The Male Breadwinner Myth: The South African Case

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There is no singular mechanism, or proverbial silver bullet, that can address the wide variety of vulnerabilities and wishes of people. In response to the inequalities and poverty witnessed globally since the late 1980s, social policy initiatives tended to focus on social protection in the form of cash transfers or safety nets. This social policy approach originated in Western countries with specific entrenched cultural and social dynamics, but it also spread to developing countries (Kangas 2012).

In reaction to this narrow social-protection focus, the concept of transformative social policy was put forward to indicate that a far more extensive and collective approach is required to address the needs of people and develop a conducive environment for wellbeing. A transformative social policy goes beyond short term risks and has a wide range of focus areas, including production, protection, redistribution, reproduction and even social cohesion (Mkandawire 2007; Adesina 2011).

In line with this latter thinking on social policy, the gendered implications of a transformative social policy at a collective level is explored here with a focus on men. In South Africa, a country of soaring unemployment figures, men are still expected to be the primary breadwinners and are often blamed or ignored if they are not able to fulfil this role adequately. Although certain men ostentatiously have disproportionate amounts of wealth in South Africa, this wealth is by no means the norm. This emphasis on men as breadwinners, an expectation that many cannot meet, has serious implications for their gender identity and mental health and undermines their potential role as active caretakers.

Factors such as the high incidence of gender-based violence with men as perpetrators, the high incarceration rates of men and their poorer performance in education compared to women suggest an urgent revisit of the 'African masculinities in crisis' discourse. Masculinity studies (including a specific focus on African men) have grown exponentially in the last three decades (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele 2015; Langa 2020; Van den Berg and Makusha 2018) and the power hierarchies between men have been well documented (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger 2012), but social policy documents focusing on poor and vulnerable groups of men (including perpetrators of violence) and their coping mechanisms have been more elusive. Not only 'the state' and 'the individual' are involved in social policy, but a range of other 'non-state actors' (Kangas 2012) and therefore other role players, such as non-profit organisations (NPOs), should be considered in the transformative social policy context. NPOs can play a positive role in the development and implementation of social policy, especially if they do not duplicate state services but rather augment them. The NPO sector is explored here by focusing on the work of Sonke Gender Justice as it relates to gendered caregiving.

Unemployment and state interventions in South Africa

In 2019 the overall official unemployment rate in South Africa was 29.1 per cent and the expanded unemployment rate, which includes people who have given up on seeking employment, was reported as 38.7 per cent. In addition, 32 per cent of people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four were not in employment, education or training (the so-called NEET-category) (StatsSA 2019: 2, 7, 8).

Earlier research on the reasons why young people are not engaged in further education revealed that family commitments and pregnancies were frequently cited as barriers by women, whereas men were more likely to indicate working as a barrier (StatsSA 2013: 54). Such work commitments are often related to the informal sector.

Trying to address poverty in South Africa includes providing free basic schooling and health care to those in

need. A more direct approach is the targeted social assistance project. Roughly a third of South Africans receive a social assistance grant and far fewer people (about 14 million estimated in 2013) are formally employed (Seekings and Moore 2013). Although the targeted social assistance approach ensures tangible benefits in the short and medium term, it does not automatically lead to sustainable poverty reduction and this approach is unlikely to be sustainable in the long run.

Another approach includes work-related initiatives such as the Expanded Public Works Programme and sub-programmes, such as the Community Work Programme (National Planning Commission 2013: 154). Lofty expectations of these programmes are that they will contribute to violence prevention since they can potentially provide 'structure, meaning and dignity' especially to chronically unemployed people. Yet, young men are not necessarily keen to take up these opportunities if not on par with their expectations. Similar trends have been seen in developed countries (such as Japan and Germany) and developing countries (such as Nigeria and India), where young people were not interested in 'blue-collar artisanal trades' (Naidoo and Hoque 2017).

A more specific response to the high unemployment figures of young people is the Youth Wage Subsidy, or Employment Incentive Bill. This Bill offers a tax incentive to employers to employ young people with limited work experience (*ibid.*). However, on average workers in this age category lose jobs at the same rate at which jobs are found. Adequate mentoring can be successful in training and retaining young employees, but in an insecure economic environment, older workers may be fearful of losing their own jobs and therefore reluctant to provide adequate mentoring (*ibid.*).

Since these state-led opportunities mainly target people with low skill levels, they may not be sustainable since the current labour market in South Africa is geared towards highly skilled employees. It is thus not surprising that South Africans who did not complete Grade 12 have by far the highest unemployment levels (34.6 per cent), especially when compared with graduates (7.6 per cent) (StatsSA 2019: 12). There is general consensus that especially unskilled and semi-skilled employment are at risk as increasing technological development ensures growing mechanisation. Processes such as privatisation, restructuring and downsizing are intensified by globalisation, and all employment sectors, but especially manufacturing, agriculture and mining, are affected by them (Graham and De Lannoy 2016). Young people, and men with low skill levels, are therefore commonly excluded from secure employment.

There is a belief that the high unemployment rates in South Africa (and elsewhere) will continue for some time to come. In fact, there is a more pessimistic (or realistic) view that the idea of continuous economic growth cannot be attained and should not even be strived for since it is built on the illusion that the growth economy is desirable. Ferguson (2015: 10) argues for 'a new politics of distribution', which acknowledges that large numbers of people simply do not have (and may never have) access to wage labour and hence there is a willingness to 'just give money to the poor'. In addition, the neoliberal economic growth we have become accustomed to has a negative impact on environmental resources by slowly obliterating the natural resources many Africans depend on, and hence, it ultimately affects people's wellbeing negatively (Fioramonti 2017). Given these realities, a gendered overview of care and income follows.

Masculinities

Care work, regardless of the nature or type, is dominated by women the world over and South Africa is no exception (Rabe 2017). Whether men are employed, unemployed or underemployed, men do less care work than women. If men do care work, some struggle to reconcile it with their masculine identity (Razavi 2014).

Prior to the colonial period, older African men passed on collective understandings of masculine identities to younger men. Due to the huge impact of the mining sector in Southern Africa, the transfer of understandings of masculinity was relocated to the mining premises where men lived for increasingly longer periods. Over time, many young men became detached from their fathers but also from other adult male role models (Delius and Glaser 2002). In Southern Africa, the eroding relationships between men and their families meant that older men increasingly could no longer play a guiding and caring role, and if they could not be financial providers either, they had almost nothing left to tie them to their families.

Certain qualitative studies show that families expect adult women to earn money in some way (Wright, Noble and Ntshongwana 2014), but the male breadwinner ideology has been found to be particularly pervasive (Rabe 2017).

The targeted approach to poverty excludes healthy able-bodied men and women between the ages of eighteen and sixty from social assistance grants. If such adults do

not have (or recently had) paid employment and they live in households where children or the elderly are recipients of the grants, they inadvertently become dependent on grantholders. Since grant money is shared in poor households, 'dependents' become 'income earners' and able-bodied adults become their financial dependents. Ferguson (2015: 43) expands that if men were to be given a grant 'they might be in this way rendered "dependent" [which] is threatening to a certain imagination of masculinity within which "independence" and "autonomy" are the very ground and guarantor of male power'.

MenCare, a global fatherhood initiative, reports a particularly insightful research finding from the Democratic Republic of Congo (2015: 20): women's caregiving roles help them to 'endure the negative effects of war'. In the State of Africa's Fathers (MenCare 2015), it was reported that involved fathers are more likely than other men to cope with adverse circumstances and influence those around them positively. Men's lack of intimate social ties may be negative for those with whom they interact and themselves, for example, involving alcohol and substance abuse and neglecting their health (Slegh, Barker and Levtov 2014).

Gender socialisation, the realities in the economic sphere which assumes a 'traditional' division of labour and policies that reiterate the unequal distribution of caregiving (MenCare 2015: 20) point to restrictive masculine constructions that inhibit men from forming close social ties with family members and engaging in care work for kin members. If masculine roles become more equitable, expressive and respectful, the lives of men, women and children improve (Van den Berg, Hendricks, Hatcher et al. 2013).

Non-profit organisational interventions

If we focus on a specific aspect of social policy, such as care, it becomes clear that the term is complicated in theory and in practice since the state, the family, the market and communities (or NPOs) are all involved in providing forms of social and economic assistance. Razavi (2014: 40) explains the interconnectedness between these four sectors as a 'care diamond'. In certain countries the state may provide free care for different categories of people (for example, state-funded early childhood centres), but in other countries citizens have to either pay for care (the market) or provide it themselves (usually through kin structures).

There are hundreds of NPOs registered in South Africa, the majority of them involved in social services, culture and recreation, development and housing projects. Patel (2014: 252–3) identifies four different types of NPOs: formal public service contractors, donor-funded, faith-based and community-based organisations.

NPOs can be 'agents of the state or of international economic interests' (Meagher 2013: 25–6). Donors may also dictate to NPOs, but many NPOs may have a number of donors who usually wish to support their aims. South Africa also has an active civil society in which the NPO sector often plays a substantial role, for example, Black Sash and Gift of the Givers Foundation. Occasionally, their activist work challenges the state, but their practical support to individuals and communities supplements the care work of the state and kin networks.

I want to highlight the NPO Sonke Gender Justice here, since they focus much of their work on the gendered lives of men. Their aims include advocacy activities to influence specific social policies as well as doing the groundwork to change perceptions and gendered practices. Sonke Gender Justice, founded in 2006, has five regional offices in South Africa (Cape Town, Johannesburg, Bushbuckridge, Diepsloot and Gugulethu), and their programmes reach twenty African countries and nearly 25,000 men each year through workshops, community dialogues and community radio shows (Van den Berg, Hendricks, Hatcher et al. 2013).

Initiatives such as One Man Can and the Men Engage Alliance are aimed at encouraging men to speak up against violence against women, and to be activists in preventing the spread of HIV. The organisation casts itself as a feminist movement with almost 50 per cent female employees at all levels and working with women-led women's rights organisations. One of the prominent aims of Sonke Gender Justice is a focus on positive fathering practices, improved communication with children, different discipline strategies and socialising children to share household responsibilities in an equitable manner (Van den Berg, Hendricks, Hatcher et al. 2013). These activities reveal how difficult it is to change entrenched gender norms and practices steeped in family and community practices.

Conclusion

Men's identity is often closely associated with their ability to earn an income, an expectation which is shared by women and children. Since the economic landscape makes financial contributions from many men impossible, it has a negative effect on their self-esteem. Compared to women, men are not nearly as involved in taking care of family members or doing paid care

work. If they do care work, they often see it as 'beneath' their status. The majority of men do not qualify for any kind of social assistance grant in South Africa and in very poor households where nobody earns wages, they inadvertently become dependent on others who do qualify for grants. Even in cases where men and women qualify for grants, as in the case of people over the age of sixty, women are better able or more likely than men to share their grants with others in such a way as to alleviate poverty more effectively. On the other end of the spectrum, men who are high-income earners are held in high regard and are not necessarily expected to contribute any further support to families.

Within this social realm, Sonke Gender Justice does groundwork in changing negative gendered perceptions and practices. This type of groundwork is essential if we want societies in which men are committed to their families and care work in general regardless of the size of their income. A transformative social policy must include more equitable gender relationships and hence the work by the relevant NPOs should receive more support.

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