FAMILY AND FATHERHOOD: A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH
FAMILY AND FATHERHOOD: A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH
In recent years there has been a renewed focus on the family unit as a gendered institution and building block of all societies. Families are units where both socioeconomic cooperation and conflict coexist and where the act of parenting instils and perpetuates gender norms. It is critical for policymakers in Mongolia to understand the gendered family dynamics in order to achieve equality and improve outcomes for both boys and girls. It requires a fundamental shift towards gender-equal parenting practices and behaviours that must be supported by society, health, labour and education policies; and the private sector. An important starting point is to engage and promote men as caring fathers, and there are lessons to be learned from other parts of the world.
1. INTRODUCTION: turning our focus back on families

Over the past century, development policy planning has largely focused on what benefits the state and economy as omnipresent entities, often without cognizance of the units that are constantly building and rebuilding these organic systems, i.e. families and individuals.

Families are the cornerstone of all societies. They sustain and fuel a well-functioning state and economy when duly recognized, valued and supported. Despite a dominant ideal in many societies, family has always been much more complex than a woman and man living together with their offspring. A more inclusive definition of family is: “any group of individuals that forms a household based on respect, love and affection; and provides support to maintain their welfare” (Bozett, cited in MenCare, 2017). It is important to acknowledge the diversity of living and marital arrangements. As gender dynamics have changed, urban-centric economies have flourished and life expectancy has drastically increased. We have witnessed an increase in cohabitation, same-sex couples, skip generation (older persons and children only) and single-person households, alongside a decline in birth rates.
2. The gendered burden of parenting and care within families

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2007) defines parenting of children as a set of activities that involves, “connection, behaviour control, respect for a child’s individuality, modelling appropriate behaviour, provision and protection”. Implicit in these activities is the transmission of familial and social gender norms from infancy (UN Women, 2019; Promundo, 2013). Parenting is therefore a pivotal component of a child's socialization into gender norms and roles.

At the heart of perpetuating gender inequality within families is the division of work between home and society, i.e. women being the care providers and men being the economic providers. The unequal norms manifest across various institutions:

a) Within society – unpaid care work is viewed as ‘low-value’ and paid work is considered ‘high-value’ within the economy (Wichterwich, L., 2010, cited in MenCare)

b) Within the state and market – the formulation, implementation and enforcement of labour, social and health-care policies that perpetuate this division of work.

As a consequence, the burden of parenting or unpaid childcare work falls on women. Moreover, for too long women’s economic empowerment has largely been conceptualized as access to and participation in the paid workforce, with little consideration or recognition of their existing roles in the unpaid workforce. This has persistently led to skewed participation in certain types of paid work, gender pay gaps and the ‘motherhood penalty gap’ whereby mothers are forced to reduce their income even as they work longer hours and have greater financial burdens.

Women account for two-thirds of the global working hours but take home only one-tenth of the global income in comparison to men (UN Women, 2018). Single-mother households are extremely vulnerable to income poverty compared with two-parent families (UN Women, 2019).

On the other hand, gender inequality in parenting has fuelled stereotypes of the father falling outside the core family unit, often reducing it to just the mother and child for policy and programmatic purposes. In fact, sectors that directly impact parenting, such as health care and labour, continue to focus on mothers as having the primary obligation of providing care; for example, prenatal and postnatal health-care procedures aimed solely at new mothers or the reluctance to institutionalize paid leave for new fathers. The absence of men in parenting and childcare, as well as the lack of societal or legal obligations to do so, perpetuates a great burden on women and girls.

2.1. The unique case of Mongolia

Mongolia has a unique history of gender dynamics and parenting. It requires an understanding of gender norms as an outcome of the complex interaction between hegemonic nomadic cultures and the modern state. Nomadic communities practice a patriarchal system where men own and control their main wealth, i.e. livestock, while women are the primary carers of the family offspring. These norms are still largely adhered to within the domestic space. Masculinity is associated with patriarchal stereotypes that perpetuate toxic masculinities, i.e. men are the breadwinners, protectors and even the aggressors. In contrast, femininity is associated with familial care, physical and emotional vulnerability, and motherhood.

Traditional parenting activities have been limited to basic needs – mainly breastfeeding and providing food and clothing – and are deemed to be ‘women’s activities’. They have also involved introducing gendered roles and responsibilities. Young children will typically be socialized in binary gender identities and expected to take on adult gender roles by the time they reach adolescence. Adolescent girls are socialized as carers by supporting their mothers in domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and looking after younger siblings. Adolescent boys are socialized as
providers by taking responsibility for chores ‘outside’ the homestead, such as fetching firewood and water, looking after animals, grocery shopping, collecting younger siblings from school and accompanying sisters in the evening in urban areas. However, State policies during the socialist and post-socialist periods have created new manifestations of gender inequality. The introduction of Marxist feminism in the twentieth century inculcated notions of socioeconomic equality between men and women by promoting ‘women in the workplace’. Today, education is the pathway to formal employment, thereby enabling the socioeconomic mobility of women in the public space. Yet gender norms in traditional spheres have never been adequately challenged. For example, carer benefits are aimed primarily at mothers, and national surveys focus solely on mothers’ education as a determinant of child-related outcomes. This has led to a double burden on women and girls, and has marginalized men within the family unit.

Further, the absenteeism of men in families has been fuelled by the unique phenomenon of household splitting, whereby mothers move with their children to urban centres for the children to attend school and complete their basic education. The process is gendered, placing extreme economic and psychosocial stress on both men and women. As women and children move to urban centres, men are left alone and isolated in remote locations, often tending to livestock in extreme winter conditions with no support. Women and children form single-mother households in urban centres – with the burden of work falling on both – and become vulnerable to income and food insecurity and the risk of violence.

3. EMPOWERING FATHERS AS CARERS: A gender-transformative approach

Indeed, families are the building blocks of wider society and the state, wherein unequal gender norms are transmitted to children and adolescents through the gendered activities of parenting. Investment to achieve gender equality and the SDGs must be embedded within a family-friendly agenda. Policies that put families at the centre can be beneficial for all: empowering fathers as carers will reduce the dominance of toxic masculinities, the burden on women and girls and the prevalence of violent relationships, and thus move society towards being gender-equal.

Box 1: Programme P - The process of transformation*

Promundo, in collaboration with Puntos de Encuentros in Nicaragua, CulturaSalud in Chile, and the Brazilian Ministry of Health, first began Programme P (from the words ‘Padre’ and ‘Pai’ which mean father in Spanish and Portuguese). Currently, it has been adopted in at least 10 countries (Promundo, 2013; MenCare, 2017).

Programme P’s entry platform is the health-care sector, where fathers are engaged from the prenatal phase of pregnancies when they are most open to adopting new caregiving behaviours. Programme P targets various key stakeholders in a process to shift behaviours, practices and eventually norms through the use of manuals and toolkits.

The programme has three key components:

- Offering information and tools for health-care providers: Vital background information is provided on the importance of maternal health and engaging men as caregivers, and a guide on how to engage men at prenatal consultations and in primary health clinics.
- Developing and implementing group activities for fathers and couples: Interactive modules are organized for gender-transformative group education.
- Providing guidance to the community: A step-by-step guide is available to create and launch MenCare community-level campaigns.

Promundo in collaboration with Puntos de Encuentros in Nicaragua, CulturaSalud in Chile, and the Brazilian Ministry of Health, first began Programme P (from the words ‘Padre’ and ‘Pai’ which mean father in Spanish and Portuguese). Currently, it has been adopted in at least 10 countries (Promundo, 2013; MenCare, 2017).

Programme P’s entry platform is the health-care sector, where fathers are engaged from the prenatal phase of pregnancies when they are most open to adopting new caregiving behaviours. Programme P targets various key stakeholders in a process to shift behaviours, practices and eventually norms through the use of manuals and toolkits.

The programme has three key components:

- Offering information and tools for health-care providers: Vital background information is provided on the importance of maternal health and engaging men as caregivers, and a guide on how to engage men at prenatal consultations and in primary health clinics.
- Developing and implementing group activities for fathers and couples: Interactive modules are organized for gender-transformative group education.
- Providing guidance to the community: A step-by-step guide is available to create and launch MenCare community-level campaigns.
At present, the International Labour Organization estimates it will take at least another 75 years to achieve equality in unpaid care (MenCare, 2017). The first step is to change social norms, policies and practices around parenting and care within families, i.e. promote nurturing forms of fatherhood and encourage men and boys to engage in unpaid care.

Parenting and economic activities must become gender-neutral, with all parents encouraged to see themselves as equal partners. Achieving equality in work entails systematically addressing inequalities across each institutional platform: family, society, state and economy. Promundo’s ‘Programme P’ offers a gender-transformative approach which recognizes four key aspects of gender inequality that shape parenting and care: social norms, expectations on fatherhood, the health sector, and law and labour policy (see Box 1).

• **Traditional gender norms:** The unequal bargaining power of women and girls leads to unequal outcomes in decision-making, access to resources and wealth, and allocation of work. Unequal gender norms are perpetuated through multiple platforms: families, schools, government, media, social networks, work and other areas of life. Unequal gender norms have perpetuated the normalization of physical, sexual and psychological violence by men against women and children within families. Instead, gender-equal socialization must start young. This involves teaching all children, regardless of gender, the value of care work from an early age, and to understand that it is the responsibility of all.

• **Expectations on fatherhood:** Studies have shown that there is less chance of violence and abuse when fathers are engaged and connected to their children from a young age. For young and adolescent boys, having fathers as caring role models increases the likelihood of them embodying positive care roles in adulthood (Barker, et al., 2011, cited in MenCare, 2017). Parenting interventions aimed at fathers have been shown to be effective. Although outreach is currently very limited, parenting intervention is an important tool for inculcating shifts in thinking and awareness.

• **Health sector:** The health sector is a key platform for addressing gender inequalities perpetuated in parenting by the state. Men must be included as central and equal stakeholders in maternal and child health, as well as in sexual and reproductive health care. Such shifts in sectoral policy can have far-reaching impacts on overturning toxic masculinities that impair the health and well-being of men, and increase the risk of violence towards women and children.

• **Law and labour policy:** Apart from an expressed State commitment to gender equality, there is a need to create and enforce appropriate laws and regulations to engage men as equal partners to women within the family. Much of this needs to be realized within labour policy that promotes equality and economic justice for all types of families. It entails equal and fair wages, equal guaranteed paid job leave, improved working conditions, job training and decent work.
4. Recommendations

Family and community

- An important pathway for fathers as role models is through gender-transformative education such as Promundo’s Programme P or the Fatherhood Support Programme in Turkey by the Mother Child Education Foundation. These programmes encourage fathers to recognize and challenge traditional attitudes, learn about gender-equitable parenting and build skills involved in unpaid care work.

Schools and non-formal learning

- An education system that encourages household splitting and the isolation of men must be recognized as problematic and fundamental changes put in place. Additionally, children and adolescents can be socialized out of the gendered division of work at formal schools; technical, vocational and educational training centres; and lifelong learning centres. Pedagogic formats and curricula must be designed to encourage boys to aspire to work in caregiving professions, such as health, education, administration and literacy professions, in addition to existing efforts to increase the number of women in science, technology, engineering and math professions.

Healthcare and social services

- Health and social care systems must focus on men as indispensable and not optional allies in sexual and reproductive health, and in the parenting of children. Simple and clear health-care protocols to involve men in prenatal and postnatal care can be pivotal in shifting parenting practices. Flexible childcare arrangements must be made for single- and double-parent families, whereby communities engage with and expect men and women to be equal carers.

Social security and justice systems

- Social security schemes, such as carer benefits and labour regulations around parental leave, must adopt a gender-equal lens. Labour policies must be updated to make paternal leave a norm rather than a privilege, provide holistic support for mothers who are breastfeeding and even include provisions for paid leave to be equally shared between new parents.

Digital and non-digital communications

- In the context of Mongolia, parent support programmes and health and social care systems can rely on digital media to increase outreach among scattered populations.

This policy brief is based on UNICEF Mongolia’s 2019 Situational Analysis on Integrated Development for Adolescents, in collaboration with Development Pathways.

Other references
