



IMAGENU

Policy Brief

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Single Mothers and Frail Fatherhood

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Executive Summary

According to Ugandan law, both parents shall have parental responsibility for their biological children. In patrilineal societies, children are said to 'belong' to their fathers' families and sons claim land through their fathers. Yet in northern and eastern Uganda today, many children stay with their mothers and maternal relatives, while their paternal links are frail. Single mothers try to mobilize recognition and support from the fathers of their children, but in rural areas, they do not bring legal cases for child maintenance. For mothers who have had children from multiple relationships, juggling for support among the partners is an additional challenge. When fathers say they are too poor to help, mothers do not press. They shoulder the responsibility in the hope that fathers and paternal families will play a stronger role in future. However, mothers hesitate to send children to stay with their fathers, if there is no woman in his home who is capable and willing to care for the children. Lack of resources is an underlying problem, exacerbated in many areas by a high fertility rate.

The problem of 'frail fatherhood' should be brought to attention through schools, faith organizations and public media. Fathers and paternal families must be encouraged to show concern for their children even if they cannot provide much material support. Many pregnancies are unplanned and better access to, and adoption of, contraception would alleviate the heavy burden of child support.

Introduction

With the decline of formal marriage in Uganda, many women do not live continuously with male partners. Some have never stayed with the fathers of their children; others have separated. This means that there are many single mothers trying to manage the support of their children. For them, a major concern is the degree to which the fathers care for, and care about, their offspring. These issues are particularly prominent in eastern Uganda, where the fertility rate is high and poverty is widespread. Peculiar to northern Uganda are

The Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies (IPSS), Gulu University is implementing the Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda (IMAGENU) project, a four-year research collaboration bringing together researchers from Gulu University (Uganda), Aarhus University and University of Copenhagen in Denmark. This project is supported by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs through Danida Fellowship Centre in Denmark and aims to build research capacity in universities between the global North and South.



single mothers with children who were born out of conflict-related sexual violence during the insurgency that ravaged the region for 20 years.

In-depth studies were carried out in eastern and northern Uganda with mothers not living with the fathers of their children. It focused on the relations they and the children have to those men and their families. In what sense do the children belong to their fathers and what obligations do the fathers have?

Background

The law of Uganda requires that both biological parents maintain a child (Children Act Cap 59 as amended in 2016). Even if a man begets a child with a woman he never lives with, he is supposed to contribute to support of the child. Even more important than the statutory law is the ideology of patriliney. Children take the clans of their fathers; this is particularly important in rural areas where people are familiar with the local set of clans and refer to them in many situations. For boys, filiation to a father is especially important because sons should get a portion of land from their fathers.

The relation of a child to its father depends on age. If the parents do not live together, small children usually stay with their mothers. Ideally, they should go their father's home when they are 'old enough', which could be around seven or eight. Yet even before the AIDS epidemic, many children, also older children, did not live with their fathers. In eastern Uganda, it was common for children to stay for years at a time with different relatives, especially if their parents had separated and their fathers were in difficult circumstances. That pattern has been exacerbated by increasing instability of partnerships, high rates of unplanned pregnancy, and the economic conditions that make men feel they cannot provide for their children. In northern Uganda, children born out of marriage were raised by their maternal relatives. Unfortunately, the safety net that maternal families offered single mothers and their children has in some instances been eroded.

Findings

The study revealed a pattern of frail fatherhood in which paternal links were often more potential than practiced. Single mothers retained hopes that the fathers of their children, or the paternal family, would assume more responsibility. But many expressed disappointment.

- Many pregnancies are unplanned.
- Mothers were concerned that the children should be acknowledged by their fathers and/or members of his family.
- Many said that the fathers gave little or no support for the children. They reported that fathers did not provide money or spend time with the children.
- Often the fathers had few resources and it seemed useless to press them. Mothers did not want to worsen relations to the fathers and their families; they kept open the possibility that fathers might help in future.



- Legal cases for child maintenance were not filed in rural eastern Uganda. In northern Uganda, some cases are filed but later abandoned because bringing a case to court or to the Police Family Protection Unit or to FIDA cost money, which the mother usually did not have or would rather use to meet the basic needs of the children.
- Many mothers thought the children should go to live with their father when they were older, but they hesitated if they judged that there was no capable and willing woman in the father's home, who could care well for the child.
- Mothers were particularly concerned about the relation of sons to the fathers, since sons should get access to land through their father and his family.
- In the absence of paternal support for the children, women found other alternatives. Single motherhood is not a failure. Some had small businesses that allowed them to live alone with children in rented rooms; some stayed with other women and their children in an arrangement of mutual support; some stayed with their parents who helped support the children; some were allowed to farm on the land of their fathers and brothers, while others have purchased land for themselves.
- The continued norm of family based on marriage excludes other functioning family forms (single parent headed families) that require legal protection.
- Institutional documents (national ID, birth certificates, antenatal and school registration) require details about fathers, which may not be necessary.
- Lack of resources is an underlying problem, both for the men who fail to support their children and for the single mothers trying to do so.

- With access to land being a widely cited concern, the delayed implementation of transitional justice measures (especially reparations) is prejudicial to the welfare of the offspring of female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.
- Despite the challenges faced by single mothers, some are desirous of getting married in the hope that the new partners will support them in raising their children.
- Marriage has significantly lost meaning with some married mothers considering themselves 'single' because of the absence of fathers and lack of their support.

Implications and Recommendations

- Contraception for both men and women should be more accessible; health workers including Village Health Teams should encourage use of modern methods of family planning. The responsibility of using contraception should not be left only to women.
- Educational messages about fatherhood should be disseminated through radio, religious institutions and schools. Fathers should be encouraged to show interest and concern, even if they are not able to contribute material support.
- Educational messages should emphasize that other paternal relatives have an important role to play in recognizing and supporting children, even when the fathers fail to do so.
- The fees charged by police and FIDA (for 'transport') prohibit poor families from using their services to negotiate paternal support. This calls for strengthening of legal and non-legal redress mechanisms, coupled with clear referral pathways of legal aid providers.
- More research should be carried out with men and children to document their perspectives on these situations.
- A human rights-based approach to government poverty eradication programmes needs to be applied with a view of prioritizing access to programmes by poverty-affected single mother headed households.
- The Uganda National Parenting Guidelines that offer a holistic approach to parenting need to be disseminated and implemented as a matter of urgency
- A law for the operationalization of the National Transitional Justice policy needs to be passed in order to address challenges experienced by children of female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.
- Cultural and religious leaders need to revisit their role in protecting the family institution, not assuming that marriage is always morally desirable for everyone.
- Early childhood educators need to be cognizant of different family types and the challenges faced by single mothers.
- Legal and institutional documents should review the necessity of requiring detailed information about fathers. That could be optional.