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ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDCARE PRACTICES: A CASE STUDY OF DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP, MALAWI.

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ABSTRACT

Father involvement is increasingly recognized as a vital component of child development, yet in refugee settings it remains limited due to complex cultural, economic, and psychosocial challenges. This study assessed the impact of father involvement in childcare practices at Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. Guided by Social Change Theory, the research explored the level of paternal participation in caregiving, examined the relationship between father engagement and child development outcomes, and identified factors influencing father involvement. A qualitative research approach was used, involving in-depth interviews with twelve parents selected through snowball sampling. Thematic analysis revealed that father involvement exists but remains generally low, with fathers participating mostly in play, emotional support and discipline, while mothers perform the majority of daily caregiving tasks. Children with involved fathers exhibited improved emotional well-being, better behaviour, and stronger confidence. However, cultural norms, unemployment, economic strain, psychological stress, and lack of parenting knowledge were major barriers to male engagement. The study concludes that enhancing father involvement can significantly strengthen child development and family well-being in refugee settings. It recommends community-based parenting programs and behaviour-change initiatives to support active male participation in childcare.

KEYWORDS: Father involvement, childcare practices, refugee camp, child development, social change, Malawi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Father involvement in childcare has increasingly become an important focus within global child development research. Traditionally, childcare in many African and refugee communities has been viewed as the responsibility of mothers, with fathers relegated to the roles of providers and decision-makers. However, modern developmental science recognizes fathers as key contributors to children's emotional, cognitive, and social well-being (Lamb, 2010).

Dzaleka Refugee Camp, located in Dowa District, Malawi, hosts thousands of asylum seekers from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, and Somalia. The camp's challenging socio-economic and cultural context significantly influences family dynamics. In such settings, fathers often face stressors such as unemployment, loss of social identity, trauma, and disrupted cultural norms — all of which affect their level of involvement in childcare.

Research across different contexts shows that children with involved fathers experience better emotional stability, higher self-confidence, improved behaviour, and enhanced cognitive development (Cabrera & Volland, 2019). However, little documented evidence exists on father involvement within Malawi's refugee camps. This article contributes to filling this gap by examining how fathers in Dzaleka participate in childcare and how their engagement affects child development outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Father Involvement in Childcare

Father involvement refers to the engagement, responsibility, and accessibility of fathers in the upbringing of their children (Lamb, 2010). In refugee contexts, father involvement varies widely depending on family structure, culture, and economic conditions. While some fathers participate in activities such as supervision, playing and emotional guidance, mothers often remain the primary caregivers (Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

2.2 Childcare Practices in Displacement Settings

Childcare encompasses physical care (feeding, bathing, hygiene), emotional support, safety, educational supervision, and socialization (UNICEF, 2020). Empirical research shows that displaced families often experience reduced stability in caregiving roles due to trauma, poverty, and disrupted social networks (Betancourt et al., 2015).

2.3 Father Involvement and Child Development Outcomes

Numerous studies indicate that children with present and emotionally invested fathers demonstrate:

- Stronger emotional security (Caldera & Lindsey, 2006)
- Higher school performance (Amato & Rivera, 1999)
- Fewer behavioural problems (Biller, 1993)
- Improved confidence and social competence (Fagan & Cabrera, 2016)

In refugee environments, paternal involvement can buffer the effects of trauma, instability, and poor living conditions (Betancourt et al., 2015).

2.4 Barriers to Father Involvement

- Research shows that several factors inhibit father participation, including:
- Traditional gender norms (Makusha & Richter, 2014)
- Limited parenting knowledge (Ditekemena et al., 2012)
- Unemployment and financial stress (Baker et al., 2018)
- Psychological distress such as PTSD and depression (Panter-Brick et al., 2014)

These barriers also apply to Dzaleka Refugee Camp, where economic hardship and cultural expectations strongly shape fatherhood roles.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Social Change Theory guided the study, emphasizing how societal structures, cultural norms, economic conditions, and individual behaviours shift over time. This theory is relevant for understanding how father involvement in childcare transforms as families adapt to new environments such as refugee camps.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory design was employed to capture detailed experiences and perceptions of father involvement. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of social and cultural dynamics shaping childcare practices.

3.2 Study Setting and Population

The study was conducted at Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Dowa District, Malawi. The target population comprised fathers and mothers with children of any age living within the camp.

3.3 Sampling and Sample Size

Snowball sampling was used to identify twelve participants who met the study criteria. This technique was suitable due to the difficulty of locating participants willing to discuss family roles in a refugee setting.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were conducted after obtaining ethical clearance and informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings from the participants' narratives.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Level of Father Involvement in Childcare

The findings revealed that:

Fathers are minimally involved in daily physical caregiving.

Bathing, cooking, feeding, cleaning, hygiene supervision, and organizing children's materials are largely performed by mothers.

Fathers primarily engage in emotional and social activities.

These include playing, storytelling, guiding behaviour, disciplining, and occasionally helping with homework.

Traditional gender norms strongly shape father involvement.

Many participants believed that tasks such as cooking and bathing children are "women's work." Fathers feared loss of respect if seen performing caregiving tasks.

These findings align with Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda (2004), who noted that patriarchal norms reduce paternal involvement in hands-on childcare tasks.

4.2 Father Involvement and Child Development Outcomes

Participants reported significant positive changes in children when fathers actively engaged in childcare:

Improved emotional stability

Higher confidence and self-esteem

Better school performance

Reduced behavioural problems

Increased openness and trust

Mothers observed that children were more disciplined and cooperative when fathers were present in their daily lives. These results reflect findings by Cabrera et al. (2014), Amato (2005), and Biller (1993), who concluded that father involvement is crucial for emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development.

4.3 Factors Influencing Father Involvement

The major factors identified were:

a) Cultural Beliefs

Deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs discourage men from performing caregiving tasks. Fathers who do so are often mocked by peers, labelled as weak or “controlled by women.”

b) Economic Pressures

Unemployment and survival challenges force men to spend long hours seeking income, reducing time available for childcare.

c) Psychological Stress

Respondents experience trauma, anxiety, and emotional distress, which leads to withdrawal and reduced engagement in caregiving.

d) Parenting Knowledge

Respondents expressed lack of knowledge about effective childcare practices, which limited their confidence in participating.

e) Co-parenting Relationships

Households with cooperative parents had higher father involvement compared to those with frequent conflict.

These findings align with research by Ditekemena et al. (2012), Baker et al. (2018), and Panter-Brick et al. (2014).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that father involvement in childcare at Dzaleka Refugee Camp is present but generally low. Fathers play important emotional and social roles, but daily caregiving remains dominated by mothers. Despite limited involvement, paternal engagement has a strong positive influence on children’s behaviour, emotional well-being, confidence, and academic performance. Cultural norms, economic hardship, psychological stress, and lack of

parenting knowledge significantly restrict paternal participation. Expanding father involvement can improve both child outcomes and family relationships.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Introduce community-based parenting education programs focused on fatherhood and child development.
2. Promote shared parenting practices through community sensitization and behaviour change communication.
3. Challenge harmful cultural norms that discourage men from participating in caregiving.
4. Expand psychosocial support services for fathers experiencing trauma or emotional distress.
5. Strengthen economic empowerment programs for refugee fathers to reduce financial stress and enable more involvement in childcare.
6. Encourage NGOs to include father-focused activities in child protection and family support programs.

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