

Getting Men to Care:

Why Men's Caregiving Matters for the World

Johannes Rutgers Lecture, 4 September 2013

Gary Barker, PhD
International Director
Promundo
www.promundo.org.br/en

Photo by: John Spaul





Getting Men to Care: *Why Men's Caregiving Matters for the World*

Johannes Rutgers Lecture, 4 September 2013

Gary Barker, PhD
International Director
Promundo
www.promundo.org.br/en

At a recent UN meeting on the next round of world development goals and how gender equality fits into that, I suggested that we needed a global goal for men doing 50% of the world's unpaid care work. It was interesting to see the reaction in the room. Some of the men looked at me as if I had just betrayed my sex, and as if they wanted to cause me bodily harm. And some of the women looked at me as if I suggested something utterly impossible, like making elephants fly or passing gun control in the US.

Here I was sitting in a room with some of the world's key researchers and key UN officials on gender equality, and we had trouble affirming the importance of who does the care work - that is who cares for children, who his/her partner, for other family members and who provides the unpaid domestic work - and seeing it as a measurable and attainable issue for global gender equality.

There is something else interesting that happens when I talk about this subject in different places around the world. In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo where we work on ending sexual violence against women, men often tell me that gender equality and men doing care work is something for the West. "It has nothing to do with us," they will say. And if I talk about it in Europe, often I'll hear: "This has nothing to do with us. We've achieved gender equality. That is something for Africa, or Asia, or Latin America."

This is my argument: Men and boys doing gender justice and achieving richer and fuller (and healthier, less violent) lives - and women and girls achieving their full potential in political, social and work spheres - requires nothing less than a radical redistribution of care work. Far from a quaint idea, or a "feel-good" moment on a greeting card around Father's Day, the politics and the daily practice of men's caregiving must be part of the front line in the still incomplete gender equality revolution and we have much to do.

And this is the deeply guarded secret: it will be good for men. This change will be good for us as men.

The Gender Equality Revolution

Let's look first at where we are in terms of this thing we might call the Global Gender Equality Revolution. I'll start with the global picture and then we'll move to Europe and the Netherlands.

There have been dramatic changes in the world in the past 30 years. In terms of education we have effectively achieved equality at the primary level. With a few exceptions, at the primary level, girls are studying in equal proportions to boys.

We have seen major declines in maternal mortality. Some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America have achieved in 20 years the same declines in fertility and maternal mortality that it took Europe and North America 100 to 150 years to achieve. Family planning use is increasing and fertility is decreasing almost worldwide. These changes mean that more of the world's children are wanted children and that even in places where fertility has historically been high, there is a gradual but real shift to the quality of children's lives rather than the quantity of children.

Women are now 40% of the global paid workforce and half of the world's food producers. Women's income has increased relative to men although it still lags behind men in unacceptable levels; globally women earn 22% less than men. At the same time, some groups of women in middle and upper income countries are now earning more on average than men.

Equally important is what is happening in the social imagination: there is a generation of boys and girls in many countries who have gone to school together, who see each other as equals and who have increasingly seen their mothers and other women carry out activities - in particular, working outside the home and contributing more to household income, and in positions of leadership - that used to be considered the purview of men.

Our multi-country household surveys of men - the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) - found that younger men, men with some years of secondary education, and urban-based men are more likely to "buy into" and believe in gender equality and to live it or practice it in some aspects of their daily lives. In other words, young, urban-based men with some secondary education hold more equitable views than older men, those in rural areas and those with less schooling. Given that the world is becoming more urban, and that young people in much of the world are staying in school longer, men are being pushed and dragged, sometimes kicking and screaming, toward accepting gender equality.

On the issue of men's violence against women, we have far less evidence of progress.

Global rates of men's reports of lifetime use of physical violence against female partners range from about 20% to nearly 50%. While we lack comparable data over time to measure men's use of violence against women, the data we have suggests that such rates remain persistently high. Most countries have passed laws or policies aimed at reducing this violence and seeking to hold men responsible for such violence, but changes in women's daily, lived experiences of violence from their intimate male partners are far too slow in coming.

In terms of caregiving in the Global South, it is still women and girls who carry out the majority of unpaid domestic and care work (this includes care of children, the elderly and ill family members), two to 10 times more than men. This includes caregiving for family members living with HIV, which is a major burden in countries where adult HIV prevalence rates are 10-20%, as they are in parts of southern Africa.

And what about men and sexual and reproductive health? First off, we scarcely know what percentage of the world's contraceptive methods are for men because we rarely even measure men's contraceptive use and men's fertility. If we look at the global use of contraceptive methods - IUDs, oral contraceptives, surgical sterilization and condom use for birth control - we find that 75% of these are female methods. Men's use of condoms and vasectomy accounts for only 25% of global birth control. That percentage has remained virtually unchanged for the past 10 years.

Researchers have been working since the 1980s on male oral contraceptives, that is birth control for men. Testing has gone on for years in China with reasonable success and yet there is still no product on the market nor any commercial interests or public health effort in making them a reality. The global field of reproductive health has yet to see and engage men as full and equal partners when it comes to sexual and reproductive health. We still don't really believe men will care for contraceptive use or about children.

Our IMAGES study found that in the 10 countries where we have carried out household surveys - in diverse settings in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe - between 40% and 90% of women who had ever had an abortion said they told their male partner about it. Men do participate to a large extent in such decisions, including decisions to use family planning. And yet, why do we so seldom see men as part of the reproductive and sexual rights movement? We hear far too often from right-wing men who want to control the bodies of women, and not enough about and from men who already want to be engaged, who can be engaged, as equal partners to women, in making sexual and reproductive rights a reality around the world, both as activists and voters as well as making the daily decision to fully share contraceptive use.

What about Europe and the Netherlands?

A quick snapshot of gender issues across Europe confirms that women are now more likely to be in university, and that boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school. Immigrant and low income boys are more likely to face educational deficits. There has been an increase in women's employment, and a decrease in men's employment, particularly in traditional forms of employment. These changes have been sped up by the global economic downturn and Europe's economic woes.

But even with these changes in employment, a recent EU study confirmed that there has been very little change at the top of the income ladder - whether in government, business or academia. Furthermore, 50-70% of European men and women interviewed in 23 countries continue to believe that women with young children should work part-time while men with children should work full-time. Data from the Netherlands shows that 66% of women work part-time, while 75% of men work full-time. Expensive day care here and in many countries pushes women out of the labour market while men continue to work and their salaries, on average, climb as they advance in their careers relative to women.

National surveys show that Dutch men do about 30% of the unpaid care work, virtually unchanged between 2005-2010. This is lower than the Scandinavians but higher than much of the rest of Europe. We also know that Dutch policies are fairly limited in terms of paid leave for fathers. Two days of pregnancy leave does not lay the ground work for a caring relationship with a new-born child.

For the most part, judges, courts and social service professionals, as well as culture, all continue to favour custody for women in cases of divorce. It continues to be a complicated process for unmarried fathers to become legal guardians of their children. While much has changed, in Netherlands and the world, we still don't view men as equal caregivers.

Why Men's Caregiving Matters

So, why does all this matter? With so many pressing issues, why does it matter if men care? For one, 80% of the world's men will be fathers at some point in their lives. Even those men who don't have biological or adoptive children have parents who will require care, partners who need care, family members who become ill and need care. Care work is what we, as these fragile carbon-based life forms, need to live. For as much



as we do not value it, care is what all of us alive on the planet today needed to survive our first years of life and continue to need.

We can fill up volumes on what happens when men care. In study after study from Burundi to Belgium, men's caregiving matters for women, it matters for children, it matters for relationships, it matters for societies and it matters for men themselves.

It's obvious to women why it matters. One of the major reasons is the pay gap: There is a Europe-wide gender pay-gap of 16% and worldwide gap of more than 22%. In the Netherlands it is 20%. And this gap widens even more in the case of divorce. In the Netherlands, men's income increases 7% after divorce, while women's declines by 23%.

It matters to me in personal terms. I am father to a Brazilian-American daughter. In both of my daughter's home countries the income gap between men and women is wider than it is in Europe. How can I look her in the eye without questioning whether it is fair that she will study just as long as the boy sitting next to her and not earn the same? That she may not have the same chance to find the job she wants, to advance in that job, to find a cause that she wants to develop into a profession - because the expectation is that women leave work to take on the caregiving?

In study after study, including our IMAGES study, we see that when care work is equally divided, women's income and household income goes up. Women are happier with their partners, and happy sexually with their partners. I think most men can see their own benefits in that.

Men's caregiving also matters for societies. The American researcher Valerie Hudson (in her recent book *Sex and World Peace*) presents data from more than 100 countries showing that countries with greater gender equality (which includes men's participation in caregiving) are less likely to have experienced conflict. Clearly conflict and war are much more complex and multi-causal than gender equality and men's caregiving, but gender equality is good for societies as a whole.

To offer another example: One of the most respected studies on gang violence in the US following 1,000 low income young men in Boston over 45 years found two factors that predicted whether they stayed out of gangs: (1) having stable employment, and (2) being in a stable relationship with children and being connected to those children.

Let me give you an example of this up close: in 1999 when I was interviewing young men in gangs in Chicago, I met a young man named Tony, son of immigrants from Mexico, who had been in prison for gang activity. He had tattoos on his face that marked the gang he was in. He was having them removed with laser surgery because he was harassed by police, by his former gang members and rival gangs. The tattoos marked him as a gang member. He was bitter at the gang members who didn't end up in prison like he did and at a world that treated him like a walking problem, and a potential criminal. He couldn't get a job because of that. So I asked him: "How will you stay out of the gang and not go back to that life?" He pointed to his young daughter who was sleeping in his lap during our interview.

He said: "Her man, she's the reason." That's one of the things that caregiving can do for men.

Or we can look at Norway - with its 20-year investment in gender equality policies - which found that family violence decreased by a third when gender equality was achieved. In other words, men's increased participation in caregiving led to less violence against children and against women and in society in general.

Men's caregiving matters for children in other ways too. Children in households with more equitable participation of men show better health and development. Girls raised in households with more equitable fathers or other adult male caregivers show lower rates of experiencing unwanted sex. Men who report stronger connections to their children tend to contribute more of their income to their households, so their children are less likely to grow up poor. In the Global South, women and children are more likely to get life-saving health care when men are involved and support prenatal care. It is precisely this issue that Rutgers WPF, Promundo and other partners are promoting in the MenCare+ initiative.

The Deeply Held Secret: What's in it for men?

So we've seen the benefits for women and children and societies. And here's the deeply held secret I promised: getting men involved in caregiving is good for men.

First, let's look at what's happening with men's health globally. A recent review of the global disease burden in the Lancet affirms that of the 10 leading causes of death and chronic health problems, men lead in eight of them. Across Europe men die on average five years earlier than women. We are four times more likely to commit suicide and two times more likely to drink or smoke too much and we are far less likely in Europe and the rest of the world to seek health services and psycho-social support.

Or look at homicide and conflict. There are approximately 24 active conflicts in the world at the moment in which men are predominantly the combatants, causing harm to other men and to women and children. There are on average 55,000 direct deaths in conflict and 396,000 deaths by intentional homicide every year. This represents 450,000 preventable deaths every year, more than 80% of which are men.

Promundo's work in post-conflict settings finds that men cope less well with conflict and humanitarian disasters. Men in those settings are more likely to use violence against others, to drink excessively or use drugs as a response and not to talk about their sense of loss and trauma; women are far more likely to find support in their caregiving activities in networks of solidarity with other women.

So what does that have to do with men's caregiving? Numerous studies find that men who report close connections to their children live longer, have fewer mental health problems, are less likely to abuse drugs, are more productive at work and report being happier than fathers who do not report this connection to their children. Clearly causality is multiple in all of these associations but there are consistent benefits found in studies from around the world when men participate more and in non-violent ways in the lives of their children.

Why are we stuck in the moment of anti-feminism?

It's amazing to me with all the data we have on the benefits of gender equality and of equal caregiving that we still hear the anti-feminist narrative. We hear in many places around the world that feminism has come too far, or that we're making men feminine and

that we need to restore a traditional version of what it means to be men. Or how many women do you hear say: "I'm not a feminist." How did feminism become the F-word?

There are those who use the word feminism to mean anti-men and who view gender equality and feminism as being women against men. And there are those who use it to mean that we should not talk about men's needs, realities and vulnerabilities. But feminism is not exclusively for women or about women. Feminism is the simple, radical notion that women and girls are human beings. That affirmation and definition means that men are inherently involved in feminism and it means that men's lives change when we embrace full equality of women.

Within that simple affirmation that women and girls are human beings is the radical notion that men and boys are human beings. By that I mean that biology does not rule who and what we are as men. That we are not walking patriarchs nor walking penises cut off from our emotions and from others, born only to rule and control, produce and achieve, provide and make money and stay removed from the care for others.

Feminism offers men the chance to embrace the radical idea that we are not born to be warriors or killers or to cause harm to others -- that we are not inherently violent. That our birth right, and that of women, is to the full range of human potential and human relations, including having close, connected relationships with others. And for those men who are worried about their fragile sense of manhood or about turning into women, there is nothing un-masculine, or emasculating or feminizing about caring for others. It is quite simply - human.

Caregiving is far more than changing nappies or cleaning the house. It is empathy, responsibility, solidarity and emotional connection in daily practice. To be disconnected from caregiving is to plant the seeds for emotionally stoic boys and men who look down on caregiving. It feeds and sustains views of manhood as synonymous with being providers and protectors, and as superior to all things feminine. And it too often feeds into the view that the production of goods and income is always and inherently more important than the creation of solidarity, reciprocity and meaningful social connection with others. It creates men and boys who show limited care for their own bodies and the bodies and the bodily needs of others. The separation of men and boys from caregiving also inhibits the healing and rebuilding in countries and communities affected by conflict and violence.

As we listen to the stories of men who do care, who are involved in care, we see the power of caregiving to transform men. As part of a study called the "Men Who Care" study we interviewed 83 men in five countries in life history interviews. The men were selected because of their atypical caregiving activities. They were the primary caregivers of children or of an elderly or ill partner or parent, or they were involved in caregiving professions that were atypical for men in their context (as day-care workers, primary school teachers, nurses or gender equality activists). While each story was unique (and each context unique) there were striking similarities. For example, the "men who care" frequently reported resistance from their families and female partners (for those in heterosexual relationships) to their roles as caregivers, either in the home or as professions.

They also consistently reported that they took on their atypical caregiving practices because of life circumstances. Nearly all of the men said that they took on this caregiving role because of external forces, not because of some greater-than-average belief in gender equality. These life circumstances included the death or illness of a partner, the higher income or employment situation of a partner, unemployment on their part or the mere happenstance of finding a certain job. For most of the men interviewed, gender-equitable attitudes did not lead them to do more care work. Rather, the practice of doing care work, thrust upon them by life circumstances, led them to have more gender-equitable attitudes.

Many of these "men who care" reported that doing care work gave them new insights on women's and girls' lived experiences, or to those oppressed by homophobia. They also said it opened up new avenues and perceptions for connecting to others (male friends, other family members, female or male intimate partners) in relationships of greater emotional honesty and empathy, including in their sexual relationships They

said it made their lives richer, while it fulfilled an important need in their family or household life.

At the same time, the men we interviewed consistently reported feeling isolated and depressed in their caregiving practices. Many were worried that their children and other family members would not see them as “real men” if they were not also working outside the home in some paid work or profession. Their narratives in many ways resemble those of women talking about their care work. The discourses of these men affirmed that their social networks and society in general *do not value care work whether carried out by women or men*.

Some Directions for a Care Work Revolution

We know, of course, what societies value in men (and increasingly in some settings, in women): performance; the accumulation of capital; conquest; and the individual (man or woman) who invents or creates, and who is autonomous and self-sufficient. We value the heroic inventor of a computer application, the winner of a grants competition or the successful businessperson. We too seldom inquire how care work fits into this view of man as provider, and when we do, the caregiving is considered secondary. Our perpetuation of masculinity based primarily on production is associated with an economic model that is materialistic and short-sighted and shows limited concern for sustaining communities, families, individuals or the environment.

With this gender division of caregiving so deeply engrained in the institutions that shape our lives, how do we achieve change? We know that media or community campaigns, however important those can be, are not enough. Social norms must shift. But the heart of the revolution is around the meanings and markers of manhood - particularly as those are shaped in the policies, workplaces, institutional and community structures. Our work on the MenCare+ initiative seeks to change these policies in schools, in the health sector and by promoting family leave and state-supported child care.

Our work with men and boys must evolve beyond our laudable but short-term programme goals of increasing condom use, or reducing violence, or increasing hours devoted to care work. It must involve changing how we organize the workplace, changes in policies and laws and changes in how we raise our sons and daughters.

Some of the things we need to achieve this change are:

- equal, non-transferable and paid parental leave;
- state- or workplace-supported child care and family care;
- national policies to increase men’s participation in reproductive and sexual health, so that among others, 50% of contraceptive use happens in men’s bodies;
- making caregiving part of the school curriculum for boys and girls;
- equality of supports, governmental benefits and societal respect for all caregiving arrangements, including same-sex parents;
- incentives to encourage workplaces to offer flexible work time and adequate family leave;
- presumed joint custody in cases of divorce;
- income support policies that encourage men’s participation in family life and as caregivers (breaking assumptions that men do not care or will not contribute income to households).

Engaging men in caregiving cannot be reduced to measuring men’s time use, or counting how many nappies they change or to making men feel good around Father’s Day for things they should already be doing.



It is nothing less than a fundamental reworking of our work-life balance and our beliefs in the purpose of our lives and relationships. As we look to the next round of development goals (post-2015), the achievement of those is conditional on questioning our societal model that is too often based on production and profits at any cost. It is conditional on achieving equity including and especially equity in caregiving. I think the question before us at the moment is: Will we as a species socialize and raise boys and girls equally, boys and girls who will care for the planet, for their own health, including their sexual and reproductive health, and for others? Will we evolve toward a more caring society or a “care-less” society? I think that question merits a place in the next development goals.