

Recognising the role of fathers

The usefulness of a group like the SFATT is that its very existence changes the perception of fathers, since here are men who are fighting for their right to have a relationship with their children. This is an issue separate from the messier matter of how they get along with their children's mother and, if the best interests of the child are to be served, everyone involved, from parents to police officers to court officials, have to be educated on the best arrangements.

A grant of 55,000 euros (about TT\$400,000) given by the European Union to the Single Fathers Association of Trinidad and Tobago under the aegis of the Emancipation Support Committee signals a push-back that has been started by men against a legal system which often seems biased against them, especially in respect to family matters.

This is a significant development in a world where women's issues, understandably, receive the lion's share of attention and, concomitantly, funding. But research has shown that fathers are an essential influence in a

child's life, helping develop certain cognitive and emotional capacities that mothers either cannot or find harder to provide. Indeed, even when parents do not live together, a harmonious relationship between father and mother is the best predictor of positive outcomes for children.

The money provided by the EU, according to the ESC, is intended to build the capacity of the SFATT, institutionalise shared parenting, and provide avenues for conflict resolution and counselling to fathers and their families. But, if funding allows, a crucial aspect would be to determine if the courts are

indeed biased against fathers when it comes to custody of their children. This, after all, is the core claim of the SFATT, but the only data which exist is a survey done by attorney Hazel Thompson-Ahye in the High Court in which she found that custody was given to fathers in half the cases.

Ms Thompson-Ahye also noted, however, that most fathers didn't contest custody of the children, but her sample would not only be biased on this ground alone. Since the contested cases are all High Court ones, it is likely that the fathers involved are not only financially

secure but highly motivated to have custody of their children. In this context, a 50 percent decision rate in favour of fathers may not refute the claim of bias. So data also need to be collected in the Magistrates Court, even if by polling the magistrates themselves. In the absence of empirical evidence, however, just making court officials aware of the possibility of gender prejudice against men may improve decision-making in custody cases.

Research in developed nations such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom reveal incontrovertible legal favouritism for women in general terms.

That is to say, in cases which range from assault to child abuse and even to murder, women have typically received milder penalties than men, and even got off scot-free for crimes where men have been incarcerated. It is therefore almost

inevitable that, in a world where women are perceived as "natural care-givers", judges and magistrates would be more inclined to grant custody to them.

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A preliminary report released by the Children's Authority some weeks ago surprised many people with its finding that mothers were twice as likely as fathers to abuse their children, but research has long shown that committed fathers actually help women to be better mothers.

On all these grounds, the EU grant will hopefully be money well spent.

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