

The role of fathers in Parenting for gender equality

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Father-child relationships “be they positive, negative or lacking, at any stage in the life of the child, and in all cultural and ethnic communities – have profound and wide-ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime”.
(Fatherhood Institute and MenCare)

1. Introduction

Fathers have a profound and lasting impact on their children’s development. As stated in the Nurturing Care Framework (World Health Organization, 2018), parents and caregivers are the most important providers of nurturing care for children, and while women have historically taken the role of principal caregivers, this strategic document recognizes the need to support fathers and male caregivers to assume a central parenting role, together with the children’s mothers or female caregivers, as in practice, men’s involvement in childrearing although increasing, is still limited across the world. Several constraints and barriers exist to men’s engagement as active and caring fathers in the lives of their children at a normative, policy, community and individual level. Globally, dominant restrictive gender norms not only discourage men from becoming more actively involved in caregiving and domestic responsibilities, but also justify men’s violence and control over both women and children (Heise et al., 2019). Harmful norms that underpin patriarchal systems, promote a version of masculinity based on family headship and economic provision, control and the use of violence to resolve conflicts including wife-beating and corporal punishment of children (Heilman & Barker, 2018; The Prevention Collaborative, 2019). While evidence demonstrates the significant impact of fathers on children’s early development, parenting and caregiver support programs primarily focus on mothers and female caregivers based on the traditional sexual division of labor and caregiving. Engaging men fully in their role as nurturing caregivers and supportive partners alone is not sufficient. It requires at its core that policies and

programs interacting with families actively promote gender equality and challenge restrictive norms, so that relationships, roles, institutional practices and services can gradually evolve to create peaceful, non-violent and equitable societies and contribute to achieve SDG 16.

Men’s positive engagement as fathers goes well beyond them stepping in to perform childcare and domestic tasks. This paper understands the concept of male engagement as fathers to encompass their active participation in protecting and promoting the health, wellbeing and development of their partners and children. It also involves them being emotionally connected with their children and partners (even when they may not be living together),—including through emotional, physical and financial support. It also means that men take joint responsibility with their partner for the workload -including unpaid care work, child rearing, and paid work outside the home – and foster a respectful and caring co-parent or /and couple relationship if living together; make informed decisions with their partners and support their partner’s autonomous decision-making; resolve conflicts in a constructive and peaceful way and work to prevent violence by promoting caring and respectful relationships in the family (Plan International & Promundo-US, 2020).

The second section of this paper highlights evidence showing how positive male engagement can contribute to children’s physical and mental health, better cognitive development and higher educational achievement, as well as have a profound impact on children’s future relationships as parents and partners. Moreover, positive male engagement can also contribute to their female partner’s emotional well-being, help redress gender inequitable relationships and power imbalances in decision-making within the household and is essential for women’s participation in the labor market. Male engagement can contribute to preventing violence in their families and ultimately, contribute to more equitable and peaceful societies. The third section identifies the existing obstacles to men’s engagement as fathers; the fourth section provides examples of good practices and interventions that have addressed these constraints to engaging men through an intentional focus on promoting gender equality and the transformation of restrictive gender norms, and have proved effective in enhancing children’s, female partners

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and families' well-being. Finally, in the fifth and sixth section, the paper offers conclusions, and research, policy and programmatic recommendations to promote the engagement of men in caregiving as equitable, affectionate and non-violent fathers.

2. The importance of fathers in parenting education

Over the last four decades, efforts by researchers and practitioners have contributed to increase the body of evidence that improved the conceptualization and understanding of the myriad ways fathers can positively impact the health and wellbeing of children. Though most of the research is from the Global North, it has become clear that fathers can and do distinctly contribute to foundational components for children's growth and development including nutrition and safety, early learning and responsive care (WHO, 2018). Fathers' positive engagement in their children's upbringing has been linked to children's improved physical and mental health, better cognitive development and educational achievement, improved peer relations and capacity for empathy, fewer behavioral problems (in boys) and psychological problems (in girls), higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower rates of depression, fear and self-doubt into adulthood, lower rates of criminality and substance abuse, and more openness to critically examining traditional gendered roles (Levtov et al., 2015). There are direct and indirect hypothesized pathways through which fathers (both residential and non-residential) impact child development (Cabrera et al., 2000). They can directly contribute to enhanced child development outcomes such as cognitive, language, and socio-emotional skills through stimulation, nurturing interactions as well as through providing nutritious meals and promoting their development and health. They can also impact child outcomes by affecting the quality of the home environment through modeling equitable co-parenting partnerships, engaging in joint decision-making and responsibility for domestic work, and through positive and non-violent conflict resolution.

Fathers play a critical role in children's physical and mental health and wellbeing, particularly in the early years. Fathers' active and engaged involvement in childrearing through responsive care and stimulation has demonstrated positive outcomes in early learning and cognition, as well as socio-emotional development (Baker, 2017; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Cabrera &

Tamis-Lemonda, 2013; Henry et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2016; Jeong et al., 2017; Jia et al., 2012; Lamb, 2004; Roggman et al., 2007). Fathers' promotion of early learning, language and literacy also has an enormous impact on the developmental trajectory of children, determining their school readiness and achievement from early education through adulthood (Downer et al., 2008; Duursma, 2004; Jeynes, 2015; McWayne et al., 2013; Saracho, 2007; Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2013). In later years, qualitative and correlational studies have found that father involvement plays a role in promoting healthy nutrition and exercise in children (Garfield et al., 2012) as well as in protecting children's mental health against psychological maladjustment and distress (particularly in girls) throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Allgood et al., 2012; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Father involvement has also been linked to improved peer relations and higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower rates of depression, fear and self-doubt (Alloy et al., 2001; Burgess, 2006; Levtov et al., 2015).

Fathers have a significant role in the ways children are disciplined in the home. Experiencing harsh punishment at the hands of fathers is strongly linked to negative outcomes across the lifespan. Children who suffer physical and emotional violence by a parent or caregiver see their physical and mental health negatively impacted well into adulthood (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017; UNICEF, 2014). But, even though mothers can and do use harsh forms of punishment as well, fathers' use of harsh punishment has been discretely linked to negative outcomes across the lifespan and therefore their significant role in preventing it should be underscored. In particular, fathers' use of harsh verbal and physical discipline has been associated with later behavioral problems such as child aggression particularly in boys, even if they make regular use of positive discipline techniques as well (Chang et al., 2003; McKee et al., 2007). Conversely, the reduction in the use of harsh discipline by fathers has been linked to the improvement of child early learning, cognitive and socioemotional development (Palm & Fagan, 2008; Sarkadi et al., 2008).

Men's use of violence against women also affects children's development in the short and long term. Child exposure to intimate partner violence can have long-term health and social consequences similar to those of child abuse and neglect (Guedes et al., 2016). Children who witness violence in the home are at risk for trauma formation, as well as lags in learning and performance in

school, difficulties in developing empathy, controlling aggression, interacting with others, and engaging in healthy parent–child relationships (Brancahione et al., 2004; Dyson 1990; Holt et al., 2008; Margolin & Vickerman, 2007; Promundo & Sonke Gender Justice, 2018; Strom et al, 2013). These effects can be compounded, as different forms of violence in the home co-occur. Violence against children and intimate partner violence share common risk factors and are sustained by similar social norms that condone violent discipline (wife-beating and corporal punishment) and promote masculinities centered on power and control (Holt et al., 2008; Nami et al., 2017; Steinhaus et al., 2019; Vlahovicova et al., 2019).

The role of fathers in educating children through non-violent parenting has a profound impact on children’s future relationships as parents and partners. While data from multiple countries indicates that the exposure to violence in childhood, either as a victim or as a witness to violence against their mother, increases the likelihood that a child will grow up to experience or perpetrate violence in their future relationships (Contreras et al., 2012; Fleming et al., 2015; Fulu et al., 2013; Fulu et al., 2017); positive parental relationships and fathers’ modeling of respect, non-violence and care, has also been found to interrupt this intergenerational transmission of violence (Van der Gaag et al, 2019). Representative household survey data from many countries highlights a pattern in which men who have witnessed their fathers be actively involved in housework and unpaid care work while growing up are much more likely to do the same as adults, kick starting lasting cycles of healthy relationships and caregiving (Kato-Wallace et al., 2014; Levtoev et al., 2015). Beyond the effects on boys and young men, modeling of gender equitable relationships among parents in the household has been associated with girls’ more ambitious career aspirations and participation in the labor market (Croft et al., 2014).

Father involvement in parenting and unpaid care work is not only positive for children’s development and more equitable gender socialization, but it is also beneficial to women’s health and economic empowerment. While evidence is still limited, father involvement during pregnancy has been correlated with mother’s increased likelihood to receive first trimester prenatal care, better nutrition and rest, skilled birth attendance and postnatal care; as well as with reductions in prematurity, infant mortality, and postpartum depression (Alio et al., 2011a, 2011b; Comrie-Thompson et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2012;

Swan et al., 2019; Teitler, 2001; Yargawa & Leonardi-Bee, 2015). Mothers who feel supported by their children’s fathers suffer less parenting stress and feel less overburdened; they parent more positively and have higher life satisfaction (Swan & Doyle, 2019). Engaging men as fathers in the perinatal period also offers an opportunity to address power imbalances in gender relations and decision-making that continue to hinder women’s access to health and improve couple relations (Abosse et al., 2010). Furthermore, through becoming involved, men learn new ways of relating to their partners and families that diverge from their traditional gender roles, taking on roles that enable women to pursue their education or participate in the labor market (Doyle et al., 2014). While worthwhile in its own right, women’s participation in paid work or having access to income can reduce household financial stress, increase expenditure on children’s health and wellbeing, increase her agency and decision-making and has been shown to have macro-economic impacts at a global scale (Bastagli et al., 2016; Buller et al., 2018; Millan et al. 2019; Ostry et al., 2018; Woetzel et al., 2015).

3. Barriers and constraints

Despite the promising evidence, men’s potential to contribute in positive ways as fathers and caregivers is not being fully realized. Several barriers, including restrictive gender norms and expectations, the absence of enabling policy environments, and exclusion from key services prevent them from sharing caregiving responsibilities and becoming more involved. It is imperative to apply a gender analysis both to understand what sustains these barriers as well as to formulate solutions to address them.

Restrictive gender norms and expectations drive inequities in the division of work within the household. Definitions about how men and women should behave, as partners and parents, remain deeply entrenched in most societies. Restrictive gender norms include expectations around men being the financial provider, the authoritative head of the family in charge of decision-making. Women, meanwhile, are expected to be caretakers and responsible for the health and wellbeing of the children (Heise et al, 2019). Beyond individually held ideas, socially shared beliefs are reflected in and continuously reinforce patterns of gendered division of labor and caregiving (Plan International & Promundo-US, 2020). Promundo and other practitioners have recurrently found that adopting

equitable behaviors can be challenging when social norms in the groups of reference remain unchanged: while some men may support women's agency or work outside the home, they may worry about losing respect from their community if their wife earns more than him; while women may worry about social censure and being labeled as poor mothers should their husband take on childcare (Promundo, 2018).

The normalization of these biases also influences the ways in which parenting and caregiver support interventions and policies are designed and targeted, perpetuating these divides. Maternal and child health as well as parenting interventions are primarily designed, targeted and delivered to women, often under the assumption that fathers are ill-equipped, incapable of or not interested in taking care of children (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Maxwell et al. 2012). A global review of parenting programs shows that the large majority undervalues co-parenting compared with mothering, and there is a dearth of robust evaluations that measure father participation or their specific impact on child or family outcomes (Panter-Brick, 2014). The scientific evidence contests this belief -fathers, both biological and non-biological, have been shown to experience neurological changes akin to mothers' as a result of childrearing, including increases in oxytocin and activation in empathy-related neural pathways (Yogman, 1982; Yogman et al. 1983; Feldman, 2003; Gettler et al., 2011; Perini et al., 2012; Feldman et al., 2010; Abraham & Feldman, 2018); which then translate to active behavioral engagement in children's care and stimulation (Feldman et al. 2010; Gordon et al., 2010; Weisman et al., 2014).

At the family level, rigid gender socialization, lack of exposure to childrearing from an earlier age and absence of male caregiver role models can act as lasting barriers to father involvement (Plan International & Promundo-US, 2020). From an early age, boys learn through the socialization process how they are expected to behave based on their gender. As adults, they tend to reproduce these patterns within their own families, by remaining emotionally distant or absent, or by teaching their own sons to be "real men" at the expense of modelling compassion, honesty, and vulnerability (Barker et al., 2012; Barker et al., 2020; Levto et al., 2015). While normative environments might still be conservative, they are often in stark contrast with personal attitudes held by fathers, who express more gender equitable views that the norms on their communities would suggest

(Levtov et al., 2018; Vlahovicova et al., 2019). Much data shows that men desire to be actively involved in the lives of their children, even as they may reflect that they don't always know how (Heilman et al., 2018; Levto et al., 2015). Seeing models of male caregiving while growing-up promotes men's involvement in care as adults and encourages a virtuous cycle of care.

The lack of an enabling institutional culture and supportive work environment deter men from taking larger childcare responsibilities. In addition to individual beliefs on gendered household roles, promoting men's involvement in parenting and caregiving require supportive and enabling work environments. Yet many do not perceive or receive support at the level of their work environment or society, for men's deeper involvement in the lives of their children. Findings from Promundo's *Helping Dads Care* Research project conducted in the UK, U.S, Canada, Japan, Argentina, and the Netherlands, showed that when asked about who in their circles of influence would be most restrictive about fathers' involvement in childcare, many fathers said their immediate managers were the ones they expected to be most obstructive (Van der Gaag et al., 2019). As these findings demonstrate, many fathers fear workplace stigma if they prioritize (or even balance) childcare responsibilities with professional responsibilities.

Parental leave is one of the most visible markers of employer and government support for men's caregiving, but it is often insufficient to allow men to take time off from work. Parental leave policies vary widely from country to country and are provided to formal, salary-based employees leaving out a broad-based segment of parents -the unemployed, freelancers, those who work in the informal sector and in subsistence agriculture (UNICEF, 2019). In addition, while leave for mothers is largely codified and provided as a benefit, only a handful of countries provide paid leave for fathers, and even if they do, it is short and insufficiently remunerated. According to the International Labour Organization in 2014, only 79 countries offered any paternity leave -and paid in 71 countries. In half of these countries, the leave is less than three weeks (Addati et al. 2014). Due to the insufficient compensation and short period of time covered by parental leave policies, fathers are less likely to take the leave they are entitled to, as they are often the main income earners in their families. In a multi-country survey to better understand barriers to men's uptake of leave, many fathers reported taking little to no leave at all after the birth or adoption of their child, and

fewer than half reported taking the full amount of time that they are entitled to (See Table 1; van der Gaag et al. 2019). While paternity leave is necessary, it's not sufficient on its own to immediately change long-term, shared social norms and behaviors.

Table 1: Percentage of fathers who took no time off and who took the full amount of time they were allocated under country's policies

Country	No time off	Took as much time as country's policy offers
Argentina	20%	29% (1-2 days)
Brazil	27%	32% (5 days)*
Canada (except Québec)	40%	40% (2 weeks)**
Japan	35%	1% (12 months)
Netherlands	18%	37% (3 days)
United Kingdom	16%	44% (2 weeks)
United States	LESS THAN 0.1%	N/A (28% took 2 weeks)***

Source: State of the World Fathers 2019.

Lastly, the exclusion of men from key social services and health systems works against father engagement. In most countries and health systems, men are passively (and sometimes actively) excluded from child and family services -including maternal, newborn, child health services, early childhood development and social protection services - and often overlooked by professionals and practitioners for a range of reasons (Greene et al., 2019). These include the belief that these spaces and issues are women's domain, that facilities are not equipped to accommodate men's presence during birth, and that a fear of men's involvement would negatively interfere in women's freedom to make choices or access care. Such deficiencies on the "supply side" of services lead to reduced demand for them from men themselves: the services are seen as "women's business" and the few men who do attend them often feel shy, intimidated and out of place.

4. Good practice: interventions to engage fathers in improving the quality of family relationships and child development

A few programs have proven promising in engaging men as active fathers, demonstrating a range of positive outcomes. These include improvement in the quality of the father-child relationship, increase in men's time spent caring for children and performing domestic household tasks, reductions in men's use of violent

discipline methods against children and intimate partner violence, and shifts toward more gender equitable relationships among parents. Parenting programs (see The Prevention Collaborative, 2019) that seek to engage fathers explicitly, combined with a gender-transformative approach have found compelling evidence of impact on improving parent-child and family relationships. The following selected interventions from the Global South have been able to show impact in addressing outcomes related to couple, parent-child and family relationships and wellbeing by leveraging fathers as active agents in the education and development of their children, alongside their female partners.

The [Responsible Engaged and Loving \(REAL\) Fathers Initiative](#) works with first-time fathers of children ages 1-3 years old combining a mentorship and group education approach. This program delivers a curriculum that promotes the positive child discipline, caregiving, gender equity and communication. Through modeling of alternative methods to harsh punishment and enhance couple communication, the program aims to reduce rates of child maltreatment and intimate partner violence (Ashburn et al., 2017). As demonstrated earlier, these are critical risk factors that can limit children from developing to their full potential, affect their mental health and future relationships, including the likelihood of perpetrating or experiencing violence (The Prevention Collaborative, 2019). Its community level component works to reinforce these messages through disseminate images (posters) depicting men's involvement and positive parenting to promote an environment supportive of individual fathers' newly adopted behaviors. Results of an experimental evaluation showed a significant reduction in father's self-reported use of harsh punishment, with fathers who gained exposure to the mentoring sessions being two times more likely to use positive discipline methods (Ashburn et al., 2017; The Prevention Collaborative, 2019) and to spend more time in activities such as play with their children. They were also more likely to report feeling confident about managing their child's behavior without resorting to harsh punishment, and were more likely than fathers who did not participate in the program to disagree with corporal punishment. (Asburn et al., 2017).

[Program P](#) (for "Pai", meaning "father" in Portuguese) is an evidence-based father-centered program that aims to promote an environment of care through the prevention of violence. The model engages fathers alongside their partners, to become more involved, gender-equitable

and non-violent partners and caregivers. The program has been adapted and implemented to date in over eighteen countries. More recent adaptations to address early child development include modules to favor early stimulation, parental responsiveness, knowledge of developmental milestones, and positive discipline. The Program P model is based on an socio-ecological framework and aims to 1) address health systems and other institutions to promote more targeted engagement of fathers; 2) work with couples in a multi-session group education setting to examine the impacts of harmful gender norms on relations, and work towards healthy equitable households; 3) develop community campaigns that help create supportive environments for these new norms. In a RCT evaluation of Bandebereho (an adaptation of Program P implemented in Rwanda), 79% of women and 67% of men in the control group reported using physical punishment against their children, compared to 68% of women and 58% of men in the intervention group; and around 40% were less likely to use violence against their partners; and spent about 55 minutes more a day involved in caregiving and household tasks than those in the control group 21 months after the intervention (Doyle et al., 2018). These promising evaluation results have led to active government support and institutionalization for both REAL Father's Initiatives and Bandebereho through relevant government line ministries and institutions and are currently being scaled-up to benefit large swaths of the country's population (Duch et al., 2019).

Fatherhood and caregiver support programs such as REAL Fathers (Uganda) and Bandebereho (Rwanda), as well as Sugira Muryango (Rwanda) (Betancourt et al., 2020), and others that are not explicitly targeted at fathers but parents -and therefore engaging men with less success- such as Masayang Pamilya Para Sa Batang (Philippines) (Alampay et al., 2018; Doha International Family Institute & Qatar Foundation, 2018), or Nadie es Perfecto (Chile) (Carneiro et al., 2019) demonstrate that parenting programs can be integrated into existing public sector service delivery platforms and wide reaching programs, such as health, child protection or social protection (cash transfer programs), early childhood development or livelihood programs (Duch et al., 2019, Carneiro et al., 2019). Parenting programs thus present the opportunity of benefitting a large sector of the population and promote population level changes that can contribute to healthy, equitable and caring relationships by transforming restrictive gender norms, strengthening caregivers' skills and self-efficacy as

parents, including their ability to resolve conflicts and manage child behavior problems through effective, age-appropriate, nonviolent discipline strategies.

The integration of evidence-based parenting programs in public social sector services in low and middle income countries faces multiple challenges in contexts of limited human and financial resources. Among the main difficulties encountered are: ensuring that program content and approach is feasible and adapted to the cultural and operational context of how social services are delivered, securing adequate funds to implement programs at scale and recruit government personnel that can be trained in gender transformative and early childhood approaches that won't turn over frequently. Links to complementary interventions and support are often necessary to address other factors of adversity contributing to family well-being such as economic deprivation, violence in the family, parental mental health or substance abuse issues.

Social and Behavior Change Communication Campaigns can also be effective to promote father engagement and challenge restrictive gender norms towards creating a favorable community environment to support individual change. The [MenCare Campaign](#) is a global effort initiated in 2011 motivated by the understanding that fatherhood provided a key opportunity to involve men in promoting caregiving, gender equality and reducing violence. Since its inception, the MenCare Campaign has created a global platform to drive and promote research exchange, evidenced based program development, tools for developing advocacy initiatives to promote men's equitable, nonviolent caregiving (Barker et al., 2018). With over 100 partners in over 55 countries, the MenCare Campaign works both locally and internationally to promote normative change through a combination of research on effective approaches to engage fathers, the links between fatherhood and family well-being and health. The campaign relies on research that informs and improves fatherhood programming, the creative use of media that showcases positive models of male caregiving, and global convenings to create a shared agenda and strategy to achieve collective goals. Partners reported MenCare had positive impacts in expanding the national conversation around fatherhood and in a number of countries, influenced specific policies around fatherhood and caregiving (Van der Gaag, 2015).

5. Conclusion

An emerging body of evidence shows that positive father engagement in the lives of their children – much like positive involvement of mothers and other significant caregivers – is associated with a series of early child development outcomes as well as improved quality of family environment and relationships that have profound and lasting impacts on their development. However, several constraints stand in the way of realizing this potential in a large proportion of families at a global level. Key barriers identified are: restrictive gender norms that discourage men from becoming more actively involved in caregiving and domestic responsibilities, uphold care to be women’s primary responsibility and justify men’s violence and control over both women and children; lack of policies and supportive enabling environment to encourage men to take time off work to care for their children, and parenting and family focused programs designed for and delivered primarily to women caregivers. Emerging and promising fatherhood and parenting support interventions show effectiveness in both improving the quality and quantity of care provided by fathers, enhancing couple communication as well as reducing violence in the family. These interventions also show that overcoming barriers to engage men fully in their role as nurturing caregivers and supportive partners is feasible with explicit strategies to reach them but it’s not sufficient on its own to generate sustainable change in social norms and practices. This requires that social policies and programs interacting with families support all parents and caregivers to strengthen their parenting skills but that also actively promote gender equality and challenge restrictive norms sustaining power imbalances and violent relationships. Knowledge gaps remain on how to design and implement evidence-based gender transformative parenting interventions that are scalable, affordable, replicable, and sustainable in order to reach large numbers of families, particularly in resource constrained settings. Concerted efforts to address these gaps and enhance the evidence can inform future policy and parenting programming to engage men and this contribute to achieving the SDG 16 by creating peaceful, non-violent and equitable societies.

6. Research, policy and programmatic recommendations: Engaging men in parenting

Engaging fathers as positive, non-violent and meaningful caregivers is critical to the development of children and to support equality in caregiving and broader gender justice. Yet significant efforts need to be made to increase the scale and quality of interventions and policies that can build the supportive environment at the societal, family and individual level required to make that possible. This section offers recommendations based on the evidence available focusing on research, policies and programs that can promote men’s active engagement as fathers:

- **Invest in conducting action oriented research to understand barriers to fathers’ engagement and positive entry points to catalyze their active involvement.** Formative research should identify men’s concerns around fatherhood and programmatic designs need to ensure they consider in-kind or symbolic incentives to motivate them to attend; develop strategies to reach men in places and at times that work with their schedules; create a safe space for mutual sharing and learning on parenting and couple relationships. Additional areas for advancing the research agenda to engage fathers includes rigorously evaluating the added value of parenting interventions that target fathers alone compared to couples; understanding social and community norms that play a role in enabling men’s caregiving, and mapping of opportunities to integrate engaged fatherhood in policy and legislation. Finally, given existing myths around biological distinctions in caregiving capacity based on gender, it is important to support the generation and dissemination of neurobiological research to contribute to dispel this misconception that acts as a barrier to men’s engagement as active caregivers.
- **Widen the growing but yet limited evidence base of fatherhood programs to promote early childhood development and prevent family violence in low and middle income countries.** Much of the existing evidence around fathers’ impact on children’s outcomes remains concentrated within the Global North. Given highly variant contexts, impact of interventions may be constrained in different settings, due to distinct gender and social norms, incentives to participate, paid work constraints and the social economy that might prevent

men's participation. Dedicate more investment and research to implement and evaluate the effectiveness of parenting programs that explore innovative and flexible program delivery modalities that can accommodate demanding work schedules to address contextual barriers to engage fathers and overcome recruitment and retention challenges; and to better understand the pathways through which positive father engagement in parenting can impact different areas of child development.

- **Support the development of a repository and open sourcing of evidence and knowledge on the roles and impact of fathers to inform policy development.**

Initiatives like [The Global Fatherhood Charter](#) or the [National Fatherhood Initiative](#), are key resources that draw on expert knowledge and a large body of research to make evidence-based recommendations accessible to parents, practitioners and policy makers across the world (Global Fatherhood Charter, 2019; National Fatherhood Initiative, n.d.). As organizations and specifically, local civil society seeks to elevate and prioritize healthy child development, developing more accessible resources that highlight promising practices can ensure the wide diffusion of evidenced based practices.

- **Support the development of theory-driven social norm change interventions that identify specific norms driving inequitable behaviors around parenting and caregiving.**

Addressing restrictive social norms and expectations is at the heart of driving transformative change and developing supportive environments that enable fathers and their female partners to adopt gender equitable behaviors including the use of intimate partner violence and violent forms of discipline against children. These interventions should involve parents, family members, reference groups and the communities at large to challenge harmful norms and rigid ideas around masculinity, adopt new norms and attitudes, as well as strengthen healthy relationship skills that can sustain these shifts.

- **Design, implement and evaluate gender transformative parenting programs that can be taken to scale in a sustainable way.** Long-term and resource intensive interventions may be challenging to implement for most governments in the Global South. It is critical to invest in generating a larger body of evidence and practice based knowledge on what are the core components (curriculum topics, dosage and approaches) of parenting interventions that have been most effective. Evaluations

should not only describe program results achieved but also detail the content of the curriculum, the required profile of facilitators, the strategies used to recruit and retain parents, but particularly fathers, whether incentives are required, and core elements to ensure fidelity of design and implementation, as well as its cost-effectiveness.

- **Ensure programs and interventions that engage men are designed and delivered in ways that respond to women's needs, choices and priorities.** Policy and program practitioners should involve women during the design of the intervention to consider their concerns regarding potential risks of increased male involvement which can include reinforcing men's power and control over women's decision-making, restricting the few safe spaces where women have agency in the areas of maternal and child health and parenting. Health and social protection services engaging men need to guard against possible exclusion of young, single or unaccompanied women. Moreover, any intervention seeking to actively engage men as partners in parenting, maternal or child health needs to ensure they do not create additional risks for women, of experiencing intimate partner violence. These need to guarantee access and referrals to adequate and survivor centered support services for women that can suffer intimate partner violence as traditional norms begin to shift and male partners can feel threatened.
- **Integrate strategies to actively engage fathers and male caregivers in key services and programs directed to families seeking to promote children and adolescent development that reach large sectors of the population.** Policies related to early child development, social welfare, childcare, newborn and child health, nutrition, education, and youth development should encourage fathers' positive engagement with children, while recognizing the realities of different types of families and fathers, including non-residential fathers. Social services directly interacting with families need to train and recruit male staff to model caregiving and childcare roles. Moreover, these policies should provide resources to strengthen and support families to address structural drivers of adversity, especially those with special needs and vulnerabilities (e.g., adolescent parents, children with disabilities, incarcerated fathers, etc.), and they should be complemented with policies that promote fathers' involvement in their children's lives throughout adolescence and early adulthood.

- **Support equal, fully paid, non-transferable parental leave for all parents to create the conditions that allow for fathers' involvement in their children's lives from an early age.** Parental leave should be offered in both public and private sectors, and complemented by other policies (e.g. provision of care services for children, elderly and people with disabilities) that promote women's equal participation in the labor force and men's equal participation in unpaid care work. Support efforts to collect data on time use in unpaid care work and how it is divided between women and men, as well as reasons that determine male and female parents' dedication to unpaid care and use it to inform policy-making and budgeting decisions regarding provision of childcare, and parenting and parental support services.

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