

Assessing Community Attitudes Towards Home-Based Male Caregivers for Daycare Children

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ABSTRACT

This study explored community attitudes toward home-based male caregivers for daycare children in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. The aim was to understand perspectives on using male caregivers for daycare children. The study interviewed 32 parents and prospective parents in Ogbomoso, Nigeria, about their attitudes toward male caregivers for daycare children. During the interviews, respondents were asked about their willingness to use male caregivers, the reasons behind their decision, the expected impacts on children, and the need for societal change. The study occurred between February and July 2022 in Ogbomoso South and North Local Government areas. Respondents include married men and women aged 30-50, with equal numbers of males and females represented in the 32 interviewees. A qualitative approach was used alongside an accidental sampling technique. An inductive thematic analysis elicited key themes shaping attitudes and norms. A prevalent theme was associating caregiving with inherent female capabilities and maternal duties - many felt women naturally provide superior nurturing and care while men lack these innate aptitudes. Alongside this was a strong distrust of males with children, stemming from abuse and misconduct fears. However, some felt gender is irrelevant, professing egalitarian ideals. However, pursuing equality conflicted with lingering skepticism about men's care motivations. It is apparent that parents lack a framework for choosing caregivers yet choose for their children. Such a framework could help bridge the gender inequality gap in caregiving.

Keywords: Male Caregivers, Community, Attitudes, Children, Parents, Daycare

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, caregiving has been a worldwide concern in research and public health (Barello et al., 2019; Del Río Lozano and María del Mar, 2020; Gaugler, 2022). This is due to the nature of the services caregivers offer to the public and their vital contribution to the social system and health, as they support various categories of people in society. Caregiving encompasses different categories, such as caregiving for the aged, people with specific ailments, and people with special needs.

This study focuses specifically on caregiving for daycare preschool children. Daycare for children involves supervising and caring for single or multiple children simultaneously, whose ages range from a few weeks old to around thirteen years old (Johan et al., 2019). The duties of caregivers for children include caring, babysitting, bathing, feeding, nannying, and ensuring the children's security. In today's Nigerian society, caregiving services for daycare children have become a flourishing full-time or side business for people. However, engaging in this business is demanding. Caregivers must balance their caregiving responsibilities with other personal activities such as family, business, and other demands to meet their daily living needs. Thus, caregiving is one of the most excessively demanding services anyone can offer in present-day Nigeria.

The Nigerian government advocates for registering early childhood care and education (ECCD) as the preliminary form of education and a fundamental part of primary education offered to children aged 0-5. This preliminary education falls into two categories: preschool (age 0-3), pre-primary/nursery school (age 3-5), and primary. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act provides that all current government primary schools embrace and admit children between the ages of 3-5 into pre-primary/nursery school, and these children attend school for free. However, the UBE Act does not make provisions for preschool children aged 0-3 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

As a result, many private service providers have sprung up to engage in caregiving for children of this age range. This preschool experience is crucial as it bridges children from birth to the beginning of formal schooling. Not all private service providers are registered with the government; some operate as babysitters and charge less compared to the government-registered ones. This study focuses on these private daycare centers. The operating hours of daycare centers can be divided into two categories. Some centers offer flexible hours based on parents' requirements and the center's policy. For instance, parents can fetch their children whenever they finish work or are ready, but they pay for their children's extra hours after the official closing hours. This is referred to as 'after-hours care.'

On the other hand, some centers have fixed closing times, and parents must fetch their children on or before that time. Additionally, the operating frequencies of daycare centers differ, with some operating daily while others operating twenty-four hours a week (24/7). Centers that operate 24/7 cater to children whose parents are not available to fetch them daily, so these children live in the centers until the parents agree that they can be fetched. Consequently, these centers charge significantly more than others that operate daily. This study provides an overview of how daycare centers in Nigeria operate and cater to the children under their care.

However, gender roles and assumptions related to caring for children remain deeply embedded within many societies, and this is also the case in Nigerian society. Females are still disproportionately expected to serve as primary caregivers and conduct principal childcare duties within families (Tsai, 2023). At the same time, men desiring to take on greater caregiving involvement continue to confront skepticism, stigma, and perceptions that they are deviating from expected masculine roles (Tahir et al., 2022). This recurring gender imbalance in domestic duties

and childcare responsibilities represents a key gender equality issue with implications for relationship dynamics, women's empowerment, and children's development (United et al., 2015).

In childcare, women are also heavily concentrated in areas like teaching young children, whereas men are discouraged from such care work (Shpancer et al., 2023). Hence, men who enter childcare occupations face stigma and suspicion (Moosa & Bhana, 2020). Social attitudes and gender role expectations thus continue to constrain men's involvement in direct caregiving. Within the Nigerian context, research indicates that parenting and domestic duties are still highly gendered, with women expected to provide the majority of childcare (Beauregard & Adisa, 2023). However, assessments of community perspectives towards males as professional home-based caregivers for young children remain limited. Understanding these attitudes can elucidate the degree to which traditional gender biases persist or show openness to greater male participation.

Theoretical Framework

Although gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles have been extensively studied, the reasons why these persist remain unclear. This study examines how gender stereotypes about childcare arise and are reinforced in contemporary Nigerian society. The social role theory proposed by Eagly and Wood was adopted in this study (Schneider & Bos, 2019). They theorized that gender stereotypes arise from observations of how men and women enact societal roles. According to them, historical divisions of labor, with women in domestic roles, led to stereotypes that women are communal and nurturing while men are agentic and competitive. These stereotypes influence beliefs that women are naturally better caregivers. Significantly, stereotypes are reinforced by institutions like workplaces and family structures where traditional roles are perpetuated (Eagly & Sczesny, 2019).

According to social role theory, such stereotypes shape societal expectations for how men and women should behave in alignment with their culturally defined social roles (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Women are expected to be well-suited for caregiving and domestic roles, while men are expected to excel in leadership, provider, and protector roles. These differential role expectations and gender stereotypes result in bias when individuals deviate from normative roles for their gender.

In the case of childcare, social role theory posits that women are assumed to inherently possess exceptional nurturing capacities that make them better caregivers than men (Eagly & Wood, 2016). This assumption stems from historical observations of mothers as primary caregivers. When men take on roles such as primary caregivers, they allegedly violate ingrained stereotypes, leading to skepticism and prejudice (Robb, 2019). It is concerning that males face backlash for straying from expected masculine roles as providers, appearing unqualified for the perceived feminine domain of childcare.

Media representations also propagate stereotyped gender roles, reinforcing traditional notions and temporarily restrictive attitudes about gender. Thus, social role theory provides a framework for understanding how traditional gender divisions shape community attitudes about caregiving.

Social role theory holds that increased exposure to counter-stereotypical roles can gradually reduce rigid gender stereotyping (Maruyama, 2023). The more individuals observe men successfully performing caregiver roles or women in assertive leadership roles, the more it breaks down associations between gender and social roles. Social role theory thus proposes that the visibility of capable male childcare providers could slowly shift community attitudes and openness to men participating in this domain, which currently skews females. For example, men visible in nurturing

roles may shift assumptions. By illuminating current role divisions, social role theory provides context for interpreting the data collected by this study and considering approaches to enable male caregivers' acceptance.

In summary, the social role theory provides an ideal framework for interpreting the interview data of this study related to gender beliefs, exposure to male caregivers, and stereotype-based barriers versus progressive potential. It elucidates both the roots of bias and possible levers for change. Adopting this theory in this study allowed for a deeper analysis of how broader gender norms and divisions of labor shape community attitudes.

2. METHOD

Using the accidental sampling technique, 32 parents and prospective parents were interviewed in Ogbomoso South and North local government areas, as the participants were initially unknown (Natalia et al., 2021). Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to the interviews. Inclusion criteria were mothers, fathers, stepparents, guardians, and prospective parents aged 25 years and above who spoke Yoruba or English. Potential participants were approached individually to discuss the study's purpose. If interested, an interview was scheduled at their convenience, consisting of seven open-ended questions exploring attitudes toward male home-based caregivers for daycare children.

The interviews for this study were conducted between February and July 2022. Before the interviews, the research team underwent formative training in qualitative methodology, including supporting participants and informing them of the study's objective. The interview questions were initially designed in English. However, some Yoruba-speaking participants requested interpretation to respond accurately. The research team obliged and interviewed those participants in Yoruba. Of the 40 interested participants, only 32 were eventually interviewed. After collating the interviews, a competent interpreter translated Yoruba's responses into English. The research team met regularly on WhatsApp to discuss the collected data, drafting subject matters weekly until thematic soundness was achieved. Interview results were reflected on and checked for accuracy with participants. The study employed inductive thematic analysis of open-ended responses to identify critical themes underlying community attitudes about male childcare providers. The thematic analysis guidelines provided by Braun and Clark (2019) guided the analysis process.

First, the interview data were thoroughly read for familiarization. Then, initial codes were manually generated to capture salient features related to perceptions and openness toward male caregivers. Through multiple re-readings, the codes were refined to represent emerging themes best. Collating codes identified broader candidate themes and sub-themes. These were reviewed for coherence and distilled into five final themes, defined and named based on their essence. Extracts were identified to illustrate the themes. Through iterative coding, semantic and latent levels of analysis were conducted, focusing mainly on underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies shaping surface-level responses (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This rigorous qualitative approach systematically identified and analyzed themes to gain insights into gender beliefs within the community despite limitations like the small non-representative sample. However, the open-ended data provided a rich qualitative understanding of attitudes lacking in purely quantitative studies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following key themes emerged from the inductive thematic analysis of the interview data of this study: (i) Traditional gender roles, (ii) Trust and safety concerns, (iii) Uncertainty of male impacts, (iv) Gender equality, and (v) Lack of exposure.

Traditional gender roles

A prevalent theme underlying community attitudes was the strong association of caregiving with traditional female gender roles and capabilities. More than half of the female respondents indicated they would not use a male caregiver, commonly stating that women are naturally more caring, better nurturers, and better equipped to provide childcare. Many explicitly stated that childcare is primarily a woman's role and responsibility. Below are some of the responses:

"I believe women can do the job better" (FR1).

"Female is good and caring, unlike male." (FR2).

"The world is becoming so scary...I prefer a female caregiver" (FR3.)

The responses above reveal perceptions of caregiving as an extension of women's maternal instincts, duties, and obligations to the family. In contrast, men are seen as lacking the innate qualities and skills needed for caring for children. The following respondents also viewed women as naturally more caring and nurturing:

"First, females are naturally caring and protective of children" (FR9.)

"Women take care of children better than men" (MR18).

Some of the respondents also blatantly viewed males as not up to the task of caring for children. In other words, men are viewed as inherently ill-suited.

"They are not willing, and they lack mother's love" (MR22).

"Some men cannot multitask like women when caring for a child" (MR30).

These above attitudes are indicative of highly rigid societal views that sharply demarcate gender capabilities, strictly confining domestic duties such as childcare to the domain of women. The responses also indicate that caring for and nurturing children is seen not merely as a task that women perform but as an integral and defining part of womanhood. The respondents' explicit reference to concepts such as "motherly love" and "a woman's touch" describe tender, maternal qualities that men could never adequately cultivate or replace. This suggests an underlying traditional belief that women have an almost sacred maternal obligation and duty to shoulder childcare responsibilities. They dedicate their time and energy to nourishing children with gentle affection in a way no man could match.

Furthermore, relinquishing the hands-on duties of raising and caring for children to others, especially men who are viewed as less qualified for domestic nurturing roles, is perceived as thoroughly unnatural and a violation of the proper order of things. There is a perception that men must stick to stereotypical masculine provider roles centered on physical strength and domination outside the home, as they are seen as fundamentally incapable of managing sensitive childcare responsibilities compared to women's innate mothering instincts and abilities.

Trust and safety concerns

In addition to rigid notions of traditional gender-based roles, there is also evident strong distrust of males being responsible for children's care. Over half of the female respondents specifically

mentioned apprehensions and fears about potential abuse, sexual misconduct, or other nefarious motivations from male caregivers. Below are some of their responses:

"Some males have mental issues, and we hear cases of abuse" (FR10).

"Their intentions are not always genuine" (FR18).

The respondents above (FR10 and FR18) indicated that their deep-seated trust issues stem from an alarming multitude of reported cases of sexual and physical abuse perpetrated against children by male figures such as relatives, teachers, religious figures, and others in positions of authority, power, and presumed trust over children's wellbeing. They made anxious references to seemingly endless amounts of disturbing rumors combined with ceaseless news stories, many local, recounting horrific abuse scenarios that contribute to ingrained societal panic, skepticism, and reflexive suspicion when it comes to the prospect of allowing any male caretaker access to caring for young children, especially girls.

This pronounced climate of distrust and perceived threat poses an exceedingly high barrier for even the most qualified, experienced, and well-meaning male childcare providers, who face automatic presumptions of ill intent and suspected danger no matter their credentials or track record. Some respondents also shared growing concerns and anxieties regarding risks posed specifically to girl children by male caregivers, with one mother anxiously stating, "If my child is a girl, a male caregiver may sexually abuse her." The use of the tense "may" indicates that this mother views the potential for sexual abuse of her daughter by a male caregiver as a highly likely and probable event she feels a need to guard against.

The above sentiment could reflect broader societal misconceptions and ingrained biases against men. However, it also demonstrates perceptions of men as inherently dangerous and inept as caregivers to young girls and unable to control their sexual urges or be trusted to respect physical boundaries. Comments like this clearly illustrate how deep-rooted doubts about males' self-restraint and trustworthiness around girl children negatively influence parental attitudes toward considering or accepting male childcare providers for their daughters.

Another instance of trust and safety issues concerning male caregivers, when men are seen as risks, are as follows:

"I cannot trust male caregivers; protection of the girl child is critical" (FR13)

"Many males are not patient in attending to the needs of a child" (FR15)

In the responses above, concerns were markedly heightened surrounding the specific prospect of young female children being cared for by unfamiliar or unrelated adult men. There was an evident underlying presumption of exponentially escalated risk associated with allowing males to have such intimate proximity to and perceived authority over vulnerable young girls.

Furthermore, FR15's concern stems from the fact that men were fundamentally distrusted due to ingrained doubts regarding their capabilities to appropriately handle delicate childcare duties such as feeding, bathing, dressing, and tenderly nurturing girl children, which were seen as antithetical to most men's inherent nature and learned skill sets. These apprehensive responses exposed broad societal preconceptions of adult males as potentially both utterly incompetent and hazardous in various ways when theoretically placed into the role of primary caregiver for female children.

These deeply embedded prejudices and unquestioned stereotypical assumptions are highly capable of negatively influencing community attitudes, trust levels, and openness toward accepting male caregiver options or opportunities, erecting barriers even for qualified, experienced, and conscientious candidates seeking childcare employment.

Uncertainty of male impacts

On whether respondents feel that having male caregivers will assist or hinder their children's character development, while some were biased against male caregivers, many respondents also expressed uncertainty about specific impacts on children from being primarily cared for by men. Some believed that having kind, ethical male role models who exhibit positive masculinity and can connect with boys who lack father figures could be helpful. However, others expressed concerns about children missing out on female role models to develop nurturing qualities themselves. For those who feel that male caregivers are necessary but are not beneficial to their child, below are their responses:

"It may assist the child, but my child already has a father figure" (FR6)

"Yes, it might help for fatherly roles. The male child needs that" (FR10).

"Not necessarily, but it should be encouraged for the sake of male children (MR25).

A response such as "Yes, it might help for fatherly roles. The male child needs that" indicates a positive and beneficial attitude toward male care providers in the life of children who lack a father figure. This agrees with the submission of Santos et al. (2020), who argue that the presence of the male figure is crucial for children, holding the same level of importance as the female figure. Conversely, some respondents were concerned about being unsure of the influence of males in their children's lives. Such concerns are:

"It may hinder their development without a mother's role (MR16).

"Some men caregivers will hinder children's ability to be caring (FR1).

In the above responses, respondents MR16 and FR1 specifically expressed worries about potential emotional and developmental impacts on young daughters from lacking adequate maternal bonding, tender affection, and empathetic nurturing during the crucially formative early childhood years. They described fears that the absence of this unique motherly social-emotional nourishment could lead to behavioral issues, dysfunctional relationships, or lifelong struggles for girls who fail to receive proper female role models early on. A few other respondents voiced apprehensions regarding the risks of normalizing improper behavior in impressionable young girls if they are exposed to probable vulgarity, nudity, or other inappropriate conduct from less sensitive or emotionally attentive male caregivers.

These anxious concerns reflect a belief that women possess exclusive traits and abilities to provide vital socio-emotional nourishment that profoundly shapes positive child development. At the same time, the uncertainty and presumption embedded throughout these concerns also convey a general lack of familiarity within the community regarding actual firsthand examples of male childcare providers caring for girls.

Gender equality

In terms of the fundamental role that gender plays in caregiving duties and professions, there was a divergent perspective expressed by a minority portion of respondents, predominantly fathers, and prospective fathers, that gender is essentially irrelevant. The below responses capture their views:

"Anyone can take care of a child once they have the skills" (MR6)

"Expect better performance irrespective of gender" (MR18)

These men (MR6 and MR18) advocated that caring, responsible individuals with proper qualifications, training, and temperament should be considered viable options for childcare roles

regardless of being male or female. They pointed to the equal capacities of men and women, stating that both genders can provide quality care if given the opportunity.

In addition, some male participants referenced real-world examples of fathers successfully serving as primary nurturers and caregivers within their families and social circles.

However, most of the respondents who supported equality still wanted assurances when asked if they, as a parent/guardian, would leave their child in the care of a male caregiver if that was the only option. For examples:

"Yes, if the males could undergo background checks and proper licensing (FR13)

"Yes, with proper personnel checks and surveillance cameras" (MR25)

It is surprising that the above respondents (FR13 and MR25), one of whom was espousing equality earlier (MR25), exhibited traces of lingering bias, frequently stating conditional requirements such as thorough background checks, strict licensing, and constant surveillance cameras to satisfy their ongoing security concerns before feeling comfortable leaving their child with a male caregiver.

This indicates that inwardly, their viewpoints still relegate properly screened male caregivers as backup options only to be utilized if no trustworthy females could be found for the job. Unfortunately, even the segment of respondents voicing support for equality of the genders still harbored conflicting vestiges of those same ingrained childcare gender norms they outwardly professed to reject. Since those most adamantly in favor of male caregiver equality were a notable minority outlier, this suggests Nigerian society overall still likely has a very long journey ahead before notions of role equality can fully take hold and overcome the deeply culturally embedded maternal associations of childcare with womanhood exclusively.

Lack of exposure

When asked about their experience with male caregivers, respondents' responses highlighted a general need for more familiarity and experiential exposure to male childcare providers within the community. 30 of the 32 respondents had yet to gain direct experience utilizing male caregivers, especially for young children. With few real-world examples to draw from, preconceived biases carried more significant influence, making people more resistant to this relatively novel concept. The responses below provide evidence of the respondents' minimal exposure to male health providers in their community:

"I do not have any experience with any male caregiver."

"I do not have an idea because I have not seen one before."

These responses rely heavily on preconceived biases, which could promote negative attitudes towards male caregivers. However, the data also indicates that positive exposure and experiences increased openness to male childcare providers among some respondents.

In contrast, the minority of respondents who had encountered male caregivers spoke more favorably, highlighting positive qualities like competence, attentiveness, and professionalism. Their commentary suggests that direct familiarity with male caregivers can help counteract ingrained biases. For examples:

"My dad and husband assist in caring for the children" (FR2).

"Good with some, while some men have been awesome" (FR1).

The above positive responses from participants FR2 and FR1 represent a promising shift, indicating growing openness to male caregivers in their community. Though still a minority view,

these responses are real-world examples demonstrating that capable, responsible men can succeed in caregiving roles, challenging stereotypical assumptions.

Specifically, the subset of respondents who reported prior positive experiences with male caregivers for their children expressed markedly more receptiveness to this idea. Furthermore, their exposure to positive examples has counteracted ingrained biases in their community. This suggests that increased visibility and normalization of men serving successfully in childcare could continue dispelling skepticism and negative perceptions over time.

However, most respondents still exhibited substantial reservations, which were heavily informed by cultural stereotypes rather than direct observation. This reveals the considerable effort still required to overcome dominant norms that cast suspicion on men's ability to nurture and provide care. With minimal current exposure and ingrained stigma, driving broader acceptance will depend on steadily increasing positive interactions with male caregivers so communities can witness their skills and compassion firsthand beyond prevailing assumptions.

In summary, while the openness of some participants represents a positive step forward, substantial work remains to counter entrenched stereotypes and expand opportunities for men - given the overall lack of familiarity exhibited in the responses. However, the promising instances of openness based on positive exposure provide a model for how increased male visibility in childcare could ultimately transform perceptions.

DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the data of this study revealed the traditional gender role beliefs, distrust of males, hypothesizing about impacts, tempered equality pursuits, and lack of exposure as key themes shaping community attitudes towards male caregivers. The findings demonstrate that societal childcare is still strongly associated with womanhood. This results in bias, safety concerns, and uncertainty around male caregivers. There is a clear gender divide in attitudes as most female respondents expressed hesitation and unwillingness to use male caregivers, while male respondents were more open to the idea.

Looking deeper into the reasoning behind these attitudes, the most commonly cited reason for hesitating to use male caregivers was a belief that women are naturally more caring and better suited to caregiving - many felt childcare is primarily a woman's role. Those opposed feared potential abuse or impropriety if children were cared for by men and felt children's development could be negatively impacted without a nurturing female role model. Some cited an assumed lack of experience and specific training among potential male caregivers as a reason to doubt their capabilities.

However, some respondents, especially males, expressed openness and felt gender should not be a limiting factor - that anyone compassionate, responsible, and qualified should be considered for childcare roles regardless of gender. An important point also raised by a few respondents is the belief that trusted male caregivers could be positive male role models in children's lives.

In terms of solutions, many respondents suggested thorough vetting, licensing, background checks, and oversight, such as security cameras if male caregivers are utilized, especially in daycare settings. Overall, while the data shows most respondents still firmly see childcare as a female gender role, there is some openness to male caregivers contingent on proper vetting and safeguards. Increased positive exposure and awareness could further transform attitudes and improve community acceptance of male caregivers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote greater acceptance of males as professional home-based caregivers within the community, the following recommendations are proposed based on the study's findings:

- (i) They are actively recruiting and providing training programs to build a cohort of qualified, compassionate male caregivers who can serve as positive role models and display care competencies through their work.
- (ii) Implementing thorough licensing and vetting procedures, like reference checks and background checks, to help provide assurances that mitigate safety concerns and distrust surrounding males in childcare roles.
- (iii) They are increasing the visibility of male caregivers through community outreach events, parent testimonials, and other initiatives that allow families to interact with and get to know potential male childcare providers.
- (iv) Encouraging early childhood education institutions and vocational programs to actively welcome and promote male participation in caregiving careers to help expand the pipeline of potential male caregivers.
- (v) It was launching public awareness campaigns that directly challenge prevailing gender stereotypes that typecast caregiving as solely a feminine trait. These could emphasize that virtues like compassion and nurturing are not limited by gender.
- (vi) Promoting media representations like public service announcements, commercials, and storylines in movies/TV that depict males as capable, responsible, and nurturing caregivers to help expand public perceptions.
- (vii) Providing financial incentives like subsidies for wages, scholarships for training programs, etc., to qualified male caregivers to help incentivize their participation and retention as the availability of male childcare providers expands.

The goal of these multifaceted efforts across institutional, educational, media, and community channels is to gradually normalize the idea of trusted, caring males serving in vital family caregiving roles so the prevailing assumption that childcare is solely a woman's duty can expand. However, fundamentally transforming the deeply rooted gender role biases in the community will likely require sustained, long-term efforts on many fronts to overcome ingrained stereotypes.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provided rich qualitative insights into community perceptions of male childcare providers. The findings reveal barriers and potential opportunities related to increasing acceptance of men in caregiving. Traditional attitudes and distrust pose challenges requiring fundamental norm change. However, openness among some and potential impacts of exposure provide pathways if leveraged carefully. Practically, the findings of this study suggest modeling competent male caregivers, emphasizing similarities in care capabilities across genders, and requiring standards and oversight could gradually shift attitudes. However, this study proposed that larger samples across diverse communities are needed. Quantitative measurement of attributes like egalitarianism would also add depth. Still, this paper contributes meaningfully to knowledge on the uphill battle towards gender-equal childcare given deeply entrenched societal norms.

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