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Godfrey Ejuu

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Celebrating African Men's Role in Child Care and Early Childhood Development Programs

In many cultures, early child care and education has been considered the purview of women, who were thought to be more nurturing and better suited to the role. Hand-in-hand with this notion is the historical misconception that early child care and education is unimportant, and that the most valued members of society should focus on other, more important things. Thankfully, we are recognizing the importance of early care and education and the value of both male and female involvement in child rearing. Research consistently shows the benefits of strong male role models and father figures in children's lives. In Africa, where many local cultures have enforced traditional and strict gender divisions of labor, this change is beginning to take root. Men are increasingly joining the early child care and education profession and are proud to contribute to the positive development of their own children and the children in their communities. In this article, the author champions dedicated and passionate men in the profession, and calls for campaigns and policies to reduce discrimination against male caregivers in early childhood.

By Godfrey Ejuu

Godfrey Ejuu is Senior Lecturer, Department of Teacher Education, Kyambogo University, Kampala, Uganda.

Deep into the 21st century, we are still challenged by far lower numbers of males working in early childhood related jobs than females (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Farquhar, Cablk, Buckingham, Butler, & Ballantyne, 2006; Hamilton, 2003; Sargent, 2004; Sumsion, 2000; Wardle, 2008). What cannot be ignored anymore is the potential effect of low numbers of men participating in early childhood programs on children's lives, growth, and development (Berger, 2003; Lamb, 2000; Wardle, 2008). The presence of men in early childhood programs has been found to contribute significantly to children's development (Berger, 2003) by providing male role models (Bittner & Cooney, 2003; d'Arcy, 2004); reducing sexist beliefs (Farquhar et al., 2006); and providing fun, excitement, more physical activity, and more motivation for boys to get involved (Lamb, 2000; Wardle, 2008). Increased participation of men in early childhood programs and activities also means fathers benefit from having a male on staff with whom they can relate, and male voices are added to the struggle for a higher standard of working conditions in child care (d'Arcy, 2004).

Men working in early childhood programs persist in pursuing their vocation (Farquhar et al., 2006; Sanders, 2002) despite a negative attitude from some parents (Evans, 1995; Wardle, 1999), who consider men to be deficient in caregiving (Barker & Verani, 2008), the female cultural orientation in the profession (Wardle, 2008), and the extremely low number of other men in the profession as role models (Cooney & Bittner, 2001). Despite these challenges, many men in this profession are more ready than ever to devote their life, energy, and passion to the cause of early childhood development in different settings (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Hamilton, 2003; Sargent, 2004; Sumsion, 2000).

Whereas many men are able to live with the prejudices about them working in early childhood programs, it is particularly challenging when such prejudices originate from a cultural perspective that considers them to be breaking cultural taboos. In many traditional African settings, cultural practices must be followed and taboos respected in order to remain safe in a given community. Acting in violation of taboos means anything that may befall the person, even if it is a coincidence, will be associated with his going against the taboo. Other community members may feel justified in "disciplining" such a person through corporal

punishment or even lynching, and the police or security officers would not intervene. Because of this cultural conflict, men working in the child care field experience a sense of difference and isolation on a daily basis (Sanders, 2002), causing frustration and resignation (d'Arcy, 2004). Yet some of these bold men persevere in child care work, even at the risk of being placed under constant scrutiny by administrators, other teachers, and parents, who may suspect the men of being pedophiles (Sargent, 2002). In this study, we explore the roles previously considered taboo that fathers and male child care workers are taking on and the challenges they face, while celebrating their achievements.

Men in Child Care Roles That Used to Be Taboo

Child care and upbringing in the early years is associated with women in most African traditions. Some may even believe that a man performing such a role had been bewitched. Many traditional sayings institutionalize child care as a woman's role, such as, "All good children are for the fathers, while all bad children are for the mothers," "A child is as intelligent as the father but as beautiful as the mother," or "Blame a mother if a child fails in her marriage." All these sayings reflect the defined role of the mother in child care and upbringing, while the father reaps the benefits despite having contributed very little to the welfare of the child.

However, we are starting to see men playing more central roles in child care, going against some deep-rooted African traditions. For example, in some Ugandan traditions, when a woman is nearing child birth, her husband stays far away from her. Some men go to another village or even marry another wife, thus carrying on a tradition of polygamy. So, the man has no understanding of labor pains or the process of childbirth. Any man, especially the husband, seen around the delivering room would be criticized or ridiculed as being womanly and immature. Today, however, some men remain with their wives, sharing the same bedroom, up to the time of birth. Some men even step forward to be with the doctors in the delivery room to assist as needed. When the newborn arrives, the father is given the child to carry, something that used to be taboo.

In traditional practice, the man, who went away from the women as the time of birth approached, waits for a rite to be performed to welcome him back. If the man did remain around the home, he is expected to stay in a different room than his wife and baby, and is not allowed to even look at the baby, until this rite is performed. His mother-in-law usually takes charge of her daughter and baby for

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some time. Or the mother may go to her parents' home, where they will take care of the child in the absence of the father for some period of time. Today, some men are defying this practice, sharing the same bedroom with their wife and baby. The man even carries the baby and wakes up in the night to take care of the baby as the mother sleeps. This turn-taking, although contradictory to many African traditions, is becoming a norm in some communities.

While at home, men have started changing the baby's diapers in the presence of their wives. Previously, a baby who needed changing would be quickly passed on to the mother. A man who tried to clean a child would be considered abnormal. Today, many wives are seeking their husbands' help with diaper changing, bathing, and tending while they do other chores. Some African communities do have traditions that reflect this turn-taking. For example, among the Aka Pygmy people of central Africa, while the women went to hunt, the men looked after the babies by letting them suck their nipples. These men would also go to their local pubs with a child attached to their chest suckling their nipples or in their arms as they enjoy their local palm wine (Hewlett, 2005).

Men, including fathers, uncles, and brothers, have also taken on the tasks of bathing children, including girl children, and playing with them. Previously, this practice was taboo. If a man was seen bathing a girl child, he would be suspected of attempted sexual abuse. Thus, many men have been subjected to suspicion and scrutiny regarding bathing children, changing diapers, or potty training (Murti, 2014). This attitude made such activities a reserve for women, with men avoiding close contact with a child lest his genuine care for the child be misinterpreted.

It has also become a common practice for African men to carry their babies as they walk alongside their wives to the market or hospital. They also walk children to school, repair their toys, especially girls' dolls, and even tell them bedtime stories. This practice marks a great departure from many traditional African customs for men, who never

walked with their family members as one group. If the family was going somewhere, the man, carrying nothing save for a stick, would be some distance ahead and the wife would follow with a load on her head and a baby strapped to her back. The children would follow, one after another, some distance behind. The man would once in a while bark at the wife to hurry "her" children to keep up with his pace. It was also common for the man, if he met an acquaintance, to refer to his wife and children as "those people," giving no sign that he was related to them or offering them any help, even if they were overburdened.

In many early childhood development centers, men are now more often present. They have joined the child care institutions to perform different roles, including some that have traditionally been for women. In many centers, men are cooks or are in charge of security to protect the children. Some have become teachers or caregivers, supporting children's learning and play. During celebrations in the centers, men are the ones called upon to play the role of Father Christmas or some other figurehead to give gifts to the children. Previously, men who visited centers or were in training to be child care workers would be ridiculed as "baby sitters" or being interested in "children's porridge." Worst of all, students taking up early childhood development courses would be considered mediocre students who opted to "play with children" because they were not academically capable of handling other "manly" courses.

Reasons for More African Men Taking On Child Care Roles

Given the traditional outlook, one may wonder why African men in some communities are pursuing early childhood development jobs and being more present in their families. Different factors can be attributed for this change of heart among men, including increased sensitization and messaging by different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies. Men are being encouraged to be part of their

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families, sharing in children's upbringing and child care in order to have better and healthy families. The NGOs support the formation of responsible fatherhood clubs (RFCs) and reward fathers who treat their wives and children well; Bernard Van Leer Foundation supports RFCs in eastern Uganda (Walakira, Ddumba-Nyanzi, Byamugisha, Kayiwa, & Byaruhanga, 2014).

For some men, it is their personal conviction that it is right for them to work with children. Others simply want to be present in the lives of their own children, especially after experiencing the pain caused in their own lives by their fathers' absence. This line of thinking is supported by a traditional African proverb on parenting: "A single hand cannot nurse a child." Even if the mother does maintain the primary care-taking role, the responsibility is shared by all (Mausi, 2013).

As the job market gets more competitive and more positions become available in the child care industry, some men join the profession as a chance to earn a living. However, joining the child care profession is often dependent upon providing a track record of a positive attitude toward children and child care as a whole. So, men may need to start a child care service in their own homes so that others can see them in practice. Only then would they receive recommendations for a child care job. In many communities, recommendations from community members who send their children to child care centers are necessary in order to gain a position there.

The ever-changing socio-economic status of women in some communities also means that the child care profession is no longer a reserve for women alone. Previously, the father's traditional role has been that of a wage earner and role model for a family's moral values (Bhamani, 2012). Men were the ones who tamed nature, made social rules, kept the peace, and protected the community, while women nurtured the children (Timyan, 1988). Today, some women have better-paying and more demanding jobs than their husbands. When the mother is the primary wage earner or has a more

powerful position than the husband, the husband takes on the so-called "woman's roles" in order to keep the family intact.

The changing socio-economic landscape in many African communities can bring instability into some families. Previously, a woman would be forced to remain with a family no matter the circumstances as most communities believed that a good woman persists in a marriage. Today, women are more empowered and are free to leave relationships, leaving the husband to take care of the children as a single father. Fathers in such circumstances have to take on all the child care responsibilities and be there for their children in all circumstances.

Challenges Some African Men Face While Working in Early Childhood Development Institutions

While more African men are joining the early childhood development and care profession, they still face negative attitudes toward them, work environments that do not cater to their gender, and outright confrontation from some female colleagues. The cases described below are presented to raise awareness of the need for positive action to address these challenges and not to make accusations. The names used are pseudonyms.

John is a single father who lives with two daughters. He separated from his wife when the children were 3 years old and 1 year old. He raised the girls alone, despite complaints from people who wanted him to get another wife. When he did not comply, his detractors spread stories that he enjoyed looking at his daughters naked and that he was sexually abusing them. The daughters grew up and one entered into a relationship and became pregnant. After the child was born, she remained living at home with her father. People then claimed John was the father of the child and the community organized to lynch him. The police rescued John, but he had to explain at length that he was simply doing his duty as a father and not abusing anyone. The community is still not very convinced that John

is innocent, and they keep pointing accusing fingers at him.

Moses, a newly qualified kindergarten teacher, was pleased to find employment at a kindergarten that had specifically advertised for a male teacher. He went to this school with the expectation of fulfilling his professional dreams. When he started work, however, parents refused to leave their children with him, claiming he looked suspicious and fearing he would harm their children. Even when the center head intervened, some parents preferred to withdraw their children from the center. In the center itself, there was no separate washroom or changing room for men. The other teachers made no effort to converse about topics Moses found of interest, and so he felt isolated. The outdoor environment offered no facilities where Moses or the children could climb, construct, or play sports. Moses decided to quit before the end of the first month.

Peter is one of the first male faculty members to be recruited for the early childhood education department at a university. He came to fill a vacancy that resulted when some female faculty members left to pursue further studies. When the female faculty members returned, they had qualifications similar to Peter's. However, they kept insisting they were better than Peter in handling any child care issues simply because they were women. Every time Peter tried to do something, a female faculty member would oppose it, saying he had no experience. Even when a student came to consult with Peter, one female faculty member disrupted their conversation and claimed she had better solutions than Peter could offer. The students encouraged Peter not to leave, because they considered him a better teacher than the female faculty member. Peter, like any other faculty member, applied for sponsorship to pursue further studies under a staff development program. His application for sponsorship was rejected, however, while another faculty member from the same department received sponsorship. Peter decided to use his own money for further studies. Currently, both have qualified and work together, but conflicts still occur.

Chris is a child care worker who was recruited to work at a center by the assistant administrator, who had been delegated to do the hiring by the director during her absence from the center. When the director returned, she was upset to learn that Chris was a male. Since Chris had already been hired and all the necessary documentation done, however, she could not fire him. She summoned the other, all female, staff and cautioned them to always pay close attention to Chris because she was concerned that he

could be a potential child molester. To her, the fact that most child-related crimes are committed by men meant that male child care workers like Chris were suspect. As a result, some parents and female staff question whether the children are safe whenever Chris is close to them. Chris has persisted and is still working in the center amid all these challenges.

Discussion

We celebrate the entry of African men into the child care and early childhood development profession and recognize the bold steps they are taking to do so. Their participation brings enormous benefits for children, families, and society at large, which should be acknowledged. Yet they work against a backdrop of cultural and socio-economic hurdles. Culturally, women are supposed to be the ones to care for young children (Wardle, 2008). In many African contexts, and in Uganda in particular, child care work is not a profession that a man can pursue and gain much approval from either men and women. Early childhood work is still minimized as being less important and only fit for men who are otherwise failures and who are just trying to earn a living; thus, a limited number of men are interested in it (Farquhar et al., 2006).

Yet entry of African men into the child care profession can help to bring more credibility and prestige to the profession. Also, presence of men on the staff of a child care institution sends a signal to fathers that men are welcome in the early childhood center setting and that men can play a part in children's care and education (d'Arcy, 2004). Male participation also allows both boys and girls the opportunity to see that men can be as capable as women in caring for and teaching young children (d'Arcy, 2004), helping to reduce sexist paranoia that was beginning to brew in some communities about men and child care (Murti, 2014). It should be noted that declaring men unfit to provide child care is not only about sexism against men, but also sexism against women, who have been expected to shoulder the full responsibility of child care (Murti, 2014). We all must embrace the child care profession, and caregivers must be allowed to be responsive to children's needs, interacting with them, and providing care and nurture (Timyan, 1988) without the fear that others suspect them of indecent motivations.

Research is emerging that supports men's involvement in child care as beneficial to children. Research from around the world has consistently linked fathers' involvement with children's optimal development in the early years of life (Perry, Harmon, & Leeper, 2012). The presence of men in

centers and schools is being found to have a positive effect on children's development. Boys in particular are thought to benefit from a positive male influence during their early years of development; male teachers provide stable father figures for those who do not have a stable, positive father figure at home (d'Arcy, 2004). Trends do show that today's fathers are becoming more involved in their children's development than before (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009).

When men are closely involved in the child care and upbringing process and recognize it as a shared responsibility, families benefit from reduced polygamy, domestic violence, and early marriages. The need for family counseling or the services of child welfare and protection officers decreases. These changes are also impacting the composition of families, the participation of women in the labor force, increased out-migration of mothers while fathers remain at home, and ideas about gender roles and children's socio-emotional needs (Ball, Fatima, & Chakma, 2012).

It is, however, critical to note that even with information about the benefits of male participation in child care work, participation of men in early childhood programs is perceived negatively by both colleagues and the larger society (Evans, 1995). Some female colleagues feel threatened by men breaking into "their" profession (Wardle, 1999). Instead of being supportive of the men and working together to raise the profile of the early childhood field, they try to edge men out. Thus, men in early childhood programs may need to spend time defending their presence in the field instead of creatively working to develop programs. If not resolved, this situation may impede efforts to attract and retain men in the early childhood profession.

If a man does gain access as a staff member in early childhood departments, usually to portray the institution as gender sensitive in staff recruitment, he must quickly adapt to environments that are influenced by a predominance of female staff, who may naturally be interested in doing traditionally feminine activities (Berger, 2003). Most early childhood programs tend to avoid the more physical, "masculine," activities.

Another critical challenge that male workers constantly face is prejudice about their ability to perform certain child care tasks, simply because they are men. Some believe that since men have not experienced child birth, they cannot have natural child care instincts. So, while it is acceptable for men to play outdoors with children, indoor activities should be the purview of female staff (Barker & Verani, 2008). Also, because men are more likely to be perceived as child abusers, male caregivers are

immediately suspect when a child is injured. Male staff must face daily interactions that show parents, center administrators, and female staff do not truly trust them with children.

Conclusion

African men are finally entering the field of early childhood and child care to make their contribution to promoting holistic child development. They have done so amid challenges that range from ridicule to discrimination, outright confrontation, low pay, and poor working conditions. Their presence in the field is, however, beginning to bring life to different early childhood programs, raise more interest in the field, and promote better cognitive and social development of children who seek to associate with positive male figureheads. We should acknowledge the contribution of such great men and celebrate their achievements in raising the profile of early childhood to new heights.

Ways Forward

We can celebrate the contributions of men in child care in several ways. One way is to organize an international conference with particular focus on celebrating the achievements of great men who have been bold enough to devote their lives honorably to early childhood. These men need to be praised for persisting and enjoying their work despite prejudice, discrimination, poor pay, and low morale. A conference may be one way of initiating affirmative action to encourage men to join the early childhood profession. Beyond a conference, we can put in place a system of incentives to reward fathers and men who have been consistent and positive in taking an active role in child care for their own children and others in the community. A good example of such efforts is the Bernard Van Leer Foundation program to reward exemplary fathers through the RFCs in Uganda.

More sensitization drives are needed from government agencies and NGOs to increase awareness of the great role fathers can play in children's lives if they are engaged in child care and minding activities. Such an awareness campaign should also help communities understand that child care should not be the reserve of women alone, and that men and women must play complementary roles in order to support the holistic development of children. Men's important roles include acting as father figures, promoting gender equality, identifying with male students, introducing more active pursuits into early childhood programs, and providing security. Sensitization may also warn against communities

making generalized, insensitive remarks about men and fathers who want to share rewarding experiences with the children under their care.

Some female staff in early childhood programs need to be sensitized about the challenges men face as they work in early childhood programs. They need to be made aware that some of their “jokes” could be hurtful to some men. Also, laws pertaining to discrimination in the workplace need to be strengthened, and to focus on the need to protect both men and women. When both men and women know their limits, they will be able to work together as they do in other professions.

Finally, men working in early childhood programs must rise above any petty problems that occur. They have to stay clear of any unprofessional conduct, especially anything that would contribute to community or parental suspicions about them. If men consistently conduct themselves in an exemplary manner, they will win over the trust of parents and be able to work harmoniously to promote quality early childhood care and education.

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