

United Nations  
Division for the Advancement of Women  
Expert Group Meeting on “Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men,  
including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS”  
United Nations Office at Geneva  
6-9 October, 2008

Engaging Men and Boys in Caregiving: Reflections from Research, Practice  
and Policy Advocacy in Latin America

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\* *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

## **Engaging Men and Boys in Caregiving: Reflections from Research, Practice and Policy Advocacy in Latin America<sup>1</sup>**

*“We all [referring to the other men in the room] know how to care for children, change diapers and all that. I used to take care of my brothers and sisters when my mother was out, and my nieces and nephews....”*

*Young father, slum area, Rio de Janeiro, interviewed September 2008*

*“If we give more time off for men for paternity leave, they’ll just go fishing ...” Norwegian woman researcher, 1995*

*“If we give men more time off for paternity leave in Brazil, they would take a second job. They’ll take their paid leave and work a second job to make extra money.” Male participant at seminar in Rio de Janeiro, 2007*

*“If we give men more time off for paternity leave, they’ll just make more work for us women.” A woman participant in the same seminar*

*“If we have men working in day care centers, don’t we have the risk of more sexual abuse? I mean if they give baths to young children ....” Female public health worker, city of Rio de Janeiro, 2006*

### **Introduction**

These comments – overheard in discussions and seminars in the past few years – give a sense of the challenges and the multiple social expectations related to men and caregiving, in Brazil and elsewhere. They highlight the extent to which promoting equal responsibilities between men and women in caregiving is at the heart of one of the most challenging and lingering aspects of gender inequality: the historical social division of labor. These quotes also illustrate how our understandings of men – and their willingness to or resistance to participating in caregiving – are frequently rooted in myths and misunderstandings.

Whether in seminars or in the daily conversations of women and health or child care service providers, and often in research, men are frequently portrayed incompletely or as deficient or irresponsible in family life and caregiving. It is possible, of course, to make a list of men’s commonly perceived “deficiencies” in relation to their families, ranging from not providing child support, to limited involvement in domestic chores and the care of children and others.

But this research and these discourses of deficient and non-caring men tell only one part of the story, and too frequently seek to blame or focus on individual men without adequately questioning the social and contextual constructions of gender relations that are behind the inequalities. In recent years, researchers have begun to include men's own perspectives of their roles in families and as caregivers and in the process uncovered important nuances. Much of this research is affirming that men participate in caregiving, in their own ways, more than is commonly thought, and has offered insights on the challenges to promoting greater equality in caregiving (NCOFF, 2002; Brown & Chevannes, 1998).

headed, these either being two-parent households in which the woman is the primary provider



later involvement with their children. A national policy at the level of the Ministry of Health in Brazil gives women the right to be accompanied by a person of their choice during childbirth. Studies on the use of this right, however, found that overcrowded public hospitals, and uncooperative (or uninformed) health providers often ignore this policy and that probably fewer than 10 percent of women in public maternity wards are accompanied by the father of the child.

### ***Men and Domestic Chores in General***

**As in the case of childcare, various studies in the region have confirmed that men's participation in domestic chores in general is far less than women's, although men's participation seems to have increased slightly in the last few years in some settings.** In Nicaragua, one study found that women devote 85 percent of the total time required for domestic chores, while men provide the remaining 15 percent (Alatorre, 2002). A sample survey in Chile with 400 men and women in low- and middle-income settings found that women dedicated about twice as much time to domestic tasks (including childcare and food preparation) per day as men. Looking at specific tasks, women on average dedicated five times more time per day to food preparation than men, eight times more time to housecleaning and five times more to childcare (SERNAM, 1998). As we would suspect, lower-income women dedicated more time overall to these tasks than middle-income women. **On the other hand, studies from the Caribbean and from Brazil suggest that some lower-income men share in domestic chores more than middle-income men, if not by choice then by necessity.**

**In some cases, rather than decreasing the domestic burden, men's presence can increase the amount of domestic work that women carry out.** In a study in Chile, the presence of a man in the household increased by eight hours per week the average time that women needed to devote to domestic chores (Alméras, 1997). National household data in Brazil (IBGE, 2007) finds that 91 percent of women carry out domestic chores (21.8 hours a week on average) compared to 51 percent of men (who do an average of 9.1 hours per week). Adding domestic work with work outside of the home, women work on average 11.5 hours per day while men work on average 10.6 hours. For women with children under age 14, the presence of a man in the household increased her average weekly hours of domestic work by two hours.

**Various qualitative studies suggest that even when men carry out domestic chores, they gain little or no identity or social recognition for it.** Some men, as one study in Chile pointed out, try to carry out domestic work in clandestine ways so they do not "ruin their reputation" (Olavarría, 2000). Men may see their domestic work as a kind of gift to women, or as something to do on special occasions (if a spouse is ill or tired), but seldom as a question of justice or equality. Some men, research has found, may take on significant portions of domestic labor, including childcare, when they are out of work, and may even report this to be positive. However, as soon as they return to work, they may cease this activity (Olavarría, 2000). In a study in Central America, 94.4 percent of men said that men should "help" their partner with domestic chores (without specifying which chores). But when the same men were asked about washing dishes and changing diapers, 65.6 percent agreed that this was the woman's duty (Hegg, et al, 2005).

**In the Caribbean, research suggests that some men may contribute in more ways than has commonly been assessed in domestic tasks, particularly when older children are too**



## **Public Policies to Promote Men's Caregiving<sup>2</sup>**



In terms of promoting men's involvement in HIV/AIDS-related caregiving or in other domestic chores, there has been little if any policy development in the LAC region. One of the few exceptions are some state-level campaigns promoted by and funded by the federal-

messages on negotiating flexible time to be with their families and sensitizing managerial staff to allow workers to have this time off. The campaign used the slogan: “At work and at home, what kind of a man are you? One who negotiates time off to be with his children.”

**Review current policies and how they influence men’s participation as fathers.** The issue of men’s role as fathers has seldom been included in policy initiatives in the region, beyond the issue of child support. The literature consulted here confirms the need for greater information on existing policies and how they already effect men’s participation as fathers. In **Brazil, Instituto Papai**, Promundo and partners are carrying out an advocacy campaign and seeking to influence public policy. A bill, with the support these NGOs, is currently pending in Brazilian Congress that would extend paternity leave from its current five days to 15 days. As part of the campaign, a public service announcement has been developed with the participation of several well-known Brazilian actors who are fathers. The campaign is called “Da licença, sou pai” (which would roughly translates, as: “Give me leave, I’m a father”). Brazil’s largest TV networks have refused to air the public service announcement because they do not want to be held accountable for having to pay the 15 days leave for their employees.

**Review national public health policies, including maternal and child health (particularly the involvement of fathers in birth) to consider the involvement of men.** Limited evidence would suggest that greater positive involvement by men in child health, prenatal care and childbirth is mutually beneficial to children, women and men themselves. A recent review of evaluated interventions with men in the area of health promotion concluded

barriers still exist to gay adoption and fatherhood. It is imperative that same-sex couples have the same individual and familial rights as heterosexual couples.

**Making health and other social services more friendly to men.** If men are often lacking in their caregiving, men themselves are often not cared for and seldom care for their own bodies and health. Numerous studies confirm that health and social services are often seen as female spaces or as “foreign to men.” If program staff and policymakers seek to engage men in providing care, it is also imperative to offer care for men.

## **Conclusions**

The social division of labor is probably the most complex and difficult aspect of gender inequalities. The association of production with men and reproduction with women is so deeply ingrained in the organization and structure of workplaces and family life that changing it via policies and programs is not an easy task. Nonetheless, the evidence confirms that men’s and women’s involvement and division of caregiving is constantly in flux, and that men can – in specific conditions and settings – be encouraged to become more involved in domestic chores and caregiving. These conditions include policies that promote paternity leave, flexible work policies, economic necessity and in some cases program interventions.

Above all this is an area where we can appeal to the positive in men. Most of the world’s adult men will become or are already fathers; nearly all men describe positive relationships and happiness in their interactions with some children in their lives. Appealing to men’s self-interest and the well-being derived from their connections to children is a tremendous potential engine for

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