PUSH FOR PURPOSEFUL PATERNITY

• Dispel the belief that men are not naturally sensitive to children
• Counter the macho culture that scorns men who look after children
• Address not just men but also women, families and service providers to overcome barriers to fatherhood
• Introduce laws and policies in the employment sector for participative fathering
• Mobilise opinion to make adequate paternity leave a legal right
• Encourage men to be present during pre-natal checkups
The session ‘Fatherhood and Caregiving’ held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 - Men and Boys for Gender Justice, organised in New Delhi from November 10-13, looked at research, policy approaches, activism and corporate reforms that seek to enhance caregiving among men and boys, helping them evolve into caring fathers and partners in parenthood. This can only strengthen gender equality, foster social harmony and enhance the development of children. As moderator Nikki van der Gaag, independent consultant, UK, said, “This session ranges across individual change to bringing about political and legal change and also the structural change required for better fatherhood and caregiving.”

Mothers Not Natural Caregivers

Adrienne Burgess, Joint Chief Executive and Head of Research, The Fatherhood Institute, UK, debunked some popular beliefs held all over the world – particularly the one that women are naturally more sensitive to children than men.

She said fathering varies enormously over different cultures. Pygmy communities in the Amazon, for example, have the world’s best fathers in terms of caregiving. A pygmy father carries the infant far more than the mother, a reason being that the babies are relatively big and men have greater upper body strength. There is much less sibling care in these communities because it’s the dads who do most of the child care.

She said, “Research shows there seems to be no biological difference in the sexes in their capacity to care for children. If a man is given the opportunity, he will become as sensitive to a newborn as a mother.”

Baby Can Change Dad’s Hormones

Burgess said research over the past 10 years found hormonal changes taking place in any man if he holds a baby for at least 15 minutes. Hormones prolactin and oxytocin – which help nurture the baby -- tend to be found in men just as they are in women when they are caregiving for the baby.

Women who are pregnant and breast-feeding get a lot of these hormones. But adoptive mothers also get them from handling the infant -- and so do men.

Besides, testosterone levels drop in men during the early child years, helping them become sensitive to infants. Make sure babies are given to fathers, she said. Give them a chance to be the fathers they’re capable of being.

A member of the audience said research shows when a father is involved in the life of a young girl, she reaches menstruation later and also becomes sexually active later.

ANGRY FATHERS

An audience member said there is a need to address the belief among many men that laws only protect mothers’ rights, leading to angry dads in cases of parental conflict. Burgess responded that this is the way courts behave because right from the time of birth, mothers matter the most. “We all need to campaign to make provisions for father’s rights in national laws, paternity leave policies and participation of fathers,” she said.

DEALING WITH ABSENTEE FATHERS, MACHO CULTURE

Narrating his experience in the Caribbean, Tyrone Buckmire, Regional Vice-President, Caribbean Male Action Network,
Francisco Aguayo, said a significant feature of fatherhood in this region is the phenomenon of absenteeism because many men work in distant countries. The macho culture also sees fathering numerous children with many women as a badge of honour, making it challenging to work with men for becoming sensitive caregivers.

Also, cultural art forms such as Calypso music and Reggae, in the process of commenting on social realities, often objectify women while celebrating men’s sexuality. "Reggae," said Buckmire, "has degenerated to a dance form that advocates patriarchy, sexual prowess and the use of alcohol and drugs among men."

Buckmire said his network creates effective programming to help men understand the need for continuous involvement in the lives of their children.

Emerging From The Shadows of Patriarchy

In Chile, like the rest of Latin America where fatherhood has been defined by the macho culture, important social changes are taking place. Psychologist Francisco Aguayo, CulturaSalud, Chile said though legislation hardly ensured any role for the father in caregiving, increasingly men are beginning to participate in matters traditionally left to women. Educated young men in particular are becoming participative parents as the numbers of women demanding so have been growing.

The social changes in Chile can also be seen in the increasing number of men demanding custody of children in cases of separation and divorce.

Aguayo said, "Research by my organisation reveals that in the last seven years 90% of births in the country are accompanied by male companions." He suggested that an influential role can be played by those working in the health sector as they can easily encourage fathers to take more responsibility. This was particularly important, agreed Gary Barker of Promundo and MenEngage Alliance during the session’s interactive discussion, as currently health providers do not talk to fathers. Buckmire added, "We need laws and policies in the health sector and also at the workplace, such as paternity leave."

Promoting The Business Of Fatherhood

Businesses can benefit from more effective fathers, said Michael Lannini, communications expert, Breakthrough, USA. He
develops “products and services” for migrant working parents wanting to communicate with their children who are left behind, and he helps to create a better environment at the workplace by engaging employees in a dialogue on various issues including fathering. The phenomenon of left-behind children can be seen across the world, and Lannini has developed a distance communication product aimed at purposeful parenting for migrant working parents separated from their children. "Corporate firms and employers are starting to see that engagement with the staff on 'soft issues' like these benefits the business," he said. Lannini said that as a result of promoting productive discussions among employees, he was helping set up a day care and kindergarten in a factory in China, which was likely to help retain migrant workers. This would also turn fathers into caregivers as they would be with their children much more.

This synthesis paper is also available in Urdu, Bangla, Hindi, Spanish and French.

TOP 5 FATHER-FRIENDLY NATIONS

The State of the World’s Fathers report 2015 names five countries that have done positive work in implementing well-designed paternity leave that includes non-transferable quotas and adequate financing that can lead to much greater use of leave:

Spain: The introduction of two weeks of well-paid paternity leave in 2007 resulted in a marked increase in uptake, from 15% to 58% in 2010.

Estonia: After paternity leave benefits were increased to 100% of previous earnings in 2008, financed by general taxation, uptake of leave increased from 14% of eligible fathers in 2007 to 50%.

Norway: Before the father’s quota, introduced in 1993, only 4% of fathers took leave. By 2003, 89% did so.

Iceland: In 2001, before the father’s quota, fathers averaged 39 days of paternity leave. By 2008, this rose to 103 days. Although on average fathers used only one-third of the total paternity leave available to them, one in five fathers took a portion of the time that could be used by either parent.

Germany: In 2006, the year before its reform of leave policies, only 3% of fathers took leave. With designated quotas for fathers and incentives to use them, this number rose to 28% for fathers of children born in the third quarter of 2011.