectively solicit social support and improve the delivery of relief services, even to families in remote areas, during times of crisis.

In terms of policy implications, while many national and international policies traditionally emphasize the distinct parental roles of either fathers or mothers, disaster preparedness policies should prioritize collaborative parental roles. This means that both men and women, fathers, and mothers, should shift their focus away from solely fulfilling their parental responsibilities and, instead, should complement each other's roles fully to ensure the stability of their families even during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, this study aligns with Oláh et al.'s (2018) suggestion for women's empowerment. It underscores two key factors that drive the shift towards the female breadwinner model. First, it involves strengthening women's position in the labour market by supporting their investments in education and career development. Second, it involves acknowledging the increasing number of couples where women have a higher level of education equivalent to or above their partners. By addressing these factors, challenges like limited educational opportunities that force mothers in Mukono into low-paying jobs can be effectively overcome.

### **Implication to Theory**

The study's findings regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed parental roles in Mukono District offer several implications for the Feminist Theory, Masculinity Theory, and the Family Stress Model:

#### ***Implications for Feminist Theory***

The results from this study indicate that the COVID-19 crisis parental shifts where some mothers took on breadwinning roles and fathers participated in domestic responsibilities challenge the traditional notion in feminist theory that patriarchy strictly confines women to vulnerable roles. The study suggests a fluidity in gender roles, where women's empowerment during economic crises disrupts the conventional male-dominated family structure.

Second, the emergence of mothers as primary breadwinners in some families redefined household power dynamics, fostering role negotiations between parents. This highlights how crises can reshape gender power relations in ways that promote equity, providing opportunities to challenge entrenched gender inequalities. However, this shift is not always smooth—some fathers experienced insecurity as their control over family dynamics was challenged, indicating that power shifts can also trigger family tensions.

Study implications on gender collaboration versus competition in parenting according to this study, align with feminist perspectives in noting how both opposition and collaboration between genders can influence family dynamics. When both parents collaborated effectively, it promoted family well-being, reinforcing that joint efforts rather than rigid roles are crucial for gender equality.

#### ***Implications for Masculinity Theory***

Results from this study on the Masculinity theory indicate both the transformation of hegemonic masculinity and insecurity amidst the masculinity identity crisis. The involvement of some fathers in childcare and domestic chores challenged



hegemonic masculinity, which traditionally defines male roles in terms of authority, control, and economic provision. This shift suggests that crises, such as the pandemic, can trigger positive disruptions to gender norms by encouraging alternative masculinities that are more nurturing and participatory. Additionally, the transition from sole breadwinner roles led some fathers to feel threatened, aligning with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory that disruptions to hegemonic masculinity can create insecurity among men. This reveals how deeply entrenched gender roles are, and how difficult it can be for men to adjust to evolving gender expectations.

### ***Implications for the Family Stress Model***

This study found that positive adaptations in parental roles were only realized through the buffer of collaborative parenting. Families that embraced collaboration and shared responsibilities not only managed stress better but also provided more positive environments for their children, fostering emotional and psychological well-being. This highlights the importance of supportive partnerships, especially in times of crisis while at the same time challenging some assumptions of the family stress model that postulates that economic difficulties antagonise family stability, yet this study found that with collaborative parenting, families benefit from crises.

### **Limitations to the Study**

- **Limitations of Qualitative Approach:** While the qualitative approach is valuable for understanding experiences, it might not provide generalizability. The findings of this study are specific to the studied context and participants.
- **Sample Size and Diversity:** The sample size of 40 participants might have limited the diversity of experiences. The findings might not cover the full spectrum of shifts in parental roles and identities.
- **Scope of Study:** The study primarily focused on how the pandemic affected parental roles. It might be beneficial to include broader contextual factors that could influence role identity changes.
- **Thoughts for future studies:** Future research could expand the sample size and include diverse populations to ensure broader representation. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative data might provide a more comprehensive understanding.

### **Acknowledgements**

This project was funded by the ARUA Centre of Excellence in Notions of Identity in Africa (ARUA CO-E Identities), based in the School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University.

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