

Covid-19: Strengthening or weakening our family values?

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Last December, no Ugandan would envision the world changing in just two months. We eagerly looked forward to the weekly ‘party-after-party’: drink ups, weddings, birthdays and get-togethers. On a normal day, Veronica and Alex Irumba would wake up early morning at 5am to hug and see off their children into a waiting school van, usually full of chatty children sharing stories and sweets. As they boarded, the couple would take some moments to shake hands and hi-5 the other kids in the van. And as the van exited their compound, they would board their car to beat the early morning jam to go and workout at a city gym until 7am before heading to the office. After work, because of the evening jam, the couple would normally get home when the children are already asleep, with their maid under instruction to make sure they are in bed by 8pm to have enough rest so they can easily wake up at 4am to prepare for school the following day.

The above snapshot of Irumba’s family is typical of a Ugandan urban middle class family, but it can also be partly relevant to other urban dwellers, given their busy times as market/shop traders, vendors, boda boda riders, taxi drivers, etc. It is always a tight schedule juggling between work and family. There is little time for the family, relegating the responsibility of grooming children to maids, peers, and electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets and televisions. Even when home, urban parents, too, are engrossed in their electronics. They are physically available but mentally and spiritually not present. This has had a negative impact on the family, with parents finding no time to transmit family values to their children or couples spending no quality time together.

With the announcement of a national lockdown (and social distancing) on March 18 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, family lovers could see a silver lining on the dark cloud – families spending more time together and inculcating values into their children. But has this actually happened?

Sources we speak to, who are closely monitoring this situation, argue that Covid-19 has had both positive and negative impacts on the transmission of family values. On the positive side, there is family bonding and sharing of roles and responsibilities. The lockdown has also created more time for children, including home schooling.

“Families that had not stayed together for a long time are now united; they are playing and praying together,” observes Isaac Kintu, the Manager Ekisakaate with the Nnabagareka Development Foundation, adding “it has brought men closer to their families, something that had been eroded.”

According to the 2006 Uganda National Culture Policy, the family is considered the primary building block for society, where the inculcation of values takes place. It is perceived as the space where acculturation begins and where difference in terms of ethnicity, religion and gender, among others, is defined, understood and managed to foster (or not) harmony from the smallest unit of a household to the wider community, according to a research paper by Emily Drani, Santa

I Kayonga and John De Coninck titled: “*The family: At the heart of managing cultural diversity*”. The paper, which explores the role of the family in managing cultural diversity, further observes that inculcation of values, old and new, often takes place within a family setting where they are translated into the daily lives of children.

Steven Langa of the Family Life Network observes that a man previously played an important role not only as family head but also in stabilizing the family and preparing children to face life. Men had however relegated this role to women, thinking that their only role was to look for money. Langa advises that parents should utilize this lockdown to build strong relationships with their children. They should teach them family values such as: mutual respect, civility, empathy, love, caring and hospitality, as well as traditional skills – cooking, washing utensils, etc. Parents should also teach their children the mechanisms through which these values and skills can be transmitted. These include: cultural education around fireplaces or dining tables; and social gatherings (birth, naming, initiation ceremonies, marriage, funerals and social communication (hugs, handshakes, holding hands).

Men, particularly, should use this time to affirm and compliment their children, telling them how beautiful or handsome they are, how smartly dressed they are, etc. Langa notes that girls who are not affirmed by their dads find it difficult to stick to their morals as they search for the affirmation of a man in wrong places. Similarly, sons, who are not affirmed by their fathers, go for women, thinking that, to be a man, you have to put a woman down, resulting in violence against her.

This, perhaps, is one of the reasons for the increased cases of gender-based violence during this period. The Uganda Police spokesperson Fred Enanga reported in the media a rise in such cases, including murders. On March 31, for example, the media reported that “five people had died due to domestic violence since government imposed ‘stay at home measures in mid-March’”. Enanga noted that before, police would register one or two cases over the same period of time.

This is not a Ugandan problem only; it is regional and global. A week after most countries declared a lockdown (the last week of March), UN Women reported that in France domestic violence cases increased by 30%; in Argentina by 25%; and by 33% in Singapore.

“It is a double pandemic for women and girls. Domestic violence keeps exponentially increasing faster than Covid-19. We need to effectively handle the two pandemics concurrently because the two kill, if not prevented,” Nathan Byamukama, Regional Director, Regional Training Facility (RTF) on prevention of sexual and gender based violence is quoted on their website www.icglr-rtf.org. Since the lockdown, Byamukama notes, Uganda has registered several deaths due to domestic violence but no death from Covid-19.

How to cope

According to Kintu, with the Nnabagereka Development Foundation also registering increased cases of domestic violence in Buganda, they were forced to dispatch a team to the villages to provide communities with psycho-social support. As Byamukama advises, during this period, people need to have a positive attitude that we shall overcome this pandemic.

“It must be clear to all members of the family that the pandemic is not anybody’s fault. We need to fight the pandemic and not each other. This realisation comes from smooth, honest and transparent communication with all family members,” he says.

To this, Kintu adds that parents should become teachers. “We should teach our children to be responsible, manners such as greeting and our local languages,” Kintu notes. “Usually kids are sent to relatives but now they are with their biological parents. What you teach them will impact on them after Covid-19.”

But with offices shifting to homes, with some parents working even longer hours into the night since their bedrooms also serve as offices, how do you strike a balance between parenting and working?

“You don’t need an entire day or week to teach a child,” Kintu says. “Even one minute or 30 minutes you spend with them are impactful. For example, merely speaking your local language to them is enough to teach them a word or two. Being a teacher isn’t about having chalk and blackboard. Be exemplary; how do you dress? Are you putting on bikers in their presence? Behaviour and action speak more than words.”

He further notes that how a parent sits with their laptop is enough to communicate to his/her children. How you speak on the phone tells something too. You could be lying to your boss and say that you have been working yet you are busy watching TV. This is enough to tell them that it is ok to lie. This all is summarised in what Kintu calls the “Observation, Speech and Action (OSA)” approach, which is taught to Ekisakaate participants.

“We need to critically observe our children’s behaviour, action, and how they speak and make analysis on how to help them,” Kintu says. During this period, Kintu advises parents to set aside time in the evenings to sit down with their children and be their *ssengas* and *kojjas* – talk about relationships and sexuality.

"The lockdown has helped me to teach my children and grandchildren the importance of working hard, as well as teamwork. I have also managed to talk to them about the dangers of domestic violence (because sometimes, they like fighting amongst themselves). They have learnt how to cook, wash utensils, plant and weed. We usually sit under the tree shade in the compound to share these important issues,” says John Tutu of the Madi Lugbara Cultural Foundation in Arua.

To conclude, whereas the family has been under threat from various circumstances such as civil strife and displacement, from AIDS, education, work and religion – with new types of families emerging, such as single mothers, absent parents, parents of mixed ethnicity, mixed religions, diverse political affiliation, polygamous families, etc. The Covid-19 lockdown presents an opportunity for parents to reflect on their roles. Are you imparting family values to your children? What image (of yourself) do you portray to them? Are you teaching them your mother language? There is a need to strike a balance between work and parenting, because parents play a large role in inculcating family values in their children for the greater good of fostering peace and harmony in society.

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