Mothers’ and Fathers’ Perceptions of Paternal Involvement in Child Care in Uganda

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Abstract

Two-hundred and twenty two working fathers with working wives and two-hundred and forty-six working mothers with working husbands were randomly sampled and interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of fathers’ involvement in child care tasks (which traditionally in Uganda are a women’s domain) as a result of increasing maternal involvement in paid employment. The data shows that most respondents thought it is ideal, necessary and fair for fathers to be involved in child care. 70 percent of fathers and 90 percent of mothers expressed the view that fathers who baby sit are ‘well brought up’. 70 percent of fathers expressed the opinion that ‘Baby sitting should not be left to mothers’ Most respondents thought that fathers should be more involved in activities like helping children with home work, school, holding and playing with children and attending to their health. Half the mothers expressed that they didn’t think their husbands find it unfair for wives to do most of the child care work. Most fathers understood that their presence and involvement is crucial for their children’s development. Fathers and mothers believed that fathers’ involvement in child care is necessary regardless of their financial contribution to the household and their work schedule. However, the study reflects that although there are egalitarian perceptions about fathers’ involvement in child care, actual involvement in child care is much lower as only a half of the fathers reported that they are involved in providing care for their children.

Introduction

In all societies in the World, it is evident that culture assigns particular roles to men and women (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2005). Housework, which includes childcare, food preparation and domestic cleaning, has traditionally been regarded a domain of women. Fathers spend about a third as much time as mothers in providing direct childcare (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2005). Estimates in 1995 showed that women’s unpaid domestic labor accounted for 40 per cent of GNP worldwide, yet in developing countries, 66 per cent of women’s work is excluded from national accounting mechanisms (World Bank 2002a). In Uganda, statistics show that the greater share of household tasks are performed by women and girls: cooking (86 per cent); fetching water (70 per cent); collecting firewood (73 per cent); childcare (62 per cent); washing clothes (88 per cent); and caring for the sick and elderly (62 per cent) (Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD 1999). On the contrary, the men’s place is largely understood to be in the wage employment sector, and not at home.

However, the construction of gender roles in societies has not been static. Since the 1960s and 1970s, women have begun to enter the labor force (Coltrane 2000). This change, which began in the developed countries, has been occasioned by factors like increased urbanization, industrialization, migration, education, population growth, religion and politics. The way women spend their time has changed—from unpaid dependent care and homemaking activities to spending significant amounts of time in paid labor force participation (O’Connell 1994; Anderson and Green 2006; Hill, Hawkins, Martinson and Ferris 2003). However, the way jobs are designed has not changed to fit the strategic and practical needs of women. It is also apparent that men’s roles have not changed in a corresponding manner, to address the gaps created by women’s involvement in formal employment (Hill et al. 2003). This has serious implications for childcare. This dual working role creates an overload on women, and in particular on mothers, who have the problem of how to fulfill the needs of their children. For those who can afford it, alternative arrangements are available, including day-care centers, and the use of paid carers within the home - known as nannies in some contexts and maids in the context of Uganda. However, these have been noted to offer no ideal
solution (Sempangi 1999).

Some studies in post-industrialized countries, such as the United States, Australia, and others in western Europe, have indicated that when mothers take up paid employment, it is likely to lead to fathers becoming increasingly involved in caring for children (Christensen and Gomory 1999, Hawkins et al. 1995, Marsinglio et al. 2000, Dienhart 1998, Lopton and Barclay 1997). This article is based on research undertaken in Uganda. We cannot just assume that this trend is reflected in developing countries like Uganda, where socio-economic and cultural contexts are different. Studies on fatherhood have testified to variations in the ways in which gender roles and relations play out, in western European settings (Plantin and Kearney 2003, Lopton and Barclay 1997). It seems that women’s and men’s behavior remains aligned with traditional gender roles, even in the developed countries (Coltrane 2000; LaRossa 1988; Hill 2003).

Maternal Employment and Child Care

Today, traditional patterns of life are changing, and demand for paid work is escalating everywhere. Labor force profiles are changing along with social roles (Coltrane 2000). Women are now entering the labor force in increasing numbers, although often with less education and fewer skills than men (O’Connell 1994, Anderson and Green 2006; Hill et al. 2003). Conversely, male employment figures have shrunk or remained static (Lockshin et al. 2004). This may seem advantageous to women. But benefits in the form of paid leave, maternity leave, social security, or health insurance are usually lacking, and this could have negative effects on childcare (Lockshin and Fong 2000). One of these effects relate to breast feeding.

Mothers of older infants are more likely to work and less likely to breast-feed. Yet the nutritional significance of breast-feeding during the first three months of life is tremendous. A study conducted on breastfeeding and maternal employment in urban Honduras (World Bank 2002b) revealed that employed women have more social and familial contacts outside of their immediate households than did non-employed women and more people helped employed mothers with the care of their children. The study further showed that for many employed women, childcare seemed to be an obstacle that they could not surmount (World Bank 2002b). Feeding of children was thought to be an interruption, which robbed time from tasks that were never finished. The study also revealed that employed mothers introduced supplements to breast milk earlier than non-employed mothers. Among the employed women, those at highest risk of early cessation of breast feeding are those who earn low wages in the formal sector, work more than six hours per day, six days per week and have help with child care at home (World Bank 2002b). Employed mothers also reported more feeding of breast milk substitutes (artificial milks) and supplements (other foods) than non-employed mothers.

Maternal employment has been reported to affect various aspects of children, such as health, education and personality (Lockshin and Fong, 2000). Researchers have argued that maternal employment can be advantageous to child care through increased incomes for affording child care necessities (Anderson and Green 2006). On the other hand, although maternal employment may afford households more child care necessities, it creates a gap in child care due to the reduction in the availability of mothers. It is therefore important to analyze the way gender roles can change to accommodate or fill the child care gap, by increasing men’s participation in childcare.

The Current Study

The current study set out to explore the circumstances under which fathers of young children in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, and Mpigi, a rural district, are getting involved in child care tasks, (which traditionally in Uganda are a women’s domain), as a result of mothers getting more involved in paid employment. The research involved 222 employed fathers with working wives, and 246 employed mothers with working husbands.

Respondents were selected randomly. The sample was selected regardless of the income levels of households from which respondents came. In order to obtain a representation of rural and urban areas, two sites were chosen for the research: Mpigi, a rural area, and Kampala. Kampala is the most urbanized district in Central Uganda, whereas Mpigi is the least urbanized district in the same region. It is widely believed that the process of modernization accounts to a great extent for changes in gender roles in countries such as the USA (Coltrane 2000). The study therefore gathered data from both rural and urban areas, to compare attitudes and practices regarding paternal involvement in child care accordingly. We interviewed our respondents at their homes, using interview schedules (questionnaires). In addition, ten focus group discussions were conducted for fathers and mothers. Mothers referred to women, married or unmarried who are living with their spouses and working, with children, born or adopted, below 6 years of age. Fathers referred to men who are working, married or unmarried, living together with children and the mothers of those children, born or adopted, below six years of age. The study employed both the cluster and random sampling designs, using households as the primary sampling units and mothers and fathers as the primary units of analysis. To obtain a sample of villages, within divisions/sub counties and parishes, the Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) procedures was used. Since survey data collection was household based, PPS was used to obtain the sample of respondents.

Most respondents had attained either ’O’ level education or below (62.2 per cent of fathers, and 72.3 per cent of mothers). Fathers were more likely to have attained A level education and above (37.9 per cent) than mothers (27.7 per cent). The vast majority of respondents were in monogamous marriages, although 10.3 per cent of men were married polygaminously. The maximum number of wives was 6. Both fathers and mothers reported that they had been in their relationships with their spouses for more than nine years on average. The mean number of children of respondents was
Other Respondent characteristics:

Workplace Location

In the sample, more mothers than fathers worked at home: over half (55 per cent) of mothers, compared to one-third (36 per cent) of fathers. A further third (35.5 per cent) of mothers reported working outside of the home, but within one hour's traveling time, while half (49 per cent) of fathers fell into this category. 9.5 per cent of mothers, as compared to 15 per cent of fathers, worked far away from home (defined as more than one hour's traveling time).

Parents who had attained higher levels of education were more likely to work away from home than those who attained lower levels of education. Ninety per cent of the fathers in our sample who worked at home had not achieved beyond O level, while 76.5 per cent of fathers that worked far from home had attained high-school education and above.

Time-use and Hours of Paid Work

The research measured women's and men's average hours of paid work per day. Fathers worked for 7.8 hours a day on average at their productive tasks, which is slightly more than that of mothers, who worked for 7 hours a day on average, because of the need to find time to fit in child-care and other household work.

Maternity and Paternity Leave

Uganda is a signatory to the Maternity Protection Convention of 1952, which entitles women to at least six weeks of maternity leave. Legislation in Uganda does not require paternity leave to be provided for fathers, although some international organizations provide paternity leave of five days in their human resource policies. Maternity leave not only allows women to care for children during the actual leave, but is also likely to strengthen the social norm that child-care is 'women's work'.

Most mothers (63.6 per cent) reported that they take time away from work on the birth of a baby. The average length of time taken away from paid work around a birth was 40 days. Women in the informal sector take time away from their occupations according to need - on the one hand, for time to care for their new babies, and on the other hand, their need for income.

Most of the fathers (70.3 per cent) reported that they do not take paternity leave from work when a baby is born. While those who are self-employed would be able to do so, most men who are employed do not have the choice.

Fathers’ involvement in child-care

Overall, 50 per cent of fathers interviewed said that they provided some child care for their children. 41 per cent of mothers reported that their children's fathers provided some child-care for them.

We defined childcare to include activities of baby-sitting such as feeding, holding, bathing, health care, playing with and changing nappies for children, taking children to and from school, and helping children with their homework.

During the study, fathers who did child-care were asked to mention what caused them to engage in child-care. Most of the fathers (38.3 per cent) perceived themselves as doing it because they enjoyed it. They stated that they enjoyed doing it. 30.6 per cent said they did it because of necessity. 12.6 per cent mentioned that they wanted to bond with their children; some 11.3 per cent said that they were involved when they had the time, and only 7.2 per cent said that they felt it would be unfair to their wives if they didn’t. It is therefore clear that most of the times fathers are involved in childcare, they are intrinsically motivated rather than pressured to do so.

Of the fathers who did not participate in child-care, 79.7 per cent mentioned that lack of time was the main reason, while relatively few (13.5 per cent) mentioned that they felt they had already made a fair contribution to the children’s and household’s wellbeing through their income. 3.2 per cent reported that their wives discourage them, and 3.6 per cent said they were not sure they knew what to do.

Mothers’ and Fathers’ Perceptions of Paternal Involvement in Child Care

The study sought to ascertain fathers' and mothers' perceptions about fathers' involvement in child care. Respondents provided information about their views on whether fathers should be involved in or exempt from child care. Overall, 70 percent of fathers and 90 percent of mothers expressed the view that fathers who baby sit are 'well brought up.' 70 percent of fathers expressed the opinion that 'Baby sitting should not be left for mothers.' Most mothers and most fathers thought that fathers should be more involved in activities like helping children with home work, school, holding and playing with children and attending to their health. 50 percent of mothers expressed that they didn’t think their husbands find it unfair for wives to do most of the child care work.

Most fathers understood that their presence and involvement is crucial for their children’s development. Fathers and mothers believed that fathers' involvement in child care is necessary regardless of their financial contribution to the household and their work schedule.

Fathers’ and Mothers’ Views on Whether Fathers Should Be Involved in Baby Sitting

Findings show that most of the fathers and mothers thought that fathers should be involved in child care rather than leaving it for mothers. 32 per cent of fathers were of the opinion that 'Baby sitting should be left for mothers and fathers shouldn't be involved'; while 68 per cent disagreed with the statement. Mothers had a similar opinion. 72 per cent of mothers disagreed with the statement. Further, 74.4 per cent of the fathers and 87.8 per cent of mothers mentioned that fathers who baby sit are 'well brought up.'

At an activity specific level, most mothers and fathers thought that fathers should be more involved in activities like helping children with home work, school, holding and
playing with children and attending to their health. Most of the respondents thought that fathers should not be involved in changing nappies, dressing, or feeding children.

85.1 per cent of fathers and 90.5 per cent of mothers were of the view that fathers should be involved in holding children. 91.9 per cent of fathers and 91.7 per cent of mothers were of the opinion that fathers should be involved in attending to children's health. 77.9 per cent of fathers and 81.9 per cent of mothers were of the opinion that fathers should be involved in taking children to and from school.

78.8 per cent of fathers and 80.2 per cent of the mothers expressed that fathers should be involved in helping children with home work. 55.9 per cent of the fathers and 55.8 per cent of the mothers thought that fathers should be involved in dressing children. 37.4 per cent of the fathers and 39.7 per cent of the mothers expressed that fathers should be involved in changing nappies. 68 per cent of fathers and 66.9 per cent of mothers expressed that fathers should be involved in feeding children. 86.5 per cent of the fathers and 89.3 per cent of the mothers expressed that fathers should be involved in playing with children. 64.4 per cent of fathers and 65.3 per cent of mothers thought that fathers should be involved in bathing children.

Fathers are less willing to be involved in child care activities like changing nappies, dressing, bathing and feeding children. Data from focus group discussions suggests that this preference could be related to the level of competence needed. One father explained his experience with bathing a young child:

“I really wanted to do all things needed for my child. One day I told my wife that I want to be the one to bath the child. She said okay. When I was bathing the baby, she was as if she was going to slip out of my hands. Sincerely I got stressed...” (FGD participant, Kampala)

Another father narrated:

“Most of us men fear the way a young child is handled—because for a baby, you don’t hold just a part of the child such as the hand, you have to hold the whole body and you have to be very careful. You can’t hold it the way you want. When she is older, she can stand or sit, you can hold one hand and wash her with the other when she is sitting or standing” (FGD participant, Kampala)

It is possible that activities like bathing, feeding and changing nappies for young children require more competence and thus fathers may be less willing to be involved in them, especially if their wives do not provide enough support and mentoring.

Perceptions of fairness

According to study findings, most respondents—mothers and fathers, think that it’s unfair to mothers if fathers do not participate in childcare. 59 per cent of the fathers agreed with the statement: ‘if child care work is not shared equally, my wife will feel unfairly treated’. 71.5 per cent of the mothers expressed that they would feel unfairly treated as wives if the child care work is not shared equally.

One mother said: ‘We mothers carry the baby in the womb for nine months, and so the fathers should also play their part by helping in child care’. Further, survey results show that mothers are more pessimistic about the possibility of fathers’ participation. For example, whereas 69.4 per cent of fathers agreed with the statement: ‘if child care work is not shared equally, I would feel that my wife is unfairly treated’, most mothers (54.1 per cent) expressed that they did not think their husbands find it unfair for wives to do most of the child care work. This shows that there is less trust of fathers by their wives.

Mothers and fathers share the view that fathers’ involvement is still needed even when the mother is available—because of the need for fairness and the importance of fathers’ time in child development. Most mothers and fathers (74.4 per cent) disagreed with the statement: ‘Fathers don’t necessarily have to participate in child care activities especially if the mother is available to give the care’. 89.6 per cent of the fathers and 95 per cent of the mothers were of the view that young children need fathers’ care even if the mother is available to give the care.

Perceptions of Fathers’ Exemption from Childcare

Data on respondents’ perceptions on whether fathers should be exempted from childcare activities indicates that most fathers think that they should not be exempt from childcare. Most of the fathers (45 per cent) mentioned that they should not be exempt from child care, and 44 per cent mentioned that they should be exempt only from some child care activities. Only 11 per cent of the fathers mentioned that they should be exempt from all child care activities. Mothers expressed similar views, as most of them (51.2 per cent) mentioned that fathers should not be exempt from child care activities. 40.9 per cent of the mothers mentioned that fathers should be exempt but only from some child care activities, and only 7.9 per cent of the mothers mentioned that fathers should be entirely exempt from child care. It can be noted from these findings that both fathers and mothers do not agree that fathers should be exempt from child care. Furthermore, more mothers than fathers report that fathers should not be exempt from child care chores, and more fathers than mothers report that fathers should be exempt from child care chores.

In analyzing fathers’ and mothers’ perceptions of fathers’ exemption from childcare, it is important to examine whether some fathers connected their exemption from child care work to their involvement in market production. Most of the fathers (70.3 per cent) and most of the mothers (68.6 per cent) mentioned that even if the fathers earn more income than their wives, fathers may not be exempt from childcare.

This finding is further supported by data from focus group discussions. The data shows that attitudes towards fathers’ exemption from child care depend on the situation at home, and the availability of other family members or maids that provide support in child care. One father mentioned:

“...it depends on who is at home. If you are there at home alone with your wife and a young child, there is no way you should be excluded from any child care chores.
work. When your wife is doing one thing, you do the other...” (FGD participant, Kampala)

From the focus group discussions, it is clear that some fathers would like to be exempted from some of the child care work if there are other care providers available at home. In explaining some of the activities that fathers should be exempted from, one father explained:

“The baby may be seated there, and she defecates. The father shouldn’t be the one to clean the baby or even bathing the baby”

Nevertheless, some fathers are of the view that even if there are other child care providers available at home, fathers should participate in some child care activities, such as holding and feeding children. One father commented:

“Even if these people are around, I could hold the baby and see how she is feeling. I could feed her once in a while”

Another possible reason for exemption of fathers would be if fathers work and their wives stay at home. While 41.4 per cent of fathers mentioned that this is an adequate reason for fathers' exemption from child care, most of the mothers (72.7 per cent) believe that this is no worthwhile reason for fathers' exemption.

Most fathers (69.8 per cent) and most of the mothers (67.8 per cent) mentioned that they should not be exempt from child care even if they work for more hours than their wives. 95.5 per cent of the fathers and 94.2 per cent of the mothers mentioned that earning higher incomes than their wives would not be an adequate reason for exempting fathers from child care activities. Surprisingly, 72.1 per cent of the fathers and 77.7 per cent of mothers reported that fathers should not be involved in child care even if they earn less income than their wives. Similarly, 91 per cent of the fathers mentioned that even if their wives’ incomes do not support the household much, fathers should not be exempt from child care. Even if their wives incomes support the household greatly, 96.4 per cent of the fathers and 96.7 per cent of the mothers expressed that fathers should not be exempt from child care.

It is therefore clear that most of the fathers and mothers do not believe that fathers can buy their exemption from child care. Fathers and mothers believe that fathers’ involvement in child care is necessary regardless of their financial contribution to the household and their work schedule.

Although most fathers reported that they should not be exempt from childcare, they express preference for certain childcare activities to others. Most fathers would rather they are exempted from bathing, feeding and dressing children. Hence they would rather be involved in holding, playing with children, and attending to children's health and schooling.

From both the survey and qualitative data, it is clear that although fathers and mothers hold the view that under no circumstance should fathers be exempt from child care, fathers feel that they should be exempted from certain activities, such as bathing children, especially if there are other child care providers available at home. Although some fathers report that they are involved in certain child care activities even when other child care support is available, this is only once in a while.

Perception of the “ideal man”

The study also sought to relate fathers’ and mothers’ perceptions of ‘the ideal man’ with their perceptions about paternal involvement in child care. Most of the fathers (48.6 per cent) expressed that an “ideal man” should participate in child care all the times. 42.3 per cent of the fathers expressed that an “ideal man” should participate in child care sometimes, while only 9 per cent of the fathers expressed that an ideal man should never participate in child care. 95.9 per cent of the mothers expressed that an “ideal man” should participate in child care at least sometimes. Further, 94.1 per cent of the fathers mentioned that their wives understand that an “ideal man” should be involved in child care at all times or sometimes.

However, qualitative data from FGDs reflects that there are other items that both mothers and fathers think are important for an ideal man:

“A real man/father is one who has money”
(Female FGD participant, Katikanyonyi)

“A real husband is one who has built a family house and is hard-working and also helps me to care for the children.”
(Female FGD participant, Katikanyonyi)

“It is not proper for a responsible man to be found lighting fire to cook when my wife is seated. It is disrespectful. In fact if you do it two or three times, the next thing you hear her bragging to the neighbor’s wife that: ‘I have finished that one, I have put him in the bottle.’ So because of that I can’t allow it.”
(Male FGD participant, Katikanyonyi)

In view of the above statements, it is clear that there are some fathers and mothers who do not think that it is ideal for fathers to be involved in child care. Some people think that what defines an “ideal” father is his ability to fend for the family. This probably explains why most of the fathers continue to be uninvolved in child care and why most mothers do not encourage their husbands to get involved in child care as shown later in section 4.4.

However, it is also worth noting that some mothers reported that there is always need for fathers involvement, not necessarily for fairness, but for addressing a gap, as expressed by a respondent:

“It is true husbands don’t have to do all the small things at home. However, there are times when we really need support. For example, when I have just delivered, I would expect my husband to help me do the washing because I am still weak; whether it’s baby’s nappy or my own clothes or cooking a meal...”
Conclusion

In conclusion, the above findings present a discussion on mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of paternal involvement in child care. The discussion highlights that most of the fathers and mothers have egalitarian and positive perceptions about fathers’ involvement in child care. Most mothers and most fathers thought that fathers should be more involved in activities like helping children with home work, school, holding and playing with children and attending to their health, and fathers and mothers believe that fathers’ involvement in child care is necessary regardless of their financial contribution to the household and their work schedule. However, it is one thing to express positive perceptions and another thing to be involved in child care. The study reveals that although more than 70 percent of the fathers express positive perceptions of their involvement in child care, only a half of them reported ever being actually involved in child care.

Practical barriers to men participating in child-care link to the gender norms which view this work as female. Many respondents referred to barriers which are not practical, but ideological. They confirmed that the apparent lack of fathers’ involvement in child care is at least in part occasioned by culture, in which male and female members of society are assigned different roles. However, cultural beliefs are challenged by social and economic changes which have led to a greater involvement of women in the paid labour force. Sometimes, change occurs so rapidly that resistance sets in.

References


