

FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS: AN EXPERIENCE OF INVOLVING FATHERS OF GIRLS IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF THEIR DAUGHTERS

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PROMUNDO

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This study aimed to gain insights into the dynamics of relationships between fathers and daughters, and how these relationships influence the empowerment of girls. A campaign targeting fathers was created to address the difficulties and possibilities of their relationship with their daughters.

Introduction: Why think about fathers raising their children?

Promundo, along with partner organizations, has worked to involve young men in gender equity by critically reflecting on fundamental standards and norms that not only produce rigid hierarchies between men and women, but also pose challenges to how men can express themselves among other men. Paternal care, including the establishment of closer relationships with children, entails certain normalized gender roles. As a general rule, it is the father's responsibility to provide material resources and discipline, while mothers provide affection, health, and education.

A review of literature on fatherhood in Latin America and the Caribbean, conducted by Barker and Verani (2008) for Promundo suggests that the participation of men in their children's lives remains invisible or non-existent. The resulting implications are inequities in the distribution of household chores and a lack of participation of men in the health and welfare of their children. Both of these implications influence men's own health as well. Thus, the possibility to critique and transform these norms has proven to offer benefits to both men and women.

In the 1994 and 1995 conferences in Cairo and Beijing, respectively, international platforms laid the foundation for the involvement of men in gender equity, including the increased participation of fathers in raising their children. In addition, increasing divorce rates, greater participation of women in the labor market, and attention to the role of men in sexual and reproductive health have contributed to a greater interest in the impact of men's relationships related to the welfare of their children (Barker and Verani, 2008).

Research has suggested that committed fatherhood is beneficial for men (Barker and Verani, 2008). Men who engage in meaningful ways with their children report that fatherhood is a major source of well-being and happiness. Fathers involved in loving relationships and care for their children are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as criminal activities. Additionally, becoming a father and living with children can mean a lower mortality rate for men (Weitoft, 2003 cited in Barker and Verani, 2008).

Since fatherhood is strongly related to patterns of gender, in addition to an opportunity for men to grow and participate in more equitable division of tasks in domestic and public spaces, the Fathers and Daughters study sought to gain insight into how fatherhood based on a culture of care and respect as well as influence on the empowerment of girls and through a more equitable model across the country – aligns with support and respect for the needs and desires of girls and young women. This aspect – the needs and desires of girls and young women – has been rarely mentioned in the research on fatherhood. Taking a more comprehensive approach based on gender and human rights must begin with respect for rights in early childhood.

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Even if studies that seek to draw attention to paternal care have increased, the number of programs that promote this care in the last 20 years in Latin America and the Caribbean remain small-scale and receive limited funding. Even more limited is the number of impact assessments on these programs (Barker and Velini, 2008). In Brazil, Promundo and partner organizations from the Network of Men for Gender Equity (RHEG, by its Portuguese acronym), have sought to contribute to initiatives and campaigns that aim to bring fathers together with their children.

Since 2000, RHEG, which Promundo co-founded, has led several initiatives related to improving relationships between men and women. Recently (2008), RHEG launched a campaign, 'Give me My Paternity Leave, I am a Father,' seeking to draw attention to the lack of legal mechanisms, particularly paternity leave which allows men to pursue leave when a child is born or adopted. Paternity leave is established in Brazil by the 1988 Federal Constitution as five consecutive days from the date of a child's birth. After 20 years, a wider debate about the issue began to surface. Accordingly, the RHEG partners created a national movement to foster debate on paternity leave.

Furthermore, the literature review mentioned earlier in this document and conducted by Promundo with support from Save the Children Sweden in 2008, resulted in a series of recommendations for action in terms of policies, programs, and research about including men in discussions about children's rights and reducing violence against children.

The program, Father of a Boy, Father of a Girl: Engaging Fathers in Promoting Gender Equality, with the support Save the Children during 2009, sought to engage youth and adult men in parenthood as a strategy to promote gender equality between boys and girls, through a course for fathers on fatherhood and featuring photography in a community of Rio de Janeiro. At the end of the process, the best photographs taken by the father photographers were selected for the photo exhibition launched in the community in January 2010. This year, the exhibition circulated around several areas of the city of Rio de Janeiro, as a strategy to raise awareness about male involvement in their children's upbringing.

The Fathers and Daughters study aimed to contribute to the debate about the involvement of men in promoting gender equity, through their relationships with their daughters. The campaign, a product of this research, was held in conjunction with the Father of a Boy, Father of a Girl project, in which fathers who participated in meetings to reflect on the project as well as fathers who participated in focus groups, reflected on barriers and advantages to having a closer relationship with their children. These reflections were developed into digital stories, which the fathers themselves wrote, assembled, and narrated. The digital stories were illustrated with images of the fathers in videos of up to five minutes. The stories continue to serve as a tool for discussion with other groups of men about the possibilities and advantages of alternative forms of parenting which are based on the relationship established with the child, rather than rigid standards. It is important to note that although this phase of work aimed to develop initiatives for fathers, we did not lose sight that these activities not only benefit men by promoting a culture of care and respect, but also produce the necessary support girls and young women need to develop their aspirations. Research from Fathers and Daughters on the factors that support the empowerment of girls and women can inform activities by promoting space to reflect on the role of fathers. Similarly, the research can inform strategies to promote the empowerment of girls and women youth, based on this relationship with their fathers.

About the Research Methodology

The methodology included focus groups with fathers, mothers, and daughters, as well as one-on-one in-depth interviews with parents selected from the focus groups. A total of five focus groups and four one-on-one interviews were conducted with fathers, two focus groups with mothers, and six focus groups with girls and women youth. Focus groups were separated into the following age categories: 06-10, 11-14, 15-19, and 20-24. The research was conducted with fathers in four communities in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro.

The number of communities studied was limited by the difficulty of recruiting men for the focus groups. We used some strategies such as holding the focus groups during alternative schedules (evenings and weekends) or distributing information about them in spaces where men tended to frequent, such as soccer leagues in the community. However, the lack of male involvement in meetings and matters related to caring for children may have contributed to the lack of interest in the groups with men. The absence of fathers in raising their children in the study communities, especially when parents are separated, was also a complicating factor for reaching and ensuring the participation of men. Similarly, the absence of fathers made it difficult to hold discussions with girls about the influence of fathers in girls' behaviors and attitudes. In the community where Father of a Boy, Father of a Girl activities were being held, two focus groups were conducted with mothers, two with fathers, and four with daughters aged according to each of the age categories mentioned.

The decision to extend the age range of daughters through age 24 was a response to observations about the influence of relationships with fathers and the empowerment of women. Including women through age 24 allows us to observe through a longer timeframe, how women's relationships develop into marriage and in their professional lives.

How can we understand the influence of relationships with fathers in the empowerment of girls? We understand 'empowerment' as the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities take control of their own affairs, life, destiny, and recognize their skills and expertise to create, produce, and manage. Speaking about the empowerment of young women involves recognizing their power and autonomy to make decisions throughout various territories: their bodies, their subjectivity, their sexuality, their time, work, and resources.

By expressing the goal of research to observe the influence of the relationship between fathers and daughters in the empowerment of girls, we wanted to gain insights into how this relationship contributes to promoting gender equity, which involves balance in decision-making power between men and women in ways that affect the lives of both. Despite numerous advances and achievements more broadly, women, especially younger women, are still disadvantaged compared to men with regard to access to goods and services, salaries, domestic violence and decision-making power regarding the number of partners they have and when they wish to start having sexual relationships (Promundo, 2007). Thus, beginning with the concept of empowerment, we sought to identify signs of progress on achieving equity/ equality between women and men, drawing from this research on the relationship of girls with their fathers.

The term 'empowerment,' which comes from the English language, has not been met without criticism. There are several meanings of empowerment in the dictionary such as: "1. to authorize or permit; 2. give power, make possible" (Oxford Dictionary); or "1. to give official authority or legal power; 2. to enable, allow, permit; and 3. to promote self-actualization or influence" (Merriam-Webster). In addition, however, social movements and academic studies concerned with the empowerment of people generated a breakthrough in defining the concept. They began to stress the subject as active, meaning the person who becomes empowered is able to overcome obstacles and realize achievements. Many social projects that have addressed the promotion of rights, health, and gender issues have used this concept to talk about the balance of power between dominant and oppressed groups such as people with lower incomes, youth, black or Afro-Brazilian populations, homosexuals, and women in order to promote gender equity. Thus, it is not about one person empowering another – in this case, fathers empowering their daughters. Rather, empowerment is about women believing they have access and the right to decide freely about their lives.

The work of Greene (2004) offers some indicators for observing the empowerment of women youth. According to Greene, an empowered young woman: has support for reaching her aspirations; makes autonomous decisions about her body, health, and sexuality; controls her income and personal resources; makes autonomous decisions about education and work; has recreational opportunities; accesses and uses health services; can read and write; is capable of speaking in public; is aware of gender inequities and how they affect the lives of women and men; is aware of her rights; and is aware of the influences of culture and media on a woman's sense of self.

Since the initial age of the girls in the study was 14 years, some of these indicators could not be observed. Thus, the age of the daughters was extended to 24 years. Doing so allowed us to observe the dynamics of the relationship between fathers and daughters in girls' childhood and youth, as well as the longer-term implications of these dynamics into women's young adult years.

Results: Some insights into gender equity and the relationship between fathers and daughters

Based on statements made in the focus groups and interviews, the research allows us to address various aspects of the lives of young women and the roles of fathers and mothers, ranging from issues of generational differences, play, care, and punishment in childhood, to the body and sexuality. In this document, we will point to fathers' testimonies about the relationship between education, expectations of their daughters' professional lives, sexuality, and emotional lives – aspects that appear crucial to understanding the promotion of gender equity, based on the relationship between fathers and daughters.

Fatherhood is just as much related to direct health issues such as taking children to the doctor or ensuring good hygiene, as it is with making sure children do their homework and feeding them – even though the father's role in carrying out these tasks still appears secondary as compared to the mother's role. Similarly, conversations about key aspects of the lives of girls and young women, especially with regard to sexuality, tend to remain the mother's role. Often when speaking of girls, the mother appeared as a model, but the father was often not perceived as having possible influence on the way daughters behave or build their relationships, particularly when parents did not live together. This finding emerged from the daughters, as an obstacle to understanding the influence of fathers on their daughters' behavior.

On the other hand, in speaking with fathers, considerable progress was seen with regard to fathers seeking to provide conditions for their daughters to finish their studies, find a good profession, and not be financially dependent on their husbands:

I want her to study, go to college, and get a good job. She never gave me a headache about not wanting to study. All of that counts. I'll let her be independent in having her own money. After that, she can think about being in a relationship.

She has to have her own work and not depend on any man. If she likes the person she will stay and if she doesn't, she'll be an independent person [...] because I think women do not have to be dependent upon a man. You have to go after things yourself, be independent. If one relationship works, it works, and if it does not, she'll leave it for another. I think that's how it should be.

Fathers highlighted financial conditions, sometimes expressing the importance of having a good job and even specifying entering the public sector as central to their understanding of autonomy or independence for women. Once financially independent, women have the power to leave their husbands, which fathers considered to be a legitimate choice. Fathers mentioned education, attention, care, discipline and punishment as elements that aimed to “stimulate” girls' studies rather than detracting attention from their progress in school.

There was also recognition of the disadvantages that women face in the labor market, which means that fathers encourage and expect a little more effort from the part of girls:

[...] The time will come when I'll have to show her, because for her it will be more difficult than for her brother. It's because of our society. We have wonderful women, that do their work so well and become successful, but they still aren't recognized. It's this... 'I am a woman, you're a man' ... Like if I'm a woman managing a library with a man... I have to be at least twice as good as you be able to do the job. Society is designed prioritizing the man.

In order for their daughters to give priority to their studies, it is also generally agreed by fathers that in relation to housework, boys and girls have equal rights and roles. However, with regard to decision-making in romantic relationships during early adolescence, the control girls possess appears to be more important from the perspective of fathers. The possibility of pregnancy or the distraction of love is seen as more harmful to women's studies. First, it is important for women to advance in their studies, and afterwards they can think about dating:

That's why I talk to my daughter to tell her to be studying; that's why we have to be focused upon them. If they want to be a mother or father, they need to have a certain structure. A financial structure ... So that's why I say a lot, "Love, dating, kissing, sex are great." But you have to have a structure to be able to do that...

She [my daughter] is going to turn 15 years old soon. I talked a lot with her mother, she was dating someone secretly, and she wanted to be able to bring him home. And I said, "For me there's no dating. The priority for me is studying." And [my daughter] was drifting away from studying. She's doing a course here, a preparatory course for college... You have to do that with great determination, "it has to happen, so you make sure it happens..." Because if you leave it to the side, it won't happen; you really have to stick with it.

Thus, although fathers hope for financial independence in their daughters' futures and see it as an important strategy for raising girls, fathers also see controlling girls' sexuality as a condition for such success. Dating and love relationships are perceived as risks almost certain to disrupt girls' studies. If, for mothers, pregnancy represents the most serious consequence of relationships during adolescence; for fathers, the fear is that their daughters will be hurt and their suffering will hinder concentration on their studies. This fear is based on fathers' beliefs that women are fragile and men at this age always have bad intentions:

My daughter who is going to turn 14 was asking if she could date! (laughter) - This is the worst part ... Because when we were dating someone else's daughter, we didn't even care, and now the tables have turned.

No, dating is the same thing for both [young women and men]. The only difference is our culture. The adolescent male is more dominant. Then, depending on the type of relationship, dating becomes more passionate, sensual ... So when the time comes I'm going to give a lot of advice [to my daughter] about protecting oneself emotionally. Because to seduce, an "I love you" has a certain eloquence, it has a big impact on a girl.

The control of girls' sexuality does not come without conflicts. Often fathers demonstrated hesitation to differentiate between what they permitted for boys and girls in terms of romantic relationships. These differences, interpreted as socially constructed, as well as the fear of their daughters getting hurt, make fathers seek to control dating. Note that this control appears less in the form of dialogue about the construction of equitable relationships, but instead about prohibiting dating and punishments.

Fathers perceived the biological difference, or having a different body, as a limitation to approaching and having dialogues with girls:

The mother is crucial, depending on the sex of the child. For example, with a female child, we men, not all but most, kind of freeze when we ask, "how am I going to talk about sex with my daughter?" Because it's a strange thing. I mean, I don't have periods, my breasts don't grow... so how am I supposed to talk about this phase?

Some Conclusions and Looking Ahead

The interest and effort that fathers demonstrated regarding their daughters' studies represent a major advance in promoting gender equity and supporting women's empowerment. Fathers acknowledge the challenges and inequalities that women face and want their daughters to have the possibility of overcoming these challenges, recognizing education and financial independence as the best avenues. However, instead of questioning and seeking to transform social norms that produce inequalities, it was evident from their discourses that fathers perceived a need for greater effort from the part of their daughters to achieve autonomy (understood as financial independence), within this unequal social system. The control of romantic relationships in adolescence is presented as a fundamental part of this effort.

Sexuality was found to be a major element of gender division in terms of raising boys and girls. It has been recognized as one of the main signs of empowering women, understood as women's ability to "make autonomous decisions about their bodies, health, and sexuality" (Greene, 2004). Yet fathers showed difficulty in addressing or supporting notions of sexuality and girls' decision-making about sexuality with their daughters.

These results highlight the importance of demystifying gender patterns that hinder dialogue between fathers and their daughters, especially during adolescence. The results also point to the contradiction that exists in prohibiting young women to have healthy relationships while expecting that these women maintain independence with their partners in the future. There was ignorance and reluctance from fathers regarding differences between men's and women's bodies which made it difficult to have dialogues between fathers and daughters, an issue that must be considered further. The fathers demonstrated openness and desire to reflect on issues such as these.

To date, products of the campaign that addresses these contradictions included a comic strip in a local newspaper, as part of another project targeting men in one of the communities surveyed. In addition, digital stories discuss the possibilities and advantages of closer relationships between fathers and their daughters. In order to further reflect on factors that contribute to empowering women, it will be important to analyze how girls and young women perceive their relationship with their fathers as well as opportunities girls have to deal with limits imposed on them by gender norms.

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