

International Day of Families
15 May 2008
“Fathers and Families: Responsibilities and Challenges”

Background Note

In resolution 47/237 of 20 September 1993, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed that 15 May of every year shall be observed as the International Day of Families. The theme for this year’s 2008 observance is “Fathers and Families: Responsibilities and Challenges”, which emphasizes the role of the father in the family and the important responsibilities and special challenges that accompany it.

Families all over the world have been undergoing significant changes. Among these changes are shifts from the extended family to a nuclear family; increased participation of women, including mothers, in the labour force; smaller family sizes; and an increased instance of divorce and remarriage after divorce. Other, concurrent, changes to families have included increases in non-marital births, female-headed households and non-residential fatherhood.

Responsibilities

During this time of change, the roles of fathers have also been changing. In many societies, the traditional responsibilities and role of the father were that of moral teacher, disciplinarian, male role model and breadwinner. Fathers exhibited a strong presence in family life, though not necessarily through direct or heavy involvement in childrearing.

In many families and cultures, the roles and responsibilities of fathers with respect to their children has changed over time. In the extended family system, the responsibility for raising children often falls on many family members. Parenting is shared, children are cared for by several family members, and collective fatherhood is practiced. However, with the continuing shift from extended families to more nuclear families, parents are taking on a more direct role in childrearing, and the influence of fathers on their children takes on added significance.

The internationally recognized importance of gender equality and an increased number of women, including mothers, participating in the labour force have also brought about changes in the expected responsibilities of men and fathers. In many cultures, there is now an increased emphasis on the father as co-parent, fully involved and actively participating in both the emotional and practical day-to-day aspects of childrearing.

Traditionally, research on family well-being tended to focus mainly on the links between mothers and children. However, during the past two decades, there has been an increased interest in the role of the father. Much research has now been directed toward exploring fatherhood, particularly with respect to fathers’ involvement in the family and its effects on child development.

Recently, in July 2007, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), observed 2007 World Population Day under the theme “Men at Work”. Highlighted under this theme were four sub-themes emphasizing some of the major family responsibilities of fathers worldwide: “Support pregnant wife; Care for baby; Educate daughters; and Share parenting.”

Challenges

While the expectations of direct fatherhood involvement in parenting have changed over time, the challenges to fathers, as well as to society and social policy, remain as strong as ever. For many men, assuming the responsibilities of fatherhood is difficult, with negative consequences for the family and society.

One of the largest challenges is the absence of fathers from the family. Fathers may be absent physically, emotionally or both. They may also be absent economically, not providing financial support, such as child-support payments, despite having the means to do so. All of these forms of absence are more likely in families where fathers no longer reside.

With growing rates of divorce, particularly in developed countries, men are more likely than ever before to live separately from their families. More and more children live in one-parent households, usually headed by women. The effects of children growing up without a father present in the household are a subject of growing concern to researchers and policy-makers. Researchers continue to explore possible links between fatherhood deprivation and social outcomes, such as school attainment and crime.

Rising labour migration, particularly from developing countries, often leads to migrant fathers separated from their families, challenging fathers to remain connected as best they can. Other migrant fathers find the concept of fatherhood from their country of origin to be quite different from that in the receiving country – and may see their traditional fatherhood role rejected by their children as they grow up in the new society.

The HIV/AIDS crisis shows the crucial importance of the sexual responsibility of fathers and all men, and also challenges men in the family and community to act as father figures to orphaned children.

An additional, and very serious challenge to everyone, is when fathers are the source of domestic violence or sexual abuse within the family, leaving their spouses and children with profound physical and emotional scars. Social policy has a vital role to play in these situations through the education of family members, educators and healthcare workers to the signs of abuse; the provision of physical and legal protection to vulnerable family members; consequences to, and treatment for, the person carrying out the abuse; and access to physical and emotional healthcare to all concerned.

Building a supportive environment for fathers

Fathers have an important, constructive role to play in families. It is important to foster a positive environment for fatherhood, both within families and within society, and to construct and implement father-friendly social and family policies, assisting fathers to meet the many challenges of fatherhood.

Policies supporting fathers should aim at removing barriers to paternal involvement and at being supportive of enhancing fathers' constructive role, carried out in the context of a broader family policy. These policies can include education programmes for fathers, facilitating father-child bonding in infancy, starting at the birth hospital, and enhancing bonding throughout childhood at schools. Father-friendly work-related policies could include paternity leave, flexible work times, family leave for men, telecommuting, part-time or job-sharing work options and a general work atmosphere that is supportive of family life for both women and men. Legal policies also need to be mindful to not set up unnecessary barriers to paternal involvement with their children, especially in the case of divorce.

Fathers can be at their best as parents when they are highly motivated, have adequate parenting skills, receive social support for their fathering and are not undermined by work or other institutional settings. Involved fatherhood should be promoted early on through father-inclusive practices in health, education and family services. Fathers have a positive and healthy role to play in families, and need the support of society and social policy in this role.

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