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Contextualising Gender-Responsive Pedagogy in the Home-based Model to Increase Participation of Fathers in Childcare in Uganda, Ghana and Liberia

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Gender Equity and Inclusion has become a cornerstone for the provision of services to people who deserve it, irrespective of their condition and status in society. This paper highlights the challenges that gender implementers have to deal with and shows some opportunities that have been used to support the implementation of gender equity and inclusion activities. This study is based on Julian Steward's (1955) eco-cultural theory, which explains how cultural practices and beliefs shape people's adaptation to their physical and social environment. This qualitative study used ethnographic methodology to interact with communities and learned from them in their settings. Findings show that men and women do what they do due to different factors. While men want to actively participate in childcare activities, their mothers become their most challenging factor. Peer pressure also becomes another strong factor, while the role of older men gets stronger in public but is more relegated in private. In conclusion, marginalised communities that stay in deep rural parts of Africa, where there are limited opportunities for anyone to deliver gender equity and inclusion activities, home-based early learning initiatives have become one way of reaching such communities. For the case of women who may have been sidelined by the nature of being women and deep-rooted gender stereotypes, promoting gender equity and inclusion gives them shared control of resources and decision-making. Culturally appropriate gender responsive activities help to unpack social inequalities, providing space for women and men to gain their fundamental right to contribute more fully to their communities and economies. It is recommended that listening to both genders and the reasons for doing what they are doing in public that contradict what they do in private, is key to understanding their perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender Equity and Inclusion in childcare is becoming a cornerstone for the provision of services to people who deserve it, irrespective of their condition and status in society. Involvement of fathers in childcare is no longer an issue of debate, as shown by its recognition as critical for the promotion of better reproductive, maternal, newborn, child health and childcare outcomes (MoGLSD, 2017; UNPF, 1994). Excluding fathers from childcare is counterproductive, as it is already known that fathers are the final decision-makers in family matters, which include budgeting, allocating resources, and managing health services (Ganfure, Darega & Kitila, 2025). Also, the increasing number of women in the labour force that demands that they stay away from home to work as fathers take over childcare roles, inherently improves redistribution of care responsibilities between mothers and fathers, and reduces the risk of violence against mothers and children (Steinhaus, Nakirunda, Vlahovicova, Levto, Nakisuyi, & Mugenyi, 2019). There is also increased diversity in family structures and dynamics, which is prompting new beliefs about the parental roles, particularly for men (Wall et al., 2016). Further evidence shows that children of involved fathers have fewer risk factors for behavioural and psychological problems and have greater predictability and security due to the two-parent care model (Jorosi-Tshiamo, Mogobe, & Mokotedi, 2013).

Nevertheless, disagreement on what constitutes fathers' involvement in childcare still exists. To some scholars, fathers' involvement in childcare can be a direct or an indirect connection with their

children in formal settings through selecting childcare programs, participating in childcare-related activities, assuming responsibility for children's health and wellbeing in a program, and supporting joint program and family goals (Palm & Fagan, 2008). Other scholars, however, disagree with this approach. To them, fathers' involvement in childcare should entail being present, accessible, available, understanding, willing to learn about the pregnancy process and eager to provide emotional, physical and financial support to the mother carrying the child and the child (Alio, Lewis, Scarborough, Harris, & Fiscella, 2013). Thus, depending on what one needs to emphasise, fathers' involvement in childcare can be direct childcare or indirect through the mother (Heaney & Israel, 2008). It can also be in the form of a multi-dimensional engagement including direct interaction (play, feeding, bathing), responsibility for caregiving tasks (managing appointments, meal planning), monitoring a child's development and behaviour, and emotional support (affection, encouragement, being a safe presence) (Lamb et al., 1987). From the fore mentioned conceptualization of fathers' involvement in childcare, it is observed that childcare is supposed to be nurtured in men so that they participate in it from the early stages till the child grows. The process should go beyond mere financial provision to active participation as a caregiver, nurturer, and co-parent, ultimately aiming to foster a child's safety, well-being, and cognitive and emotional development.

However, the situation is that some men are encouraged to join childcare midday, the life of the child and thus don't feel connected. In lower-income countries, where traditional gender norms

are more common, male involvement in childcare is limited (Ladur, Van Teijlingen, & Hundley, 2021). Traditional African cultures have predominantly seen and treated childcare as belonging to the female domain, while resource provision belongs to the male domain (Jennings, Na, Cherewick, et al., 2014; Jorosi-Tshiamo, Mogobe, & Mokotedi, 2013). Even when fathers want to start being active in childcare from pregnancy, they are sometimes excluded by health professionals from involvement in antenatal and childbirth care (Forbes, Wynter, Zeleke, et al., 2021). Those who insist may have to face the consequences of stigma as they are punished for playing a supportive role and/or being affectionate with a female partner who is pregnant or has children. Within the health units, health facilities lack space to accommodate couples, and quickly point out the need for privacy for mothers from fathers in a hospital setting where other mothers are being examined or performing kangaroo mother care (Ongolly & Bukachi, 2019). As a result, in Uganda specifically, only about 6% of men consistently accompany their partners for antenatal care visits (Kaye, Kakaire, Nakimuli, Osinde, Mbalinda, & Kakande, 2014), reflecting less fathers are willing to bear the conditions they face in trying to provide childcare in health facilities.

Involvement of both mothers and fathers in childcare is crucial, as each parent has both a specific leading role and complementary roles in childcare. The childcare divide on fathers' participation from either a traditional or modern point of view of provision versus immersion needs to be reassessed, and what works should be nurtured. For example, we can start seeing fathers who contribute by doing housework as being involved in childcare (Lewis & O'Brien, 1987). This is because fathers' response to childcare cannot be seen from either a mothers' or fathers' perspective alone, as each sees the same role differently. For example, compared to mothers, fathers tend to engage in more stimulating play with their children, encourage rough and tumble play, exploratory behaviour, and risk-taking, thus fostering greater independence and confidence,

help children learn to regulate their feelings, temper tantrums, and aggression and are less likely to develop anxiety or depression (Miteva, 2025). There is also a need to focus on different pedagogical ways that help to nurture childcare tendencies in fathers in this changing context, for them to grow into it at their own pace. This can be further strengthened by having more studies on childcare interventions that target fathers, which are scarce at present. Research at present shows that over 93% of all rigorously-evaluated parenting interventions worldwide targeting children aged 0–3 have exclusively focused on mothers, without any attention to fathers (Jeong et al., 2021).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to show how gender responsive pedagogy can be used to cultivate gender equity in education to promote greater participation of fathers in childcare in home-based early learning centres. This paper highlights the challenges that gender implementers have to deal with and shows some opportunities that have been used to support the implementation of gender equity and inclusion activities, which are encouraging more men to participate in childcare activities.

Theory

This study is based on Julian Steward's (1955) eco-cultural theory, in which he explains how cultural practices and beliefs shape people's adaptation to their physical and social environment. He argues that cultural change consists of complex, continuing processes, rather than isolable acts or events of unitary character (Steward, 1955). Thus, socialising men into their gender roles following changing roles in the community must be a continuous process and not sporadic activities. The gender responsive pedagogies being explored in this study may be the continuous process that will bring the expected change.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic methodology was used to conduct this study based on interaction with communities in their settings and learning from them. The study was conducted in Uganda, Ghana and Liberia. Established community-based early learning centres were the sites for data collection. A total of 60 participants were engaged in the study from 15 communities, 5 from Uganda, 5 from Ghana and 5 from Liberia. Convenient sampling was employed based on the availability of the participants. Care was taken to balance them by gender of 2 males and 2 females from each of the communities. The inclusion criteria was any parent who enrolled a child in the centre. All those who never had biological children in the centres were excluded. Interviews were the main method used for data collection, as gender issues seemed too sensitive to be discussed as a group. Content analysis was done for the data collected, which was later enriched with African literature.

Uganda SIHELI Community

Communities are found in two districts, one in central Uganda and the other in eastern Uganda. Two communities are in the central district, while three communities are in the eastern district. All five communities are in deep rural, marginalised areas. Parents are in charge of the home-based early learning centres and work as facilitators of learning for their children. The centres have management committees that run the centres.

Ghana SIHELI Community

The five communities selected to implement the SIHELI model are clustered rural communities, located in Ghana's northern region, particularly the Nanton district. These communities are largely occupied by the Dagomba tribe, with the presence of other ethnic groups such as the Kokombas and the Fulbe/Fulani. With an estimated population of 2,100 (with an average of 420 residents), their major occupation is farming (e.g., shea butter, maize, millet) and animal rearing (e.g., goats, sheep, cattle, guinea fowl).

Patriarchy norms are predominant in these communities—men who mainly occupy traditional and community leadership roles make decisions that affect the socioeconomic lives of the household, including children's education. This limits women's ability to make decisions concerning children's education and participation in development programmes.

Liberia SIHELI Community

In Liberia, Nimba University was selected to work with educational stakeholders and implement the SIHELI Research Project over the next two years. Nimba is one of the 15 Counties of Liberia, located in northern Liberia. Two Districts in Nimba County were selected for the project in line with the research protocol. These include Sanniquellie Mah and Bain Garr Districts. Subsequently, five communities were selected from the two districts, hosting the SIHELI Research Centres. These centres include: Zolowee, Sehyikimpa, Zuluyee, Dingamo and Nengbein.

FINDINGS

Barriers to Fathers' Involvement in Childcare

Different initiatives have been implemented in different African communities over time to increase fathers' involvement in childcare, with limited success. Some of the initiatives may not have considered some of the barriers that impede fathers' involvement, making the interventions a waste. Through interaction with literature and conversation with some fathers in the communities in the study area, the following barriers were identified. They include:

Gender stereotype: Men who work in childcare are perceived as incompetent or treated with suspicion (Sullivan et al., 2020), specifically in terms of sexual and physical abuse (Tufan, 2018) and at risk of being suspected of pedophilia (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017). At home, fathers participating in childcare activities risk being ridiculed by the community, and their wives

would be criticised as irresponsible mothers, unable to take care of their children (Rakotomanana, Walters, Komakech, Hildebrand, Gates, Thomas, Fawbush & Stoecker, 2021). The negative attitude towards the wives of involved fathers may reinforce maternal gatekeeping that is deeply rooted in maternal identity and has been documented in middle- and high-income countries (Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, Kamp, Dush, 2015). The community criticism of their maternal capabilities ultimately limits the husbands' involvement (Rakotomanana, Walters, Komakech, Hildebrand, Gates, Thomas, Fawbush & Stoecker, 2021). The effect of all these gender stereotype treatment of men, as explained by role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) make men be evaluated as less favourable for childcare roles due to their gender (Halper et al., 2019).

Conceptualising gender equity: Communities conceptualise gender equity differently from the legal or official positions. For example, officially in Ghana, gender equity means fairness of treatment for women and men according to their respective needs (Ghana National Development Planning Commission, 2025). Likewise, in Uganda, gender equity refers to fairness in the provision and distribution of resources and services to all categories of the population, considering sex, age, physical ability and geographical location (Uganda Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2022). However, in communities, gender equity is seen as a shared responsibility by men, while women see it as being recognised, as explained by the following community members:

...Gender equity is when a woman can support a man's ideas, but she can also do something on her own, which can support the man. (FGD 1- Female).

Another female participant saw gender equity as a situation in which:

... a woman does the same work that a man can also do is called gender equity (FGD 3- Female).

Men in the community, however, see gender equity in terms of shared responsibility as explained below:

.....gender equity is doing work together, that is, a man and a woman, without leaving only one person to bear the burden (FGD 5- Male)

The above excerpts show that communities conceptualise gender equity as gender equality. For example, in Ghana, gender equality, as different from equity, is seen as the state of equal access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making; and the state of valuing different behaviour, aspirations and needs equally regardless of gender (Ghana National Development Planning Commission, 2025). Similarly, in Uganda, gender equality is viewed as the provision of equal opportunities for women and men, as well as girls and boys in all spheres of life (Uganda Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2022).

Differences in the conceptualisation of what entails gender equity between community members and the official state position may mean that even the choice of pedagogical practices being used by state agencies to cultivate gender equity and responsiveness in terms of childcare roles are being misunderstood by beneficiaries who are expected to use them to cultivate it in boys who will be the future fathers.

Gender inequality perpetuation: Gender inequality has been perpetuated in some of the communities for a long period of time. As such, it is woven into their social fabric as a normal practice, with only outsiders being able to see it as an injustice to women. Specific roles have been assigned to women and men as a standard practice, where individuals cannot question their unfairness, if any. In these communities, women

have learnt to accept all domestic chores and childcare as their primary role. Even when they go out and do the same activities with men out of the home, like farming or trade, as soon as they arrive at home, they continue to perform those roles, while the men rest. Sometimes, besides the home chores, they also have to take out the goats, cows or feed the chickens as the man goes to meet friends in the local pubs. Thus, from the onset, girls are socialised to take on those roles without question as a normal way of life and their destined role as a successful woman in that community. Attempts by other people to point out this as an injustice is normally met with resistance from both the elderly women who provide advice to the younger women and the men who you will be questioning.

Misinterpretation of gender equity initiatives:

In some communities, when you introduce gender equity and inclusion topics and activities, the first reaction to some of them is shock and suspicion. They rush to misrepresent gender and inclusion activities as strategies to promote one sexual orientation over others. For example, they start saying that those inclusion activities are meant to promote homosexuality or immorality in their community. The situation is made even worse when the local leadership are very traditional or religious or both. In this case, you, who is promoting gender and inclusion activities becomes the bad agent of disunity in the community and must be dealt with. In some extreme cases, you can be arrested, or the programme is abandoned completely.

Women's education level: The education level of most women is very low compared to that of men. This comes from the fact that some families prefer an informal and apprenticeship model of education for women over formal education. So, it is common to find many women who are well educated and knowledgeable as per their local cultural context, but do not have any formal education. Such women can be leaders in local issues but are very reluctant to participate in some gender and inclusion activities that is seen as requiring formal knowledge or going against their

cultural practices. So when you get job opportunities or want women to fill such places, they will not be available or willing to take them. They end up giving up such opportunities to men, further perpetuating inequality.

Legal Barriers to Fathers' Involvement in Childcare

The Employment (Sexual Harassment) Regulations of 2012 was set to guarantee equal opportunities and impartial treatment for all employees by having a secure and respectful work atmosphere that forbids any type of sexual harassment. The regulation also provides procedures for reporting and resolving sexual harassment incidents (Sekitooleko, 2024). However, this law seems to show an equity bias against men as it portrays them as likely aggressors and women as potential victims. Thus, men who work with women in childcare settings may have to endure harassment from women, knowing that the law will be against them.

There is still cases of recurrent incidents in Uganda where husbands regard their wives as possessions and treat them with diminished value within the family (Sekitooleko, 2024). Also, because husbands pay bride price, women are regarded as part of the man's acquired property and cannot inherit land as "property cannot own property" (Landesa, 2020). In this case, a man assumes the right to allocate more childcare responsibility to a woman and limit his own participation in childcare.

Male involvement in childcare is also being curtailed by the parental leave provisions. While mothers in section 56 of the Uganda Employment Act of 2006 will get a 60-day leave after childbirth, men get only 4 days paternity leave (MoGLSD, 2006). In other countries like Norway, mothers get one year of maternity leave while men get 4 months (15 weeks at 100% pay or 19 weeks at 80% pay) (Kitterød & Halrynjo, 2019). This gives more legal opportunity for men to participate in childcare than in many Ugandan communities. Thus, if the study is to address the

issue of increased participation of men in childcare, we should be looking at the option of giving equal time for both paternity and maternity leave.

There are also laws and regulations that limit access of men to childcare facilities. Some claim safety concerns as they believe men are a danger to young children, while others see men as encroaching on the privacy of mothers who are breastfeeding their babies. These regulations do more to keep men from active participation in childcare.

Gender Responsive Pedagogy Enhancing Fathers' Involvement in Childcare

Working with communities and listening to their opinions, the researchers identified a number of distinct gender responsive pedagogical strategies that are both overtly and covertly being used to instil male engagement in childcare. Some of them include:

Mothers working as trainers in home-based centres: In this approach, mothers train boys in different childcare activities in play situations. This helps the boys to take those activities as normal and valued since they are being taught by their mothers. As they grow, they keep getting approval from their mothers when they implement different childcare activities.

Role model fathers: Use of fathers as role models who implement different childcare activities and roles at home in the presence of the boy child. This helps the boys see that even their fathers, who are their role models, participate in childcare.

Childcare volunteers: Making boys volunteer in childcare activities in home-based centres for their siblings or other younger children in the centre. This has been previously a reserve for the girl child, while boys were encouraged to do something else. Engaging in childcare activities will help instil childcare skills in boys that can be used in later life as fathers.

Gender blind approach: Addressing gender and inclusion concerns in home-based centres without referring to them as gender issues. This blind approach to gender and inclusion helps to draw away the attention of children to it as a concern needing special attention. Once such attention is given to it, different children are isolated as needing special attention, leading to discrimination.

Science of brain development: Introduction of the course of the science of brain development in the centres, with special emphasis on what children miss when fathers are absent in their lives, is crucial in attitude change. When videos showing how children's brain cells are wired based on the contribution of the presence of fathers in their lives through activities they engage in, many fathers got intrigued. In their reflections, they started noticing gaps in their children that they felt resulted from their own childcare shortcomings. Many fathers, since then, have become more vigilant in supporting different childcare activities with their children.

Location of Home-based centre: Locating home-based early learning centres in homes or near homes of children with special needs helped include such children in early learning, with no option of dropping out. Since the learning is in a home, fathers who are owners of such homes find themselves also involved in childcare. When other children come to the home, the father in the home may have to get them play materials, occupy them or find other caregivers to come and help. In this process, they get used to being involved to some degree.

Men's clubs: The home-based early learning centres have also initiated men's clubs that focus largely on how to mobilise men to engage in childcare activities. The clubs also have competition with the women being judges who vote on which man has been the best father in the community. The winner is given an agreed prize and becomes an envy of the community. This gesture makes other men in the coming year also do more for their families in the hope of winning

the prize. In this competitive environment, more men end up taking up different childcare roles, thereby giving mothers who had been previously overburdened some form of childcare relief.

Multi-strategic model: Take note that not all the above pedagogies are being used in the model program centres to increase fathers' involvement in childcare. A centre may use three or four approaches depending on how active the centre management committee is in organising parents. Implementation of such activities also depends on how far the limiting factors discussed earlier here have been addressed in such communities. Striking factors to note include the role of mothers of the fathers in motivating their sons to be the fathers others want them to be, depending on the strength of the socio-cultural role conflict in the area. For example, while men may want to actively participate in childcare activities, their mothers become their most challenging factor. Peer pressure also become another strong factor, while the role of older men gets stronger in public but more relegated in private.

CONCLUSION

In marginalised communities that stay in deep rural parts of Africa, where there are limited opportunities for anyone to deliver gender equity and inclusion activities, home-based early learning initiatives have become one way of reaching such communities. While men may not be seen as active in childcare spaces, most caregivers who are women leave their own children at home, sometimes in the care of their husbands. This makes these men become potential primary care providers who are not easily recognised in practice. For the case of women who may have been sidelined by the nature of being women and deep-rooted gender stereotypes, promoting gender equity and inclusion gives them shared control of resources and decision-making. Culturally appropriate gender responsive activities help to unpack social inequalities, providing space for women and men to gain their fundamental right to contribute more fully to their communities and economies. This equity gesture

is also now seen as useful for achieving sustainable development goals and addressing global inequalities that support cultural identities.

Recommendation

Listening to both genders and their reasons for doing what they are doing in public that contradict what they do in private is key to understanding their perspective. Trying to force fathers to engage in different childcare activities without understanding their limitations may result in outright rejection.

Interventions that try to promote fathers' involvement in childcare need to acknowledge the fact that in African communities, fathers and mothers have unique roles in childcare that complement each other. Trying to make fathers and mothers do the same things in childcare may go against each person's inherent disposition to play their cultural role in childcare. The implication here is that fathers need to be supported to play their roles in childcare in line with what they are disposed to do, as opposed to making them do everything regardless of their ability.

The legal definition of childcare focuses on men as providers. Thus, the need for men to keep working and only given four days of paternity leave in order to go and provide for the mother and return to continue working. The implication for this is that fathers will continue to use this provision in the law to be away from their childcare roles. There is a need to update the broader childcare definition that recognises more roles of fathers in childcare and provide for them with extended time to engage in their childcare roles.

Taking advantage of gender responsive cultural practices that are practised in communities can be a good way of advancing the broader gender equity discourse. For example, some communities in Ghana have women as leaders or traditional chiefs who are fully respected by men. Such women are able to instruct their subjects, who are

men, to engage more in childcare activities, and they will obey without question. This practice, when done for some time, can institutionalise childcare by men as equitable partners with women.

Some fathers in the communities were already seen as role model parents who engaged more in childcare activities. Such parents, especially those belonging to the male clubs, need to be further recognised and celebrated to encourage more fathers to use them as their role models. We can keep adopting the Ghana approach in which Male Action Groups or MAGs initiated by the government were deployed to train men at grassroots levels to teach their peers about family planning, reproductive and maternal health services (Mwije, 2018).

Limitations

This study was conducted in rural and marginalised communities that have beliefs and cultural practices that may be different from those in urban and socially modern thinking. The rural communities may sound conservative, while the urban areas may seem progressive. Thus, the opinions here need to be understood from a conservative Africentric perspective that may not apply to those whose beliefs are rooted in Eurocentric epistemologies.

Early learning being addressed in this study is based on an African community-based form of preparation, with illiterate parents from the Eurocentric perspective being the teachers. Comparing them with modern early learning centres, usually referred to as nursery schools, may be problematic due to differences in their conceptualisation of pedagogy, gender and childcare.

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