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Perspective on family health, happiness and harmony in Ugandan Communities

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As the world struggles to deal and contain the Corona virus pandemic, with over 300,000 deaths (May 2020) and millions affected socially and economically, it is important to appreciate the role of the family in alleviating the pain resulting from the pandemic.

From time immemorial, families have been central to human society, the basic social unit for the expression of love between man and woman and the creation or raising children.

Similarly, in Uganda the family is the fundamental and basic unit of society. It serves its members as a reproductive unit, socio-cultural and spiritual/moral base (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2018).

The importance of the family is also recognised by SOS Children Villages whose vision states, "Every child belongs to a family and grows in love, respect and security". This vision is aligned to Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 and UN guidelines on Alternative Care (2010) which emphasize that it is in the best interest of the child to grow up with its biological family. These guidelines also recognise that there are children who have lost or at the risk of losing parental care and grow up in other options of child care such as family life, residential care, fostering, adoption and others.

The family is considered as place where warmth, tenderness and understanding can be expected from a father, a mother and or caregiver. Indeed, families provide us with identity,

social referencing for emotional regulation in times of hardship i.e. the current Corona situation that secure for every person. Children and people without families' miss this. Three major themes of family namely health, happiness and harmony are crucial to a family (Lam, 2016), Child Health and Development Centre – Makerere University (2018).

Family health can be conceptualised as family wellbeing, family life satisfaction and function. It includes the physical and mental health of family members, which is related to the psychological capital and family unity. Family happiness is when family members care, love and support each and needs met. These needs scan be physical-material, economic, social, and emotional/spiritual. It can be enhanced for instance by spending quality time with family members and building connection with friends and relatives



Photo 1: Mother (R) reading as her children happily listen

Family harmony on the other side refers to absence of conflict and effective communication with family members. It means getting along with each. Interpersonal harmony in a family is believed to be crucial for many African cultures who see it as contributing not only to each individual member's welfare but also to a well organised and peaceful world. In Uganda,

families that are living in relative harmony may show evidence of limited or no domestic violence. Family harmony is the basis of an individual's happiness.

Uganda communities are known to have very strong family ties that bond them together from generation to generation. The three generation family including grandparents in addition to the parents and children, provides the greatest support of raising of children and continuation of the lineage. The family will nurture a child based on what they want that child to be in the future. For example, when a child is born, it will be named and this name has a meaning or it is a clan name. This is normally by family head based on the physical features and visionary of who this child would be. Hence there is a sense of belonging to a family and happiness for the family.

Similarly, where a family spends quality time with each other visiting, calling, sharing information, supporting each in happy and sad moments like weddings, sickness, burial, education achievement then that family is characterised to be happy and living in harmony. It is always given as an example of a role model family to other families in the communities or gathering. Similarly, a family where the father/male care giver and mother/ female care giver support each other and engage their children in decision making activities with a gender lense is consider peaceful and happy. For instance, praying together, participation in family meetings reflecting on personal goals is common.

A 10 years boy during an informal discussion remarked,

'Having a happy family is when my father and mother have time for us as children. They provide for us and give us a good foundation like pay school fees, teach us manners, to love each other. They play with us, plan for us and teach us what to do.'

Elsewhere a couple with four children in SOS CV Uganda Gulu project pointed out,

'A happy family is key to a happy home, happy children, happy community and happy country. This means members of the family care and love each. They talk and listen to each other. They challenge and each support each as they grow and develop. They work together for the family in happy and sad moments. When one of our children is sick we expect all the other 3 children to care. If one of them has an event at school, we should all support and encourage her to excel. There is a drive to be there for each other at all times. That is what makes a family happy.'

During covid-19 lockdown, findings from SOS CV family Strengthening Programme interventions and engagements with community members;

"families are happy when there is food, income and connecting with their members".

Without food, income and connectivity, families were found to be unhappy leading to reported violence amongst some family members.

Families with disconnected members, do not support each other and are most concerned about individual achievements are to large extent considered to living in disharmony and unhappy in many communities in Uganda. During field visits for example indicated that families that do not have regular meetings, members rare have time for each other or support financially and materials felt unhappy.

The Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development through the department of Family and Culture, is working to mainstream programming that focus on the whole family to improve the cohesiveness of the family as it is contingent upon the relation of its members particularly the father/ male care giver and mother/ female care giver or head of the family. Families that live in love and respect always bring up happy children that realise their full potential and become responsible citizens of a country as aligned to the Children Act (Amendment) 2016, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Child, United National Convention of the Rights of Children (1989).

As Uganda joins the rest of the world to commemorate the International Day of the Family, the MGLSD, through the department of Family and Culture calls upon all Ugandans and interventions to promote stable families that are culture sensitive to the Ugandan culture. In conclusion, family health, happiness and harmony are important in sustaining peace, development at home, in the communities, country and the world at large. The family's health, happiness also plays an important role in alleviating pain from shocks such as the ongoing Corona virus pandemic. We therefore need to embrace these three components to have a strong socio-cultural and spiritual/moral base for our children.

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