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Exploring Identity: A Study of Masculine Behavior among Fatherless Adolescent Girls in Sukoharjo, Indonesia

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Abstract

Fatherless refers to a condition in which a child grows up without a father figure, either in presence or influence. The absence of paternal involvement in parenting can reduce the supervision and guidance children receive, particularly in navigating their sexual identity. This lack of paternal influence may lead to a tendency among children to adopt gendered behaviors that differ from their assigned sex. This study aims to explore how fatherless adolescent girls develop and express masculine identity in their daily lives. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews with five adolescent girls, aged 17–25 years, who experienced fatherless and resided in Sukoharjo Regency. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's analytical method, which involves data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that adolescent girls experiencing fatherless often adopt masculine behaviors as a coping strategy to compensate for the absence of a paternal figure in their lives. This behavioral adaptation serves as a means of navigating their emotional and social challenges, highlighting the complex interplay between family dynamics and gender identity formation.

Keywords

fatherless, adolescent girls, adaptation, masculine behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Fatherless presents critical implications for child development and societal structures as it shapes a child's psychological and social development. Fatherless is defined as a condition in which a child lacks a father's presence and role, either due to physical absence or emotional detachment. The causes of fatherless vary, including death, divorce, or circumstances requiring the child to be raised by a mother or other relatives, thereby removing the father figure entirely. In addition, fatherless can occur even when the father is alive but is not actively involved in parenting due to factors such as work obligations or illness, leading to a lack of meaningful attachment between father and child (Sundari & Herdajani, 2013).

Although girls typically develop their identities in relation to their mothers, the presence of a father remains crucial. A father's involvement can shape a girl's understanding of relationships, self-worth, and emotional security (Lamb et al., 1979). Research suggests that a strong paternal bond fosters confidence and provides an alternative model for navigating social interactions, leadership, and autonomy. In contrast, fatherless conditions can contribute to emotional insecurity and a search for alternative sources of stability. Understanding these dynamics is vital for assessing the broader impact of fatherlessness on identity development.

Cultural norms shape parenting expectations and family structures, deeply intertwining fatherlessness with societal traditions. In patriarchal societies, people primarily expect fathers to serve as breadwinners, focusing on economic provision rather than direct childcare involvement. Meanwhile, mothers take on the responsibilities of nurturing and managing the household, reinforcing traditional gender roles. This socially constructed division of labor aims to establish an ideal family model but ultimately perpetuates gendered inequalities in caregiving. As a result, fatherless

conditions—whether due to physical absence or emotional disengagement—become increasingly prevalent, though their impact often goes unrecognized by family members, particularly children.

The prevalence of fatherless, shaped by cultural and societal norms, has significant implications for child development. Its impact becomes particularly evident during adolescence, a transitional biological and psychological growth phase. Adolescents, driven by curiosity and a desire for autonomy, may engage in exploratory behaviors without fully considering the consequences for themselves, their families, or their communities (Anggraini & Siregar, 2023). In addition, emotional and psychological development during adolescence tends to be unstable, making it vulnerable to changes in the environment, including fatherlessness. The presence of fathers in parenting has an important role in shaping adolescents' self-control. Growing up without a father figure can significantly affect an adolescent's psychological well-being, often leading to lower levels of self-control (Agustin et al., 2024). Fathers who are actively engaged in child-rearing contribute to developing self-regulation skills (Prastiyani, 2017). Research by Lidya Yuliana et al (2023) further supports this perspective, demonstrating that lower paternal involvement in parenting correlates with decreased self-control in adolescents, whereas greater paternal presence strengthens self-regulatory abilities.

The absence of a father figure significantly impacts adolescents' psychological well-being, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, loneliness, aggressive behavior, and feelings of being unwanted. Greater father absence correlates with higher risks of depression in adolescents (Putri et al., (2023)). This absence contributes to loneliness, increasing the tendency of aggressive behavior such as physical confrontations, bullying, and violence (Alfasma et al., 2022). Several studies suggest that it may foster patterns of emotional suppression and self-restraint in children, leading to internalization of distress and potentially manifesting as emotional detachment or sudden aggressive behaviors (Husni, A. & Randi, 2025). Fatherlessness is also associated with decreased high school graduation rates, poorer academic performance (lower GPA), and a higher likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors (Hidayah et al., 2023).

A father's presence is crucial for developing effective coping mechanisms for stress. Adolescents raised without a father are more vulnerable to emotional difficulties like depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem and exhibit a higher likelihood of problematic behaviors, including aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse (Rutsviga 2024). The critical role of paternal parenting for fatherless children in Africa is linked to high rates of criminality, emphasizing the impact of father absence on behavior and development (Freeks & De Jager, 2023). Fatherless adolescents often face significant obstacles in academic performance and overall educational attainment (Wae & Chandra, 2024). They may lack emotional attachment to their fathers, show limited independence, and struggle with emotional regulation (Mahendra & Rahayu, 2024).

Girls may be more affected by losing a father than boys. While boys model relationships on mothers, girls primarily learn about relationships through fathers. The father shapes a girl's standard for acceptable male behavior, so his absence can disrupt gender role formation (Casterter in Wandansari et al., 2021). This can lead to "father hunger," an emotional void prompting a search for paternal substitutes. Adolescent girls without a father's role may have difficulty regulating feelings, perceiving the absence as both formative and distressing, marked by shifts from closeness to distance, disappointment, and lack of financial and emotional support. These adolescents tend to experience low self-esteem, heightened stress, anger, loneliness, and emotional volatility, contributing to psychological challenges. (Wandansari et al., 2021). Being fatherless increases feelings of disappointment, discomfort, and depression (Diananissa et al., 2024). The absence of a father negatively affects trust levels, contributes to "daddy issues," diminishes self-esteem, and influences mental health and social behavior, potentially leading to deviant actions or social withdrawal (Rahayu et al., 2024). These effects may increase vulnerability to risky behaviors like promiscuity and substance abuse (Pramudito et al., 2024).

Adolescent girls in fatherless environments may struggle to develop a stable gender identity, sometimes adopting masculine behaviors as a coping mechanism. Fathers play a distinctive role in shaping gender identity by reinforcing traditional gender expectations (Jacklin in Vasta, 1992). The absence of a father can contribute to challenges in sexual behavior and identity development, increasing the risk of deviations (Pratidina et al., 2022). Fathers also serve as role models for understanding gender roles (Sary et al., 2023). While not widespread, fatherlessness can significantly influence how adolescent girls navigate their gender identity, creating emotional and structural gaps leading to behavioral adaptations that may diverge from traditional gender expectations. In families where fathers are primary financial providers, their absence creates concerns about stability and future security. Losing a father increases anxiety-related challenges among adolescents. (Ntoma & Kusmawati 2024) Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable, experiencing shifts in self-perception, heightened emotional sensitivity, and deviations in traditional gender identity expressions. Understanding how fatherlessness influences coping strategies is essential for assessing its role in shaping adolescent gender identity, highlighting the need for social and familial support. (Shifa & Suherman, 2024)

The absence of a father influences how individuals perceive and engage with gender roles. Studies suggest boys without fathers may exhibit feminine behaviors and struggle with sexual identity, while fatherless girls may assume traditionally masculine roles (Herzog in Shapiro, 2003). Adolescent girls raised without paternal influence may view their mother as dominant and adopt roles typically associated with fathers, reshaping gender dynamics in their relationships (Poernomo et al. 2024). Adopting masculine traits like courage, independence, and assertiveness can be an alternative coping strategy for fatherless girls. This behavioral adaptation raises questions about how fatherlessness influences gender identity formation and whether these traits emerge as a response to emotional and social challenges. The process of adopting masculine behaviour is not only limited to behaviour, but can also affect appearance (Sumardiono, 2022).

Gender identity is an expression of an individual's personal identity as masculine, feminine, or a combination of both (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Gender is a social construct shaped through repeated actions and behaviors (performativity), not a fixed identity (Butler, 1990). Gender identity emerges through performativity, meaning that individuals continuously enact gender roles in ways that create the illusion of stability and naturalness. As a result, gender is dynamic and subject to change, influenced by social interactions and cultural expectations. Within this framework, fatherless presents a unique context in which adolescent girls may experience shifts in gender expression. However, in reality, some men have gender expressions that are not masculine and appear more feminine than men in general, and vice versa; some women appear more masculine than women in general (Seale & Patrick in Sumardiono, 2022).

Fatherlessness presents a unique context in which adolescent girls may experience shifts in gender expression. The absence of a father figure alters traditional gender dynamics in the family, potentially shaping how individuals adapt to their environment. In families without paternal involvement, adolescent girls often develop behavioral patterns that align with roles typically associated with fathers, challenging conventional expectations of femininity. These adaptations may be understood as performative acts—responses to structural and relational changes—that highlight the fluidity of gender identity.

By situating fatherlessness within Butler's theory of performativity, this study explores how adolescent girls construct gender identity through behavioral adaptations, particularly the embrace of masculine traits as a coping mechanism. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how gender identity is actively produced through lived experiences rather than predetermined by biological factors. As concerns about fatherlessness continue to gain attention, examining how adolescent girls respond to this condition offers valuable insights into coping mechanisms and identity formation. Thus, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discussion by exploring how fatherless adolescent girls develop gendered behaviors in response to the absence of paternal influence. By situating this phenomenon within established theoretical frameworks, the research aims to highlight how gender identity is actively negotiated through social interactions and lived experiences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the experiences and meanings participants attach to their circumstances. A descriptive qualitative approach prioritizes rich, detailed accounts of personal narratives and lived experiences without theoretical constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This approach is particularly relevant for this study, as it enables an in-depth exploration of how adolescent girls growing up without a father interpret their experiences, construct gender roles, and develop coping mechanisms in response to fatherlessness. By gathering firsthand accounts, the study seeks to uncover patterns in adopting masculine behaviors as a form of adaptation. The emphasis is on understanding how gender performativity, as theorized by Butler (1990), manifests in response to familial structures and social expectations.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: girls aged 15–20, experienced fatherlessness, resided in Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, and exhibited a tendency to adopt masculine behaviors. Data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews with selected respondents. Given the sensitive nature of the research, participation was secured through an informed consent process, ensuring that all five respondents voluntarily agreed to take part with full awareness of the study's purpose and procedures. The observation process involved the researcher joining various activities alongside the respondents, allowing direct engagement in their interactions and behaviors within natural settings. This immersive approach provided more profound insights into how fatherlessness influences their gender expression, coping mechanisms, and social interactions. To protect respondents' confidentiality, pseudonyms or initials are used to present the findings. The research location was chosen due to its rising divorce rates from 2021 to 2023, which suggests a higher prevalence of fatherlessness, making it a relevant site for studying the phenomenon. The following is a list of respondents who participated in this study:

Table 1 List of Respondents

Name	Occupation	Age	Age After Father Left	Time Span When Father Left
APS	Part-time worker	19	17	2 years
DD	Part-time worker	19	15	4 years
DJ	Not working	18	10	8 years
HR	High School Student	16	2	10 years
IH	High School Student	15	10	5 years

This study analyses data using the Miles and Huberman model (in Citradin, 2020), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves sorting and categorizing data to ensure relevance to research objectives. The reduced data is then presented descriptively to reveal patterns and themes. Finally, findings are synthesized to identify recurring themes that inform interpretations of how fatherlessness shapes adolescent girls' coping mechanisms and gender identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Fatherless Background

Family structure is crucial in shaping adolescents' experiences, influencing their emotional development, coping strategies, and perceptions of gender roles. In cases where paternal figures are absent, adolescents navigate unique challenges that profoundly shape their identities. This study explores how fatherlessness impacts adolescent girls, examining the circumstances that led to the absence of fathers and the resulting adaptations in their personal and social lives.

Through observations and interviews, various patterns emerged regarding the respondents' backgrounds and the factors contributing to their fatherless condition. While some experienced paternal absence due to parental separation, others faced the loss of their fathers due to death. Despite these differing circumstances, a common thread among respondents was their choice to reside with their mothers, reinforcing the maternal role as the primary source of emotional and structural stability. The findings also indicate that fatherlessness was often preceded by weak paternal bonds, characterized by minimal interaction and emotional detachment, which shaped the respondents' experiences long before the father's physical absence.

The following are statements from each respondent:

"Mother and father separated (divorced) about two years ago. Before the divorce, they argued a lot, arguing that no one would give in, often differing opinions and ending up arguing again. Eventually, they separated, and I went with my mum, I was not that close to my dad, so I chose to go with my mother" (APS-R1).

"My mum and dad separated a long time ago, if I'm not mistaken, when I was in the third year of junior high school. At that time, I knew that my father never came home anymore. It wasn't until I entered high school that I found out that my mum and dad had divorced. I never saw my mum and dad fight, but my mum said it was because my dad was unfaithful" (DD-R2)

"My father passed away when I was in primary school, he had already suffered a stroke before he died. I was not close to my father, I rarely talked and played together, it was difficult to ask my father to talk to me first. After my father died, my mum didn't remarry. I live with my mum and grandmother, my mum works, while my grandmother takes care of me and my younger siblings" (DJ-R3)

"My mum said that my mum and dad separated when I was still in the womb. My mother then remarried, but my stepfather did not live in the same house as my brother and I. After two years, my mother divorced again. After that, my mum remarried for the third time. But my new stepfather is very abusive, I've seen my mother being hit and cursed at by my stepfather, not only to my mother, he's also abusive to my younger siblings. When my stepfather is at home, I feel uneasy and insecure" (HR-R4)

"My father died when I was still in primary school, in an accident when I came home from school. When I heard the news that my father had died, I was very shocking. Even though I wasn't very close to my father, I still felt lost. Mum hasn't remarried since Dad died, because I was afraid that my stepfather would be bad. Maybe my fear is why mum hasn't remarried." (IH-R5)

Across the cases, emotional detachment from fathers appears to have preceded their absence. Respondents reported weak father-child relationships characterized by minimal interaction, lack of emotional closeness, and limited engagement in shared activities. This indicates that fatherlessness, in many cases, was not only a structural reality but also an emotional condition experienced long before the father's physical departure.

Respondents who experienced fatherlessness due to parental separation often recalled family conflict shaping their early perceptions of stability—APS noted frequent arguments, while DD highlighted hidden marital issues such as infidelity. HR's situation was compounded by an abusive stepfather, adding further insecurity. Meanwhile, DJ and IH, who lost their fathers to death, had already felt emotionally distant before their fathers' passing, yet still experienced grief, uncertainty, and concerns about future relationships.

The Impact of Fatherless

The absence of a father figure profoundly impacts adolescents, shaping their perception of family and social environments and often leading to feelings of loss and comparison with peers from intact families (Kiromi, 2023). Fatherlessness can cause emotional distress as adolescents navigate development without paternal guidance (Wibiharto et al., 2021) and disrupts emotional regulation, as fathers are crucial in this process (Theofani & Rohayani, 2025). The following outlines a range of notable impacts experienced by respondents due to paternal absence:

The Loss of Paternal Figure

Respondents' narratives reinforce the loss of a paternal figure, showing how this absence influences self-perception and emotional experiences. Studies reveal it significantly affects self-confidence, causing heightened insecurity, impaired social functioning, and difficulty expressing oneself (Riska et al., 2025). APS describes a different feeling from her peers, noting the absence of paternal support in her daily life:

"It is very clear that I lost the father figure. From childhood, I was not close to my father. I felt different from my friends—they had fun and cool father. Every time they came home from school, they were picked up. I actually wanted that too, but it felt impossible" (APS-R1).

DD expresses longing and envy seeing peers with active father:

"I was not close to my father from a young age. I used to see my friends coming home from school picked up by their fathers, and I became jealous. In the past, when there was a parent day event at school, I saw that most of my friends were attended by their fathers, having fun together. I wondered what it would be like to be close to my father" (DD-R2).

HR's experience shows profound absence, as neither her biological father nor her stepfather fulfilled a paternal role:

"From childhood until now, I have never felt a father figure. My biological father never took care of me and my brother, until I finally met him a week before he died. My stepfather was never a good father either—I never felt a father's love. The father figure in my life was quite bad. So, I never got a father figure at all" (HR-R4).

These findings highlight the impact on adolescents' self-perception, especially when comparing themselves to peers. The lack of a paternal figure creates an emotional void and a yearning for support, guidance, and validation, undermining self-confidence and development of coping mechanisms. Navigating social environments and gender roles without paternal influence can exacerbate challenges in identity formation and social adjustment.

Impact on Economic Stability

Father absence affects not only emotional attachment and gender roles but also family economic stability. Fathers often serve as primary breadwinners (Nailufar, 2023), and their absence shifts economic conditions, impacting adolescents' futures, including education and work decisions.

Respondents expressed concerns over financial instability. APS, whose mother became a factory worker, tutored instead of pursuing higher education to contribute financially:

"Only my father worked at home. After we separated, my mum started working, selling snacks at schools. Now, Mum works in a factory, and she earns enough. But I feel sorry for my mother, so after graduating from school, I didn't continue my studies, I helped her by working as a tutor near my house" (APS-R1).

DD's experience reflects concerns about being an economic burden due to irregular household income after her father's death, influencing her decision to work part-time instead of pursuing further studies:

"Before my father got sick, he worked at a school as a teacher. After he died, my mum worked selling clothes online. The income for the family became erratic, so I decided not to continue my studies, afraid of being a burden to Mama. I helped her find additional income by working as a barista at a coffee shop near my house, but only part-time" (DD-R2).

DJ, needing to support her schooling and sick grandmother, felt uncertain about continuing education despite her mother's encouragement:

"Mum was the one who worked after Papa died. Mum worked in a textile factory, and my sister and I were cared for by my grandmother. I just graduated from high school, I don't know if I want to go to college or not. My mum wants me to go to university, but I feel sorry for my mum, so I have to pay more for my studies while my sister is still at school, and now my grandmother is also sick" (DJ-R3).

These narratives highlight the link between fatherlessness and financial insecurity, showing how economic hardship reshapes adolescents' choices and perceptions of independence. Losing a father led to increased responsibility and self-sufficiency, reinforcing the adoption of masculine traits like resilience, autonomy, and financial pragmatism. This aligns with gender performativity, as fatherless girls adapt by assuming roles typically associated with paternal figures.

Impact on Decision Making

Fatherlessness influences adolescent decision-making. Fathers often provide guidance in traditional structures, and their absence removes a key source of counsel, leaving adolescents without clear parameters for assessing options.

Respondents expressed uncertainty in navigating major life choices, particularly in academics. DD reflected on the challenge of choosing a high school and academic path:

"Without dad, I can't decide on life choices. When I was choosing a high school, I had no idea where I wanted to go and what I wanted to major in, and I was afraid that I would make the wrong decision. If I told my mum, she would just leave it to me, so I was even more indecisive because I didn't have the parameters to make good choices and which ones were right for me" (DD-R2).

This underscores the role of fathers in fostering decisiveness. Paternal involvement strengthens children's ability to critically assess options and take action. Without this guidance, adolescents may experience hesitation, relying on intuition or external influences. Mothers, while supportive, may adopt a passive approach, encouraging autonomy without structured direction. This reinforces the need for fatherless adolescents to develop independent coping strategies, often adopting masculine traits like self-reliance and assertiveness to compensate for the absence of paternal counsel. The impact extends beyond uncertainty, shaping how adolescents internalize responsibility, confidence, and autonomy, demonstrating a performative adaptation reflecting Butler's theory of gender identity formation.

Impact on Learning Motivation

Father absence reshapes familial roles and influences adolescent girls' perceptions of education and future aspirations. Financial instability often forces them to reevaluate priorities, leading to divergence in learning motivation. Some saw education as a path to stability, others prioritized skill development for immediate economic survival.

HR's response exemplifies the first group, showing how father absence drove academic determination:

"I became enthusiastic about learning to get a scholarship, continue my studies, and make my family proud. I want someone in my family to go to university; that person must be me. My brother has sacrificed so that my siblings and I can go to school and achieve our dreams. Even though there is no father, my brother always tries his best for me and my siblings" (HR-R4).

For HR, father loss amplified responsibility, motivating academic excellence to uplift her family. This aligns with studies indicating fatherless adolescents develop heightened resilience in education as a coping mechanism (Nailufar, 2023).

Conversely, IH's motivation stemmed from maternal encouragement:

"Even though there is no father, my mother always tells me to study hard at school, go to college. My mother always encourages me to study and join positive school activities" (IH-R5).

IH's experience highlights maternal influence in sustaining motivation after paternal absence. Her determination appears less internally driven and more a continuation of family encouragement. Other respondents prioritized skill acquisition over academics, viewing work as an immediate necessity. This suggests fatherlessness affects long-term educational goals and reshapes perceptions of economic stability and career planning. Fatherlessness does not result in a singular educational trajectory but compels adolescents to adapt learning motivations based on familial expectations, economic pressures, and coping mechanisms. This divergence reflects gendered adaptations where fatherless girls negotiate roles by adopting varying approaches to independence and self-sufficiency.

Impact on spirituals Values

Fatherlessness also influences the development of spiritual values. In the absence of paternal guidance, some respondents turned to religious practices as a coping mechanism, finding comfort in prayer, Quran recitation, and faith-based communities. Spirituality serves as an adaptive mechanism for individuals facing emotional distress.

J's experience highlights family influence in reinforcing religious devotion:

"My mum always tells me that even though my dad is no longer in this world, and I am not close to him, I must still pray for my dad so that one day I can meet him in heaven and be together again. Mum also always reminds me to pray diligently. My grandmother taught me to read and write the Quran, so I have never learnt the Quran at the mosque, because my grandmother taught me the Quran" (DJ-R3).

Religious practice is framed as both an obligation and an emotional connection with the deceased father. Engagement in prayer and Quran study provides a pathway for maintaining symbolic ties. Meanwhile, HR's statement reveals spirituality as a direct coping mechanism:

"I happen to join a faith-based martial arts community, Pagar Nusa from Nahdlatul Ulama, where I not only learn martial arts, but I am also taught to recite the Koran and always be devoted to my parents. Even though my family situation is chaotic, I always remember to pray and recite the Koran, it is also one of my efforts to not be so depressed at home" (HR-R4).

Spiritual engagement extends beyond personal practice, functioning as a structured support system within a communal space. Participation in faith-based organizations can stabilize emotional well-being, offering guidance and moral teachings reinforcing self-discipline and resilience. IH's account further illustrates spirituality as emotional regulation:

"I have always been taught to pray and recite the Koran by my mother; my mother also always says that all sadness can disappear if we pray diligently. So, I never miss my prayers, and I always join the Quran recitation activities at the mosque in my village. If there are no activities at school, I sometimes help teach reading and writing the Qur'an at the mosque" (IH-R5).

Participation in religious community activities suggests an active approach to integrating faith into life. Emphasis on Quran study and teaching implies spirituality is not just an internalized mechanism but a social practice fostering connection. Respondents' narratives reveal fatherlessness often leads to intensified engagement with religious values as a means of maintaining traditions or a strategy for emotional resilience. For some, prayer and Quran recitation honor their father's memory. For others, religious involvement becomes a structured means of emotional healing.

Enhanced religious understanding contributes to inner peace, fostering forgiveness and acceptance (Lavienda et al., 2024). Forgiving promotes emotional calmness and psychological well-being (Zuroida & Agustin, 2025). These findings align with discussions on spirituality as a protective factor in crisis, providing purpose, stability, and moral guidance. In fatherlessness, religious practices help reinforce emotional strength, offering coping mechanisms for processing grief and uncertainty.

Impact on Mental Health

Father's absence during adolescence can significantly disrupt psychological development, resulting in mental health challenges (Majid & Abdullah, 2024). Adolescents without paternal support are more vulnerable to emotional instability, including depression, anxiety, and abandonment feelings. The lack of a stable male role model may hinder identity formation, contributing to emotional regulation and difficulties with social adaptation. Fatherlessness is recognized as a critical factor influencing adolescent mental well-being.

HR stated that the loss of a father figure had led to various mental health challenges, reporting prolonged sadness and depression:

"I feel sad because I never received love or affection from my biological father. When my mother remarried, I hoped to finally have a caring father figure, but the reality was quite the opposite. My stepfather often engaged in abusive behavior, both verbally and physically. This situation made me feel distressed at home, constantly unsafe, and fearful. I also feel deep sympathy for my mother and younger siblings. Watching them suffer makes me feel guilty, as though I have failed to protect them" (HR-R4).

DD reported a similar experience. Loss of her father led to depression and overthinking about her future and family:

"It had a significant impact on my mental health. After my father was no longer around, I became anxious about the future—how my education would continue, and what would happen to my family. In the beginning, I experienced constant overthinking, which even led to insomnia for several days. Eventually, it also affected my physical health; I lost my appetite and started losing weight." (DD-R2).

Loss of a parent is a traumatic adolescent experience (Fitria, 2024). Traumatic experiences can contribute to mental health disorders. Unaddressed psychological issues can manifest as severe behavioral problems like juvenile delinquency and social maladjustment. Father's absence is critical, depriving adolescents of emotional support, guidance, and moral framework. Without paternal involvement, adolescents struggle with behavioral standards and ethical decision-making crucial for healthy development. Consequently, fatherlessness exacerbates vulnerability to mental health challenges and impedes effective coping.

Adoption of Masculine Behaviours

Father's absence has influenced behavioral adaptations, leading to the adoption of masculine traits as a coping mechanism, aligning with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. The father's absence catalyzes performative adaptations in response to the socio-emotional environment. Respondents adopt traits traditionally associated with masculinity—assertiveness, independence, emotional restraint—as strategic tools to manage challenges. This behavioral shift underscores the performative nature of gender, shaped by social demands and the need for psychological resilience.

Independence as a Performative Necessity

Father's absence often necessitates a heightened sense of independence, positioning self-reliance as a crucial coping mechanism. In traditional gender norms, independence is linked to masculine roles, emphasizing men as providers and decision-makers. Respondents describe increased responsibility when paternal support is lacking, assuming tasks and decision-making functions linked to the father's role. This illustrates how family dynamics restructure, compelling fatherless adolescents to develop adaptive strategies.

One participant explained:

"I've become more independent because my Papa is no longer there. I go to school by myself; I also register for school by myself. I'm afraid of bothering other people, especially since my mum works alone. I don't want to burden her, so as an older sibling, I have to be reliable" (DJ-R3).

Another shared:

"Because I was never very close to my father, I tend to be more independent. When I go to school, I usually go with my friends, and if I have trouble with my homework, I prefer to ask my friends for help. Since I was young, I have been used to doing things on my own" (IH-R5).

These statements reveal that independence arises as an essential adaptive response shaped by familial circumstances and environmental pressures. Gender identity and expression are fluid constructs shaped and performed through social interaction and the necessity to fulfill roles dictated by situational demands and cultural expectations. Enforced independence is a strategic behavior shaped by social and familial contexts, demonstrating the dynamic nature of gender roles as they are renegotiated.

Assertiveness as a Defense Mechanism

In patriarchal societies, assertiveness is linked to masculinity, embodying dominance, clarity, and decisiveness. Cultivating assertiveness is a strategic adaptation for fatherless girls to counteract perceptions of vulnerability. Fostering assertive behaviors reinforces their ability to express themselves and challenge social stigma confidently.

This is illustrated in testimonies. One respondent recounted being taught firmness in a martial arts community:

"Maybe because I joined a martial arts community, I was always taught to be firm and not beat around the bush—if it's wrong, it's wrong; if it's right, it's right. As an organizational board member at school, I have to be firm" (HR-R4).

Another participant highlighted how school organization involvement provided character education on firmness:

"I joined an organization at school, so I received character education that taught me to be firm. But not fierce—assertiveness in speech must be clear and direct. I was even proposed as a candidate for chairman in my organization" (IH-R5).

These narratives underscore how assertiveness functions as a social mechanism enabling fatherless girls to navigate social environments where father absence might be perceived as a deficit. Cultivating assertive communication and leadership abilities demonstrates agency and resilience. They compensate for lack of paternal guidance, adopting traits associated with masculine authority to assert presence and command respect. This reflects a dynamic where gendered behaviors are performed and adapted in response to social contexts and personal circumstances.

Masculine Behavior and Gender Role Adaptation

Respondents reported assuming roles traditionally ascribed to male figures within the household, such as physical labor and maintenance. These behaviors illustrate a reconfiguration of gender expectations in fatherless families, where absence leads adolescents to engage in roles out of necessity, not conventional norms.

One respondent shared:

"I replace my father at neighbourhood meetings because my mother works, while I still have free time at home. Sometimes I also fix the roof tiles—there are no men at home, so I handle what I can. If it's difficult, we call a handyman." (APS-R1)

Another added:

"I was once told to repair a motorbike that was slightly damaged. If it's basic repairs, I can do it. I also tend to like motorbikes, so I can handle simple fixes like installing lights and connecting cables." (DD-R2)

These statements underscore how father absence leads to a redistribution of gendered roles, requiring girls to step into spaces conventionally occupied by male family members. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests gender identity is constructed through repeated social enactments. The adoption of masculine-coded labor demonstrates how gender roles can be fluid and responsive to family dynamics.

Difficulty Expressing Emotion as a Socially Conditioned Trait

Respondents indicate challenges in expressing emotions, particularly sadness, aligning with cultural constructions of masculinity equating emotional restraint with strength. Narratives illustrate how fatherless girls may embody masculine norms by suppressing vulnerability to appear strong and self-reliant. This is a learned response to social expectations in the absence of paternal emotional support.

One respondent shared:

"I find it quite difficult to express my feelings. When I'm sad or angry, I usually choose to stay silent. I think that if I express myself too much, people will see me as weak or just seeking attention. So, I prefer to remain quiet whenever I feel sad or angry." (DD-R2)

Another respondent explained:

"I would say that I rarely cry. For me, crying is a sign of weakness, so I choose to hold back my tears whenever something makes me feel sad or uncomfortable. My mother also doesn't really like seeing me cry—her response isn't very supportive when she sees me in tears." (DJ-R3)

The absence of a father figure significantly influences how adolescent girls construct and express their gender identity, often prompting them to adopt characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity as a means of psychological adaptation and social survival. This includes heightened independence, assertiveness, assuming roles culturally coded as masculine, and suppressing emotional expression perceived as vulnerability. These behavioral shifts suggest gender identity is not static or predetermined but socially constructed and contextually responsive. These strategies reflect an adaptive process where gendered behaviors are reshaped in response to the absence of paternal presence and the need to fill that gap.

Fatherless Adolescent Girls

Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a framework for interpreting these dynamics, positing that gender is a series of socially regulated performances enacted through daily actions. The participants' adoption of masculine behaviors exemplifies how gender roles are enacted in response to structural conditions and social expectations rather than fixed identities. The experiences of fatherless adolescent girls underscore the performative and relational nature of gender, shaped by individual agency and sociocultural pressures.

Sukoharjo's patriarchal culture reinforces gendered parenting, shaping behaviors according to predefined norms. Gender socialization begins early, influencing dress, hobbies, and family roles (Kinanti & Rahmadanti, 2023). Fatherlessness disrupts this habitus, prompting adolescents to renegotiate gender identity outside conventional structures.

Despite societal expectations for traditional femininity, fatherless participants embraced masculine-linked behaviors. For example, HR cultivated assertiveness through martial arts, fostering confidence. APS assumed masculine-coded household responsibilities like representing her family at meetings and undertaking maintenance tasks. These patterns reflect Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is a socially constructed identity enacted through repeated practices. Engagement with masculine traits appears to be a pragmatic response to the father absence, suggesting gendered behaviors are shaped more by situational demands and adaptive strategies than essentialist notions of gender.

Previous research highlights that women with fatherless backgrounds are at greater risk of entering toxic relationships due to the absence of a paternal role model (Putri & Kusmiati, 2022). The respondents reinforced this concern, expressing anxieties about future relationships and heightened independence. Furthermore, fatherlessness also increases the risk of sexual offenses among adolescents, such as involvement in cyberpornography (Ni'ami, 2021). Adolescents may be more susceptible to cyber-related criminal activities without paternal guidance and supervision.

Adolescents often adopt masculine behaviors as a psychological defense mechanism, exhibiting self-reliance and emotional restraint to fortify against vulnerability and maintain control. DJ reported suppressing emotional distress to project strength, while DD struggled with expressing feelings fearing weakness. These align with masculinity norms associating emotional suppression with resilience (Husna & Adri, 2025). This suggests that fatherless may inadvertently push adolescent girls toward gender expressions typically associated with male-coded emotional endurance, further reinforcing Butler's assertion that gender identity is constructed through social experiences rather than biological determination.

Foucault's theory of body discipline provides insight into how the community responds to deviations from gender norms (Jones, 2019). In patriarchal societies, nonconformity is met with social regulation through judgment, correction, or exclusion. The respondents in this study reported negative societal perceptions of their masculinity, with some viewing it as a failure of proper parental guidance.

Parents also reinforce normalized gender expectations in fatherless households. Some mothers encouraged traditional femininity, while others inadvertently supported masculine behavior by emphasizing strength as a coping strategy. This process of gender normalization supports Butler's theory that gender is not biologically fixed but continually produced and redefined through lived experiences.

This study reinforces Butler's argument that gender is socially constructed and performative rather than biologically determined. Fatherlessness catalyzes gender adaptation, compelling adolescent girls to embody masculine traits in response to challenges. Through assertiveness, independence, role substitution, and emotional suppression, fatherless girls demonstrate that gender expression is contextual and shaped by necessity. Societal expectations and patriarchal reinforcement regulate gender expressions, evidenced by community responses to nonconformity. This study underscores that gender identity remains fluid, continuously negotiated through performative acts shaped by personal experiences and external pressures. Examining fatherlessness through Butler's framework provides insights into how adolescent girls construct gender identities in nontraditional structures, challenging binary understandings of gender norms.

CONCLUSION

Fatherless presents unique challenges for adolescent girls, influencing their identity formation, emotional regulation, and social interactions. In response to the absence of a paternal figure, these individuals tend to adopt masculine behaviors to navigate difficulties, reinforcing their sense of strength and resilience. Rather than simply deviating from traditional gender norms, these behaviors function as a legitimate form of adaptation, allowing them to assert autonomy, self-sufficiency, and emotional endurance in the face of social and familial instability.

Despite these adaptive strategies, societal responses remain divided. Prevailing gender norms often frame masculinity as incompatible with female identity, leading to negative perceptions of fatherless girls who exhibit traditionally masculine traits. Community expectations rooted in patriarchal values reinforce strict gender divisions, discouraging behaviors that challenge conventional femininity. However, a minority within society acknowledges such adaptations as necessary responses to fatherlessness, recognizing the complexity of identity formation under nontraditional family structures.

The findings of this study reinforce Butler's argument that gender is performative—constructed through repeated social enactments rather than biologically predetermined. The masculine traits displayed by fatherless adolescent girls emerge not as inherent characteristics but as performative adaptations shaped by necessity. Their independence, assertiveness, and emotional restraint are not fixed identities but responses to environmental and societal pressures, illustrating the fluidity of gender expression.

Thus, fatherlessness does not merely result in psychological or social challenges—it actively reshapes gender identity by compelling individuals to negotiate their roles within a shifting social landscape. These findings highlight the importance of viewing gender identity through a lens of performativity, recognizing that behaviors traditionally coded as masculine can serve as functional tools for resilience and empowerment rather than indicators of deviation from societal norms.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

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