



Husbands in Wives' Shoes: Changing Social Roles in Child Care among Cameroon's Urban Residents

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Abstract

Childcare has for a long time been the near exclusive responsibility of women and female house mates in Cameroon and other parts of Africa but contemporary urban challenges have forced many of these women and house mates to engage in activities that limit their ability to fully devote time to child care especially in urban contexts. There is also a growing change in social attitudes among males that has led to a blurring of traditional gender roles. As a result, some aspects of children's care have devolved to husbands or fathers. This paper challenges existing orthodoxies regarding gender roles by explaining new developments in child care by fathers among urban residents in Cameroon. What factors explain the increasing role that men are playing in the caring of their children and what implications do they have for household development and society? This paper addresses these issues using historical, anthropological, psychological and sociological methods and techniques of data collection and analyses.

Key Words: Fathers and childcare; changing gender roles; Urban life in Cameroon

Résumé

Depuis fort longtemps, l'éducation des enfants a été presque l'apanage des femmes et des femmes colocataires au Cameroun et dans d'autres régions d'Afrique. Mais les contraintes d'aujourd'hui ont poussé plusieurs de ces femmes et femmes colocataires à s'engager dans des activités qui réduisent le temps qu'elles peuvent consacrer à l'éducation des enfants surtout en milieu urbain. Le comportement social des hommes change aussi de plus en plus au point de rendre floue la frontière entre les rôles traditionnels dévolus aux uns et aux autres. Ainsi, certains aspects de l'éducation des enfants reviennent aux maris ou pères. Cette étude remet en cause les orthodoxies actuelles concernant le rôle réservé aux différents sexes, en analysant une nouvelle situation où les pères participent à l'éducation des enfants en milieu urbain au Cameroun. Quels facteurs expliquent le rôle croissant joué par les pères dans l'éducation de leurs

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enfants et quelles en sont les implications pour le développement des ménages et de la société ? Cette étude analyse ces questions, en utilisant des méthodes historiques, anthropologiques, psychologiques et sociologiques ainsi que des techniques de collecte et d'analyses des données.

Introductory Background

This paper was motivated by an interesting phenomenon: the fact that two colleagues in the same office leave the office early for home because they have to assist their wives with childcare. One of the colleague's wives had delivered twins while the other's wife was attending school. Every day both colleagues come to the office to talk about how they were helping in washing their children, preparing them for school, or taking them to the hospital. Before 2:00 pm they were out of the office to collect their kids from school, take them home and prepare something for them to eat. The colleague whose wife had twins had additional work to do with the children because the wife works far away from where they live, in Bamenda. The experiences of these two colleagues are indicative of the changing childcare roles that are happening to many families in urban Cameroon. In Douala, Yaounde, Bamenda and Buea where this research was conducted, there are many cases of husbands performing childcare activities hitherto unknown before the crippling economic crisis of the mid-1980s. This crisis together with an ever evolving urban milieu has fundamentally changed childcare today.

Research findings on childcare have generally painted a picture of women as the principal care-givers who also spend more time with children while men generally play an insignificant role and spend little time with these children, exceptions notwithstanding (Richter and Morrell 2004). This is probably because when children are young, men have generally low levels of engagement in their care (Lewis and Lamb 2004). It could also be due to the fact that when a man commits himself to childcare as the case in Mali, he is considered weak in front of his wife and people would tease him. Fathers in most cultures across the world have been seen to frequently play significant roles in socialising young children (Coltrane 1988:1085; Jaeckel 2006:3) rather than in their home care. The status quo in childcare roles between fathers and mothers is strengthened by the argument that mother's roles have been monopolised and transferred to their daughters in a never ending cycle of transfer (Jackson 1989:215).

This general picture of a domineering influence of women in childcare is not without exceptions. Even in some areas where this was the rule some decades ago, the situation is changing. Among the Aka Pygmies of the northern border of Congo, for example, fathers do more infant childcare than their mothers. They take children with them to spots where palm wine

is consumed and usually hold them close to their bodies for about two hours during the day. They continue at night by comforting and nursing the baby. In addition, the Aka fathers clean the bodies of their babies and wipe their bottoms. When their wives are away in the farms or other economic activities, they will offer their nipples for their babies to suck at least temporarily. They also carry babies on their hips as women prepare the evening meal and still take care of them even when their mothers are idle and chatting. This care-giving role of Aka fathers over their children challenges the orthodox view that fathers across different cultures carry out very little childcare activities.

Similarly, the changing perception about the role of fathers or husbands as care-givers has been informed by several factors which are eco-cultural, geographical, historical, and socio-cultural. These are also informed by a changing culture of work, worsening overall health conditions like HIV/AIDS, urbanisation and its challenges, migration, low levels of education, widespread poverty, legal changes, high unemployment and the general economic crisis (Nsamenang 2000:1; Calves 2000; Eggebean 2002:486; Bankole et al., 2004:15). The result is that in some societies fathers are engaged in about 800 percent more care of their infants and young children than their own fathers ever did (O'Brien 2004). Besides, as a wife's proportion of work outside the home increases, the proportion of a man's childcare rises (Pleck 1997). Research by Casper and O'Connell (1998) has revealed that men are more likely to provide care when the family income is low and when there is no overlap of maternal and paternal work schedules. In fact, recent experiences in different parts of Africa show that some fathers look after their children to enable their wives to work. Other fathers read bedtime stories to their children (Ramphela 2002). Some fathers' concern for their children is a result of a powerful motivator for personal change in terms of personal health, a way of reducing domestic violence and cutting criminality and risky behaviour.

In different parts of Africa, as it is elsewhere in the world, parental roles in childcare are understood within the general context of marriage as well as the social and collective enterprise which include parents, kin, older siblings, neighbours and friends (Nsamenang 2000:9). Collective fatherhood is a characteristic of traditional African society where fathers are expected to support mothers and children but some biological fathers do not act like fathers and fail to support their children.¹ Some of the fathers who neglect their functions of childcare within the society have turned to drinking and dating other women as a solution (Ramphela 2002) yet they have ended up more frustrated.

In Cameroon, while the communitarian spirit guides family responsibility including childcare, healthcare, and security, the changing sociological and urban environment has impacted on this in diverse ways. Women are generally the engine of the society in that, be it in the rural areas or cities, they get up early to prepare breakfast for the family, prepare children for the school, get to the farm or other places of work and after work stop at the market to obtain groceries for the evening home meal. In fact, there is a general tendency for women to be responsible for the overall well-being of Cameroonians including preparing meals and taking care of healthcare, childcare and household management. The way the Cameroonian family structure functions does not clearly give fathers specific childcare roles (Nsamenang 2000: 1).

In spite of this picture, there are a growing number of husbands across social classes who are involved in childcare activities. In the year 2002, the United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) organised a study on children and women's health, status and well-being. The findings of this study showed that fathers in Cameroon spend less on themselves but more on their families. It was also observed that the concern of men about the situation of their children was a motivator for personal change in personal health, a way to reduce domestic violence and cut down criminality and risky behaviour. These developments can also be attributed to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family that continues to preach equal gender roles although its limited budget has affected its activities in this direction.² For several years now, the UN Convention protects the rights of children. In Article 7 of this convention, every child has the right to know and be cared for by his/her parents. To strengthen this resolve, in March 2004 the UN Commission on the Status of Women made a strong call for an increased male involvement for the attainment of gender equality and to support children's growth and development. These changes notwithstanding, some Cameroonian men like others are responsible and others are irresponsible (Njopin 1997:11). Responsibility depends on the environment, class, experience and the existing economic climate.

The importance of husbands' contribution to childcare in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular cannot be over-emphasised. Their involvement in childcare can be a buffer when mothering fails or when mothers are not available as a result of long working hours (Grotberg 2004:2). Several factors may explain the failure of mothering, which include ill-health and abandonment of the child after delivery. The contributions of mothers and fathers are equally central to the needs of the child (Khunou 2006) and should be encouraged for the proper upbringing of the child. With an increasing number of mothers engaged in paid jobs due to education and the challenges on extended family systems the world over, some fathers have been forced to

care for their children, a domain initially preserved for women and their daughters. The importance of fathers to their children welfare is crucial because experience shows that when this care is absent, children face increased risks in almost every dimension of their lives. Fathers care for their children, make them to manage stress better and also develop better peer relations. Fathers revive the home, give strength, diligence, warmth and respect to their family. They are also economic providers, playmates for the psychological maturity of their children. They tell stories, help these children to sleep and love them for life (Uttal 1988; Allen and Daly 2007:1-4). It is therefore important to study how their role in child upbringing can positively influence their children as they grow up.

Experience has also shown that fathers' care for their children has led to better performance in exams, higher education qualification, greater progress at school, better attitudes towards school, better behaviour at school, greater self-recognition and greater ability to take initiative and direct their own activities. This is especially so in that the father-child relationship is a two way process with the potential for creating effects that are as significant for Africa's fathers as they are for their children. There is also a broad consensus that fathers are important contributors to both normal and abnormal children outcomes. It has been argued that a wide range of social problems which include child poverty, urban decay, societal violence, teenage pregnancy and poor school performance are caused by poor childcare activities on the part of fathers (Lamm et al., 2007:375). Their involvement can go a long way to mitigate these negative influences on these children.

The importance of engaging fathers in childcare related activities is because they have often been neglected and excluded from programmes and services for young children by organisations concerned about child welfare. There is a compelling need to include them especially during this era of HIV/AIDS pandemic and the crisis of care for children in many homes. The involvement of men in childcare is also pertinent nowadays because wives and mothers as gatekeepers need to invite men in and encourage them to take responsibility for children's care. As long as society and the women see childcare as exclusive to them, it will be difficult for changes to take place in this area of parental control of their children (Beardshaw 2004; Allen and Daly 2007:13-14).

Children who are deprived of paternal contact as they grow may not have a secure male model and may receive less parental support and supervision. It is certain that children who have little or no contact with their fathers are likely not to fare well compared to those who maintain an on-going relationship (Furstenberg Jr. et al., 1987:696). If fathers therefore have an important role to play in the life of their children, it is important that

adequate attention be given to this and fathers encouraged by mothers, society and relevant government services to do so. It will give the children a psychological boost and make them exploit talents to the best of their ability. In a general sense, two parents provide better guidance and teaching than single parent families. Both have the social power to teach children socially acceptable behaviours through parent-child communication as a core of child socialisation. In fact, childcare and parental monitoring constitute a significant pathway whereby environmental and personal factors impact on child development, making childcare a key factor protecting children from risk to adversity (Bray and Brandt 2005:2).

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The main objective of this study is to interrogate the view that women are responsible for childcare and men have very little or nothing to do with childcare within the Cameroonian urban environment. The study also examines other related issues to this central argument such as the nature of childcare in traditional Cameroonian society, and the role of women in childcare as seen by society. Further, the study discusses the changing environment of childcare especially in the urban milieu in the country and the implications of these on the security and stability of the household and the larger Cameroonian society in the twenty-first century.

This study relied on several methods in the collection, analysis, and presentation of data. We selected four main cities in Cameroon, namely Yaounde, Douala, Bamenda and Buea and focussed our observation on the phenomenon of childcare in these chosen towns and cities. The first two are the main cities of Cameroon located within the French speaking part of the country and the last two are located in the English speaking region of the country. Douala is the economic capital of Cameroon and Yaounde the administrative headquarters. In addition, Douala is the main commercial centre and also the gateway into Cameroon from abroad. Bamenda is one of the largest towns in the English-speaking region and Buea was the capital of German Kamerun, British Southern Cameroons, West Cameroon state and now the regional capital of the South West. All these cities and towns are cosmopolitan in nature drawing people from different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Interviews were also conducted with inhabitants of these cities and towns but due to the sensitive nature of the issues discussed, the people demanded anonymity and confidential treatment of the information collected from them. This led us not to present their names in this paper.

A total of two hundred and forty people were interviewed in the four cities of Bamenda, Douala, Yaounde and Buea over a period of three months lasting from October to December 2011. In each of the cities, we interviewed

twenty youth, twenty women and twenty men. We carefully selected our informants on the basis of their level of education, age, gender, occupation and residential areas. For each of the three category of people interviewed, we ensured that five people were selected based on the criteria set from the beginning making a total of twenty for men, women and men respectively. In each of the towns we employed the services of five persons who administered structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

We asked the same questions to all our informants and the questions asked included the following: Why was childcare the near exclusive responsibility of women and female house-mates in Cameroon in the past prior to the 1980s? What is the level of men's involvement in childcare and related activities today? What factors explain men's concern about childcare in urban areas in Cameroon? What categories of men are involved in childcare as husbands or fathers? What can be done to make sure if possible that many more men become involved in childcare? In what ways has the involvement of men in childcare contributed towards the stability of the households and the Cameroonian society? From these questions we received varied answers depending on sex, age, level of education and residential area.

Apart from conducting interviews we also observed childcare activities in homes that we visited formally and informally, in schools, hospitals, restaurants, churches and other public places like the Savannah Botanic Garden in Bafut and the Botanic Gardens and the Zoo in Limbe where children are taken to for relaxation by their parents. Those we observed gave us the permission to do so and during the period of observation some questions were also posed for clarification. We settled on these places on the basis that they were frequented by families for one service or the other. In schools family members went to pick up children, in the hospitals sick children were attended to by their parents and in churches families attend together. The Botanic Garden and Zoo are places for excursion by rich families on a more regular basis. These observations lasted for four weeks during which we tried to establish the role husbands and their wives played in the care of their children outside the home setting. From observation and participant observation, we were able to evaluate the level to which men participated in child caring activities. There was generally a trend towards changing roles never imaginable in the past and especially after independence up to the mid-1980s when the world economic slump set in and the globalisation of capital took on a very aggressive dimension. From our observations, we also appreciated the changing parental roles which was not limited to a particular class although some people had, through interviews, given the

impression that it was mostly among the educated. We witnessed both the educated and the uneducated, higher and lower social status people take up childcare responsibilities.

The last method we employed in this study was to critically interrogate the available literature on parental role in child upbringing. Very little scholarly work exists in Cameroon on this area of study but there is a plethora of data on other parts of Africa, especially South Africa. While stereotypes continue to exist on the near non-involvement of men in childcare, some literature is critical of the lapses in studies and other programmes designed for childcare all over the continent. Still some literature point to areas and reasons why men should, more than ever before be engaged in childcare as a matter of proper upbringing of children. This paper is along these lines. While it does recognise the role of women in the upbringing of their children, it is concerned with the changing socio-economic climate in towns and cities that have contributed positively towards men's involvement in childcare in Cameroon with prospects for an increased role in the near future.

Analysis of Data Collected

Following interviews and focus group discussions in the four towns of Bamenda, Buea, Douala and Yaounde, several reasons were advanced for the noticeable change childcare roles between men and women. Some informants argued that women were made to believe that their job was essentially to take care of the house and the children while their husbands either idled away or were at work to fend for their families. Other informants contended that women were considered to be inferior in certain parts of Cameroon like in the Muslim north and their place was in the home and to attend to the needs of children. This inferior status accorded to women made the patriarchal society to see them as good only for the care or upbringing of their children and nothing else. In addition, they were assisted in this task by female relatives and house-mates for those who could pay their services.

Still another group of informants claimed that women were excluded from public affairs and as a result were not expected to do any other thing out of the home but for childcare which came to be attributed to them as their own activity. Another reason advanced was that many women in the past up to the first two decades of independence were uneducated and due to this they were not permitted to function outside the home by their husbands. Their husbands feared that these uneducated wives might embarrass them through their action in public places. There was also the general belief among women and men that it was a man's responsibility to work and bring food to the table while their wives took care of the children

together assisted by other family members. Above all some informants argued strongly that Africans had the ideology that women were responsible for childcare and that eventually became the norm that was hard to change.

Closely related to the degree or level of involvement of men in childcare, were the categories of the men. From our field interviews and observations, we concluded that all social categories of men were involved but that some of them were more involved than others. Quite a reasonable number of people among those we interviewed or discussed with argued that the literate and educated men were very concerned about the welfare of their children which made them encourage and assist them when they were sick. Some informants opined that all men, no matter the social class, who were attached to their children for one reason or the other took good care of these children to the extent that even when their mothers were around these men would still be the ones to bathe the children, give them food, take them to the hospital and school among other commitments related to these children. In this connection, one woman in Yaounde, in appreciating the role of husbands in childcare said that:

When I had my first child, my husband was the one who provided for all the needs of the baby and even took care of the baby. The only thing I did was to breast feed the child. The husband was the only one who was teaching me how to train the child. Thus the child grew up in a moral way for without my husband, I could not have been able to train him up to acceptable standard. Since then, we have had three kids and my husband's assistance has remained the same. He is conscious of the need to train children in the right way while they are still young so that when they are old they will not depart from it.

The experience of this woman with the husband who has taken up the responsibility of assisting her in childcare and proper upbringing is one out of many others in Douala, Buea and Bamenda. This is because these husbands are aware that the urban environment is unlike the rural environment and to survive or build family men must give their wives the necessary assistance in childcare.

Another group of informants were of the opinion that fathers or husbands who knew the value of children in their later life were concerned about their welfare from birth to when they were grown-ups. They pointed to people like teachers as falling in this category. Such parents did not wait to be told or invited by their wives to take care of their children. They were with their children, encouraging and correcting them. In spite of their busy schedules, they would create time to chat with these children. This is because constant communication is good for information sharing and for proper conduct. Other informants and participant observation led us to also note that some

husbands who were morally and financially capable of taking care of their children did not hesitate to do so. Through this, they have demystified the stereotype view that childcare is the exclusive responsibility of the wife or woman. There is still another category of people who are concerned about childcare and they include the unemployed who spend most of the time at home to baby-sit children while others either go to work or school. This has been made possible especially in Douala because of the difficult and unreliable economic climate where many semi-skilled or unskilled workers from the rural areas of the North West and West regions are finding it difficult to obtain permanent jobs.

In spite of the increasing involvement of some husbands in childcare, some informants and observations show that there is need for improvement so that many more husbands can take up childcare as a rewarding activity for their families. One of the recommendations was for the government of Cameroon to enact a law that will compel husbands to create enough time for their children because this will help to unite families and the children will enjoy the affection of both father and mother for their psychological and socio-cultural development. Still others recommended the use of the television, radio and the print media to educate husbands on the need to assist their wives in proper child up-bringing considering that the economic environment requires both parents to work and raise an income for the upkeep of the family and the education and health needs of the children. Besides, there were those who thought that public sensitisation and talks in churches, socio-professional and cultural groups would change stereotype views still prevailing among some husbands who seem not to be aware that the urban environment has its own challenges which are different from those of the rural area and that need to be tackled through the collective responsibility of the father and mother over their children and the household as a whole.

The increasing involvement of men in childcare activities has implications for their welfare and family development as a whole. Urban fathers have joined their wives in childcare because they expect these children to grow up as responsible children who will care for their younger ones and the parents in old age. In our discussions with one couple in Buea on the degree of husbands' involvement in childcare in the urban environment today, the husband said among other things that:

I spent time with my wife working together to educate our children, look after them at home and provide them with good medical care. We were also concerned about the way they performed in school and what they did there as well as guiding them in the activities they were involved in at home. We they grew old and I fell sick, my

grown up children mobilised resources and flew me abroad for adequate medical care. Thank God I came back healthy and now my children are happy with me and their mother for bringing them up in the right way which has made them not to be able to depart from it.

From what this man said – and which is a reflection of the views of other people we interviewed – it is clear that some husbands are increasingly conscious of the fact that when one invests in proper child up-bringing, the rewards come back to him and his younger children in their lifetime. If this man had failed to share in the burden of childcare, these children might not have been able to mobilise resources to treat him out of the country where there are better medical facilities. Today, he is strong and still given the care that children can give their father. Such a spirit of care can only help a family to be self-sustaining and share resources among different members to help one another become successful in life.

Besides, fathers' involvement in childcare related activities have contributed towards promoting communication and good conduct in their children. This view came out strongly in the four towns where we conducted our interviews and engaged in focus group discussions. One person through her personal observation outlined the benefits of fathers' childcare activities. She told us that:

I live very close to a Christian family in Bamenda and have seen a father who is more caring for the family and children than the wife. He is in constant communication with his children and the wife in a very friendly manner. The women of this neighbourhood talk positively about the man and the children are proud of their father too. Through his friendly disposition and various forms of assistance to his children, he and the wife are able to correct bad character in their children in a way that these children appreciate. I deeply admire the sense of unity and stability in this family which make the children successful. These children are being brought up in the culture of free discussion and receive assistance from their parents. This has enabled them to share in the joys and frustrations of the family together and learn to love one another.

What else does a family expect than its stability, love and concern for one another? This example of a Christian family is one among many although some husbands feel that a man who spends a lot of time with the children and wife is an idle person. Such thoughts and the influence of education are gradually giving way to a sense of reason and it may not be long when many more couples will actually share responsibilities over the up-bringing of their children in Cameroon's urban sphere.

Following observation in the Great Soppo neighbourhood in Buea, we were able to establish that husbands who are always at home after work or some other business ensure that their children come back home early. This

gives them an opportunity to spend the evening together discussing the activities of the day and sharing experiences as a family. These fathers also use their availability at home to assist their wives in the kitchen which was once the preserve of women, and others have been teaching their children or assisting them in their assignments as their wives prepare food for the evening meal. Some of the children have grown up to follow the footsteps of their fathers. They return home early and are spared the evil practices of the night which include drunkenness and sexual promiscuity. Some of these men through rigour have instilled discipline in their children. With discipline these children have grown up to be of great service to the country and society because they work with devotion. There is a common saying in Cameroon that, 'tell me your family and I will tell you your character and attitude to work'. While this may not hold true in all circumstances, experience has shown that in many cases, it is true.

Many other vices of society like child trafficking, drug abuse and corruption have not affected families that have been blessed to have both parents live together with the husband working hand in glove with the wife to give the children the attention they deserve from a very early age. Regular cases of child trafficking in Africa are the result of improper child up-bringing. Drug abuse has also largely been associated with children who were abandoned to themselves while young and came under the influence of other children. Many husbands are aware of the negative impact of abandoning children to themselves or exclusively to their mothers' influence and are increasingly coming into the sector of childcare nowadays so that they can spare their children the negative consequences of being abandoned to themselves.

Conclusion

This paper has examined an increasingly emergent phenomenon in the urban milieu in Cameroon which is husbands or fathers' involvement in childcare which was once almost the exclusive domain of women, their daughters and female house-mates. Several reasons, including geographical, socio-cultural and economic ones, have been responsible for this evolution in childcare in the family. We observed that this phenomenon cuts across different social classes and depends on different experiences of the people in the different towns that we studied. The debilitating economic situation and the strain on urban families have made it increasingly difficult to keep a large extended family in town. For this reason, many couples are beginning to manage life in the cities and towns without relying on the services of house-mates which are also scarce to come by. This is because different faith-based communities are educating families against child abuse and parents

from the rural areas are no longer very willing to send their children to towns as house-mates as was the case prior to the past twenty years. Other associated problems of keeping house-mates who eventually turn out to be the second wives of their masters have also worked against the institution of house mates.

Fathers have no option than to agree with their wives who are also workers or students or market women to share in the responsibility of childcare. The degree of involvement varies according to the degree of challenges, level of education and other socio-economic forces in the urban area. While there is still a feeling of allowing women continue their monopoly of childcare related activities by over 40 percent of the people we interviewed, there is at the same time a move away from this. Many husbands have broken with tradition and now do the things they would never have done to their children and this has paid them off through success and stability in the family and the society. They are now not only actively involved in childcare activities but have begun to educate some of their friends on the benefits of proper child upbringing through the involvement of fathers.

Notes

1. See Richter, L. & R. Morrell, eds., 2004, *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa*, Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC available at http://africanfathers.org/item.php?i_id=18
2. See, for instance, the work of the ministry here: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/general.../Cameroon.pdf

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