Caring for caregivers

Understanding the drivers of caregiver well-being in Senegal, Benin and the Ivory Coast

Image credit: Busara using Midjourney V7

OBJECTIVE

With support from the Van Leer Foundation, Busara undertook a qualitative study to understand the following questions:

1. *How is caregiver well-being understood?*
2. *What are the barriers to practising well-being?*
3. *Are caregivers able to overcome these barriers?*
4. *Where do caregivers need the most support?*
5. *What are the key areas for intervention when designing programs to support caregiver well-being?*

SAMPLE

150
study participants

In total, we interviewed 150 study participants across three countries, comprising 97 female respondents and 53 male respondents.

97 female | **53** male

Key informants by gender: **20** men | **4** women

Caregivers by gender: **33** men | **93** women

Sampling locations by country

Benin
Toviklin, Toukoutouna, Dangbo, Pèrèrè

Senegal
Dakar, Thiès et Ziguinchor

Cote d'Ivoire
Ouellezoué, Nébo, Port-Bouët, Bida

Stress, Well-Being, and Coping Mechanisms

Well-being and stress are intertwined

Caregivers define well-being not simply as a state of "being okay," but as the absence of stress.

> *Both are shaped by three main drivers:* ***financial security, children's well-being, and emotional balance.***

When these drivers are present, caregivers report a sense of well-being; when any are missing, stress takes their place. Caregivers are highly attuned to both the physical and psychosocial signs of stress in daily life.

Faith is the first line of response

In moments of stress, caregivers most often turn to prayer and spiritual leaders. This practice is rooted in the belief that divine intervention can alleviate external stressors.

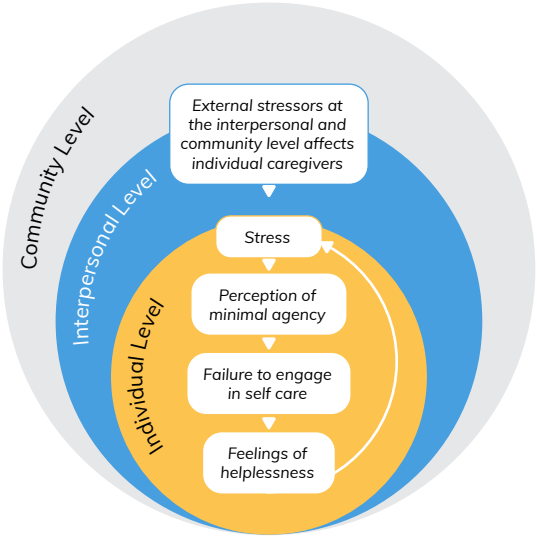
Perception of minimal agency limits self-care

Caregivers often link their stress and burnout to external forces like financial hardship, community demands, and social norms, factors they feel are beyond their control. This sense of helplessness leads to exhaustion and anxiety, making them less likely to practice self-care, which in turn deepens their stress and creates a harmful cycle.

A reinforcing cycle of stress emerges

Because stress is attributed to external forces and managed primarily through prayer, opportunities for building personal coping strategies remain underdeveloped. This reinforces the cycle of stress and dependency on external relief.

Figure: A reinforcing cycle of stress



Role of Informal Community Structures

While many caregivers turn to prayer and spiritual guidance to ease stress, they also rely on other community-based supports. For example, village savings and lending associations (VSLAs) serve not only as safe spaces to share daily challenges, but also as platforms for accessing credit, learning about job opportunities, and connecting to social programs for both children and adults.

Role of Formal Support Structures

Formal supports can ease caregiver stress and strengthen families, but they don't reach everyone. Key examples include community ECD programs, government food, cash, and schooling schemes, as well as school-based initiatives that cut costs and involve caregivers. Caregivers noted these often fall short due to irregular delivery, poor communication, and eligibility rules that exclude the most vulnerable, especially in remote areas.

Gender Roles and Caregiving Dynamics

Rigid gender norms shape caregiving

In many communities, caregiving is often seen as a women's responsibility, while men are expected to be the primary breadwinners. As a result, men often spend limited time with children and rarely take on caregiving duties that are socially coded as maternal.

Fatherhood is validated through provision, not care

Within these norms, earning an income is often viewed as sufficient for being a "good father." This belief is internalized, leading many men to disengage from caregiving and household work. Men who do choose to help with childcare or chores often face stigma or ridicule.

Quality and stimulation of time differ

When men spend time with children, it is usually through leisure activities like watching television, with little focus on stimulating interaction. Mothers, meanwhile, spend far more time with children. However, the heavy burden of household chores leaves them unable to make routine activities (feeding or bathing) more enriching and developmentally stimulating.

Impact on caregiver stress

Female caregivers consistently emphasized that men's participation (or lack thereof) in household and caregiving duties is a significant factor influencing their own stress and sense of well-being.

Recommendations

We recommend four key areas for future efforts to support caregiver wellbeing.

1 Integrate well-being support into familiar spaces

Embedding support in trusted spaces makes it more accessible. Local leaders can help normalize conversations, while existing gatherings, such as savings groups or worship services, provide natural entry points. Equally important is embedding well-being into daily caregiving routines, since caregivers rarely have extra time for separate sessions. Everyday moments like watching television, feeding, or bathing can become opportunities for storytelling, teaching, or building social skills. The key is to meet caregivers where they are and approach with sensitivity.

2 Be mindful of vocabulary when discussing well-being

Language must be adapted to local contexts so that messages can resonate effectively. It is essential to understand local social norms, including which topics are considered suitable for open discussion and which may require more sensitive framing. For example, introducing a session narrowly on "being a caregiver" may unintentionally draw only women, while a broader framing can encourage men's participation as well. A careful choice of words and awareness of norms ensure that conversations about well-being are respectful, inclusive, and more likely to gain traction.

3 Education and awareness of paternal involvement in childcare and household chores

Raising awareness of the benefits of father engagement can help shift entrenched gender norms. Programs should highlight how men's active participation reduces caregiver stress, strengthens child development, and benefits the whole household. Successful models such as the École des Maris ("School for Husbands") show that creating dedicated spaces for men to learn, discuss, and support each other in family responsibilities can normalize their caregiving role. By modeling positive examples and addressing stigma around men's involvement, communities can gradually shift expectations.

4 Shifting self-efficacy around what is within one's control when caregivers are faced with stress

Caregivers often view stress as driven by external forces beyond their influence. Building confidence in small, practical actions, such as mindfulness techniques, problem-solving approaches, and peer support, might enhance self-efficacy. When caregivers feel some control over how they respond to stress, they are more likely to adopt healthy coping practices alongside spiritual or communal support systems.

For more information on this and related projects,
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