

ENHANCING MEN'S ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE FAMILY

Women's empowerment begins in the household with equality, autonomy and respect. Achieving equality between men and women in the family is the foundation on which empowerment in other areas is based.

Women's lives are usually described in terms of motherhood, while men's lives are usually characterised as heads of household or wage-earners. Men's role as fathers tend to be vague. Yet, men's commitment to their children is key to the quality of family life and the prospects of the next generation.

The "traditional family" structure -- in which mothers are the caregivers and fathers the income earners -- has become, to a large extent, a myth. It is, however, a myth that is upheld by social and economic policy. On the domestic front, while women have taken on an increasing role in providing income to their families, men have not taken up their share of responsibility in family life. Responsibility for children, in particular, is still seen as belonging to the mother.

- **Fathers spend about a third as much time as mothers in providing direct child care.**

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The duties of a father -- both actual and expected -- vary greatly throughout the world. Fathers' contributions to the direct care of their children, particularly when children are very young, is critical. Nonetheless, a review of research in 186 societies found that fathers have "regular, close relationships" with their children during infancy in only 2 per cent of these societies.

Economic, cultural and other factors influence the amount of time fathers spend with their children. Cultural factors are perhaps paramount. In many societies, fathers' limited participation in child care is linked very strongly to beliefs that close father-child relations are not appropriate.

- **In some parts of West Africa, contact between men and very young children is seen as taboo.**

Available evidence suggests that the more men and women cooperate economically, the more equally they tend to divide child care responsibilities. Whether or not the father lives with his children, the quality of his relationship with their mother is also influential. Contact between fathers and their children tends to diminish, or even disappear, soon after a break-up when mothers have custody. Fathers who were never married to the mother generally feel even less obligation to their children.

- **A Jamaican study found that a man's involvement with his children fell significantly when his children lived elsewhere, particularly if they lived in the home of another man.**
- **A study in Chile found that by age six, about 40 per cent of children born to unmarried adolescent couples are unacknowledged and abandoned by their fathers**

Economic support from fathers also declines when marriages fail.

- **In Argentina, only 36 per cent of divorced fathers make regular child support payments.**
- **In the United States and Malaysia, 40 and 50 per cent of divorced fathers, respectively, pay no child support at all.**
- **In Japan, 75 per cent of divorced fathers have never paid child support.**

INVOLVED FATHERHOOD

Not only is promoting greater and broader men's involvement in fatherhood key to empowering women, women's empowerment is key to improving the relationships between mothers and fathers, and to improving the bond between fathers and children.

Children, parents and society benefit from men's active involvement with their children. There are economic benefits because it reduces the dependency on women and, at the same time, allows more time to be spent by parents on their child's development. There are also social benefits because when fathers are actively involved, children's emotional and social well-being and self-esteem are enhanced, and the likelihood of behavioural problems falls

- **In Barbados, a study of eight-year-old children born to adolescent mothers found that those whose fathers were involved in their upbringing did much better in school than those whose fathers were not.**

Men's roles in families, however, are not improved automatically by their presence, nor do children necessarily benefit. Problems may arise if the father is at home but decision-making is not shared by both parents, as is often the case. Child welfare suffers when men unleash violence against women and children, when men spend income on goods that do not contribute to family welfare, such as alcohol, and when they serve as negative role models.

THE NEW FATHER

A new ideal of fatherhood is emerging in both developed and developing countries. The "new" father:

- **Is present at the birth of his child;**
- **Has close relationships with his children;**
- **Cooperates with his partner; and**
- **Shares in household tasks.**

While this ideal is, indeed, evolving, practice is slow to change for a variety of reasons:

- It poses a great challenge to traditional notions of fatherhood held by both men and women;
- It may increase men's vulnerability in the workplace --for example, if they request paternity leave -- even if this is their employer's policy;
- Role models for men as fathers and instruction in child care skills are lacking; and
- Policies and programs to promote men's involvement in fathering are inadequate.