

# STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FATHERS 2021



**SONKE GENDER JUSTICE**

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**HUMAN SCIENCES  
RESEARCH COUNCIL**

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**STELLENBOSCH  
UNIVERSITY**

## THE MENCARE GLOBAL FATHERHOOD CAMPAIGN

MenCare is a global campaign to promote men's and boys' involvement as equitable, non-violent caregivers. With activities in more than 45 countries,

MenCare partners carry out joint advocacy initiatives, research, and programming to engage men in positive parenting; in equitable caregiving; in violence prevention; and in maternal, newborn, and child health.

The campaign is co-coordinated by Sonke Gender Justice and Promundo, with Save the Children, Plan International, Oxfam GB and MenEngage Alliance serving as Steering Committee members. For more information about the campaign and its partners, visit [www.men-care.org](http://www.men-care.org).

Sonke Gender Justice has been implementing MenCare-related interventions in South Africa since 2011, including the MenCare 50:50 intervention in partnership with the Department of Social Development and UNICEF South Africa.

This State of South Africa's Fathers 2021 report is produced as a MenCare Global Fatherhood Campaign affiliated resource. The report forms part of a set of country- and region-focused reports on men's involvement as caregivers around the world, inspired by the State of the World's Fathers reports. The first-ever State of the World's Fathers report was published in 2015, and followed by a new report every two years.

The reports are available in multiple languages, and regional and country reports in the same series.

# STATE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FATHERS 2021



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The State of South Africa's Father 2021 report is a project led by Wessel van den Berg (Sonke Gender Justice), Tawanda Makusha (Human Science Research Council) and Kopano Ratele (Stellenbosch University). The views expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations to which they belong, nor of the funding partners or the organisation to which the authors of the different material contained in the report are affiliated.

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> Karabo Ozah	<b>7</b>
<b>Key terms</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Timeline: Recent policy and law developments that affect families and fatherhood</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> Wessel van den Berg, Kopano Ratele, Tawanda Makusha	<b>11</b>
<b>Essay: Dad with a plan</b> Rayyan Ebrahim	<b>24</b>
<b>2 Father connections and disconnections</b> Elmien Lesch, Lesley Gittings, Shanaaz Dunn, Pranitha Maharaj, Helenard Louw, Athena-Maria Enderstein, Erika Nell, Razia Nordien-Lagardien, Blanche Pretorius	<b>25</b>
Case: Inhlawulo and mothers' reports of father connection in urban and rural KwaZulu-Natal Nonzuzo Mbokazi	36
Case: The experiences of fathers alienated from their children by manipulated distancing Emma Durden, Oncemore Mbeve, Nothemba George	44
<b>Essay: I was raised by many fathers except mine</b> Phaswana Asakundwi Emmanuel	<b>50</b>
<b>3 Brothers, uncles, and grandfathers: Kinship-based fatherhood and the state</b> Elena Moore	<b>51</b>
Case: Negotiating fatherhood in woman-to-woman marriages in Limpopo Kagiso Maphalle	64
Case: Unmarried fathers and their invisible children in the Eastern Cape Mbonisi Nyathi	68
<b>Essay: Bastard of Bhacaland</b> Lamla Bam	<b>72</b>



# Foreword



**Karabo Ozah**

*Director of the Centre  
for Child Law*

The State of South Africa's Fathers 2018 was a crucial report that required us to reflect on the complex issue pertaining to the role of fathers in the lives of their children. This new report, the State of South Africa's Fathers 2021 builds on the 2018 report and offers us a layered and considered account of the role of fathers in the lives of children in South Africa.

Importantly, the report reminds us that fathers come in different shapes and forms, and that what matters the most is the experience of a child in terms of who they consider to be their father. Furthermore, the report reminds us that there are historical barriers to fathers being able to actively participate in a holistic manner in the parenting and development of their children, and that these barriers – legal, social and traditional ones – need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The role of the state in creating an enabling environment and encouraging fathers to be present in the lives of children is central. The report highlights a recent Constitutional Court judgment, which found that the provisions of the Births and Deaths Registration Act that did not allow unmarried fathers to register the births of their children were unconstitutional. These archaic legislative provisions violated the rights of children and perpetuated an approach that undermines the importance of the role of fathers in the lives of their children.

As the report reminds us, the role of fathers goes beyond financial provision, and that we fail children and fathers by emphasising this aspect over the other aspects of being a parent.

Children have a right to have a relationship with both their parents as well as their extended family members – this is reflected in the provisions of the Children's Act. Imperfect as some of the provisions may be, they do provide a means through which disputes pertaining to fathers, including unmarried fathers, can be resolved. Unmarried fathers are enabled by the Children's Act to apply to courts to have orders that facilitate them playing an active role in their children's lives.

Courts should, however, be a last resort when there are disputes. Ideally, we want a world where both parents play a role in the lives of their children. In this regard the report urges us to embrace mediation as dispute resolution mechanism that would do more good than harm. Working in a space like the Centre for Child Law, where we receive daily queries pertaining to disputes in relation to care and contact with children from fathers, I support this proposed approach. The only people who lose out when disputes are addressed in an acrimonious manner are the children.

We do not live in an ideal world, and the violence towards women and children in our society affects the issues pertaining to the roles of fathers. Therefore, addressing the need for fathers to play an active and positive role in the lives of their children intersects with us tackling the high rates of violence against women and children. The report challenges us to address, in a concrete manner, the barriers – in all their forms – that have created our current situation where the role of fathers in the lives of their children is an exception rather than the norm.

Allow me to end on a personal note. The concluding chapter of the report reminds us to also dismantle the narrow construct of fatherhood. As a person whose fathers were my maternal uncle and grandfather, both of whom contributed positively to my development, I support this broader perspective. We acknowledge that not all children are in the privileged position to have positive male role models. But where they do have such men in their lives – we need to support their caring roles to the benefit of all children.

<b>4</b>	<b>Economic provision and fatherhood</b>	<b>73</b>
	Mandisa Malinga	
	Case: 'Black tax' and the societal expectations on fathers	78
	Ngoakwana Modubi	
	Case: Experiences of fatherhood among university students	83
	Nicola Kruger, Tamir Cohen	
	<b>Essay: There's a man in the kitchen</b>	<b>94</b>
	Angel Mhlongo	
<b>5</b>	<b>Incarcerated, single, gay or teenage fathers: Disrupting stereotypical notions of fatherhood</b>	<b>95</b>
	Malose Langa, Lynne Goldschmidt	
	Case: Incarcerated fathers: Breaking the cycle of fatherlessness	100
	Thabang Khumalo	
	Case: Experiences of single fathers in South Africa	104
	Erick Kabongo	
	Case: Fatherhood experiences of men who identify as gay	109
	Clyde Kotze	
	Case: Teenage fathers in search of support	112
	Nicole Smith, Malose Langa	
	<b>Essay: Heads or Tata?</b>	<b>118</b>
	Moses Phiri	
<b>6</b>	<b>Fatherhood and violence</b>	<b>119</b>
	Kopano Ratele	
	Case: Mothers' difficulties in securing child maintenance: Financial abuse as a form of domestic violence	126
	Felicity An Guest, Danya Marx, Wessel van den Berg	
	Case: Attitudes on gender equality and inequality among parents in South Africa	134
	Kopano Ratele, Rebecca Helman, Pascal Richardson	
	<b>Essay: The white king</b>	<b>144</b>
	Karabo Nwamusi	
<b>7</b>	<b>Mental health of fathers</b>	<b>145</b>
	Tawanda Makusha and Kopano Ratele	
	Case: A battle with depression	156
	Anonymous	
<b>8</b>	<b>Conclusion: The diverse and complex nature of fatherhood in South Africa</b>	<b>160</b>
	Tawanda Makusha, Wessel van den Berg, Kopano Ratele	
	<b>SOSAF 2021 survey: The state of fatherhood in South Africa</b>	<b>168</b>
	<b>Glossary</b>	<b>174</b>
	<b>About the authors</b>	<b>176</b>

# Key terms used in this report

The following eight terms appear frequently throughout the report and deserve some clarification here to avoid their conflation.

## ABSENT FATHERS

The term 'absent father' is used to refer to a father that is neither physically living in the same household as his child, nor involved in the child's life. While it is often used in writings about fatherhood to refer to the absence of a biological father in the household where the child lives, it can also refer to a non-biological or social father being absent.

## RESIDENCY

Residency status of fathers refers to whether the child and father live in the same household, or not.

## CO-RESIDENT FATHERS

Statistics South Africa regards a father as co-resident when he sleeps in the same household for four or more days per week. This definition is used to estimate co-residency of a biological father with his child.

## NON-RESIDENT FATHERS

A father is counted as 'non-resident' by Statistics South Africa when he is away from home for four or more days per week. Non-resident fathers may still be involved in a child's life.

## SOCIAL FATHERHOOD

A social father is a person who takes on the responsibility and role of being a father to a child, but who is not the biological male parent of the child. The status of fatherhood is

therefore a social status rather than a biological one, and may be actively sought by and/or ascribed to the person by their family or community. One person could be a biological father to one child and a social father to another.

## FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Involvement is used as an overarching term for several categories of interaction between fathers and children that include – but are not limited to – emotional support, communication, financial support and caregiving.

## PROVIDERSHIP

Being a provider includes the important provision of financial support for a child's wellbeing and health such as providing for food, clothing, housing and education. This notion of 'being a provider' also extends further to include other resources such as attentive time together, care work, care work, and educational and emotional support.

## CARE

The word 'care' is used in several ways in this report: 'caring about' refers to paying attention to, or feelings of affection and concern about another, 'taking care of' refers to taking responsibility for the wellbeing of another, and 'caregiving' refers to the competent engagement in physical care work such as feeding or washing.

# List of abbreviated terms

<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome	<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>CMDSA</b>	Child Maintenance Difficulties South Africa	<b>NIDS-CRAM</b>	National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey
<b>COVID</b>	Coronavirus Disease	<b>SASSA</b>	South African Social Security Agency
<b>CSG</b>	Child Support Grant	<b>SEM</b>	Socio-Economic Measures
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation	<b>SMS</b>	Short Message Service
<b>DHA</b>	Department of Home Affairs	<b>SOSAF</b>	State of South Africa's Fathers
<b>DoJ &amp; CD</b>	Department of Justice and Constitutional Development	<b>UIF</b>	Unemployment Insurance Fund
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo	<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>FAMSA</b>	Families South Africa	<b>VAC</b>	Violence Against Children
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product		
<b>GHS</b>	General Household Survey		
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus		
<b>LGBTQIA+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual, and Questioning		



## About the essays by children and young people in this report

Children's and young people's reflections on the fathers in their lives are reflected in six essays that can be found in-between the chapters in this report. The writings were all winning essays in the 'My Father' competition run by the FunDza Literacy Trust in collaboration with Heartlines. The essays were originally published on fundza.mobi.

## Key moments from recent policy and law developments that affect families and fatherhood

- 1994** → First democratic elections of South Africa
- 1996** → Constitution of the Republic of South Africa
- 1998** → Maintenance Act 99 of 1998
- 1997** → Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997 (maternity leave)
- 1998** → Recognition of Customary Marriages Act 120 of 1998  
Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998
- 2001** → Draft National Policy Framework for Families
- 2005** → Children's Act 38 of 2005
- 2006** → Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 (legal recognition for same-sex couples)
- 2007** → Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007
- 2012** → White Paper on Families in South Africa
- 2015** → National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy
- 2018** → Labour Laws Amendment Bill (parental leave provisions) approved
- 2019** → Defence of reasonable chastisement found unconstitutional – prohibiting corporal punishment
- 2020** → Labour Laws Amendment Bill (parental leave provisions) implemented
- 2020** → National Strategic Plan on Gender Based Violence & Femicide
- 2021** → Revised White Paper on Families
- 2021** → Section 10 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 51 of 1992 declared unconstitutional (unmarried fathers and birth registration)

# INTRODUCTION

Wessel van den Berg, Kopano Ratele & Tawanda Makusha

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Wessel van den Berg, Sonke Gender Justice; Kopano Ratele, Stellenbosch University; Tawanda Makusha, Human Sciences Research Council

The 2021 State of South Africa's Fathers (henceforth SOSAF 2021) report is the second edition on fatherhood in the country. As with the first report, the core value that permeates SOSAF 2021 is that of *men who embody care*.

Embodied male care refers to men caring for their children. Such care can be through mindful bodily presence. It can be in the form of psychosocial availability or words of counsel when needed. Spiritual guidance, a clinic visit, financial support, helping with homework, or other kinds of practical support also form part of caring behaviour.

A caring father to us also means a man who supports those who help him raise his offspring. These other people are usually mothers who gave birth to and – too often – singly raise the children. However, sometimes they are grandparents, aunts, and other relatives. Finally, fathers who care also refers to men taking care of themselves, their health, and relationships.

## A tool for the imperative of promoting a more caring nation

We were reminded of the value of care by the events of 2020 and 2021 as we worked on the second SOSAF report during a most significant event for the globe: the COVID-19 pandemic. Our very first workshop as editors and authors, which was scheduled for April 2020, had to be shelved because of the government lockdown measures. Infections rose and deaths all over the world and in our country piled up, as we watched in incredulity and shock.

Mental health suffered as people experienced loss without being able to grieve and share their distress in the usual ways. Lockdown made sure we kept our distance from other people, cutting us from physical availability of social connections. Face masks to protect ourselves became part of our existence. Those of us who could work from home memorialised departed ones via Microsoft Teams and celebrated birthdays over Zoom.

A year later, our last workshop for the report was online. This was in July 2021. We were going through the third wave of coronavirus infections and deaths. The country was under tough, alert level 4 lockdown measures. Born during this time of the pandemic, the absolute necessity for caring for one another and ourselves that inspires this report could not be more pertinent.

Around the same time, the country was gripped by events straight from an apocalyptic movie. Local and global television news networks showed incredible scenes of looting, fires, destruction, and violence. It was carnage visualised in political nightmares. When things resumed to some kind of normalcy, over 300 people were dead, mostly in KwaZulu-Natal, and some in Gauteng. Shopping malls had been destroyed, delivery trucks burned, and the president and his government ministers were blaming one another for not anticipating what some called an insurrection, others an insurgency, and yet others a counter-revolution.

There can never be rationality, justice, or social health in a society where millions of men and women are unemployed, a large number go hungry daily, stark economic inequality lies

side by side with gratuitous consumerism, and high rates of disability and mortality from direct violence are part of the social fabric. This picture too is another piece of the evidence for the need to promote policy and practices towards a much more caring nation.

## A monitoring and tracking mechanism for changes in fatherhood

The first SOSAF report<sup>1</sup>, published in 2018, received widespread media coverage. The nation wanted to know about and understand fathers. This new report is intended to slake some of the thirst to understand the lives of fathers and fatherhood that continues to be felt in the country.

Part of the inspiration of the first report was the book *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa*<sup>2</sup>, published by the Human Sciences Research Council a decade and half ago; the steadily growing body of work towards stimulating involved fatherhood in South Africa<sup>3</sup>; and the biennial State of the World's Fathers report<sup>4</sup>. The SOSAF 2018 was seen as part of the then emerging body of work on fathers contained in country-focused reports on fatherhood, including from Africa<sup>5</sup>, America<sup>6</sup>, Australia<sup>7</sup>, and Russia<sup>8</sup>, to name a few.

SOSAF 2018 established a reference point for further research and advocacy related to fatherhood. Aimed at assessing and promoting the values of involved, caring fatherhood, the editors and authors hoped that the report would galvanise a shift in priorities towards a more nuanced approach and better support for families more generally and, more specifically, would engage men in childcare and more gender-equitable parenting.

The goals of the SOSAF reports, beginning with SOSAF 2018, are to: 1. produce academic evidence and thinking to inform advocacy for law and social reform; and 2. contribute

**Fathers who care also refers to men taking care of themselves, their health, and relationships.**

credible arguments to national narratives about fatherhood. In the context of an increasing awareness of the importance of care and gender equality, and given the rise of fake news, SOSAF reports offer rational, well-informed, and fact-based countermeasures to policy decision-making and development driven by vested interests, as well as a bulwark against uninformed or false narratives. The reports are envisaged as a central plank of a multidisciplinary longitudinal project that produces, amongst the significant outputs, a new report every three years, thereby creating a long-term monitoring and tracking mechanism for changes in fatherhood in South Africa.

## Fatherhood, absence, and involvement

The issue of father absence is one that attracts a great deal of attention in South Africa. It is therefore vital to state how father absence is defined in the SOSAF reports. Furthermore, there are different degrees and kinds of absence. When emotional care is missing, physical presence may not make up for lack of involvement between parent and child. When the father is in the house, but he is violent, it may be better if he was not living in the same household with the child. Some kinds of absences are more traumatic than others because they envelop violence or oppressiveness. Other kinds of absence are relatively easier to tolerate because they can be viewed as unavoidable.

'Father absence' is defined in this report as fathers (whether biological or social fathers) who are physically *and* economically *and* psychosocially absent from their children. (See figure 1 on how living arrangements and involvement overlap – this report supports an expanded focus on all four dimensions depicted.) In other words, if a father does not co-reside with his child but financially supports her or him by buying food or school clothes, he should not be referred to as completely absent from the child's life. Similarly, a father who psychosocially supports his child, for instance calls the child, but does not live with the child, is only partially absent.

While proximity between father and child is of course an important aspect of care and involvement, an overemphasis on co-residency neglects a more accurate focus that includes whether fathers are involved in a child's care or not, regardless of their living arrangements. A man who does not live with the child for any number of reasons, but supports the child in other ways, is not altogether absent since he remains involved. The level of involvement of a father in a child's life, therefore, is important to focus on. This aspect often is missing in national statistics and conversations about fatherhood.

The collection of graphs depicted on pp. 16 – 17 show some of the national statistics from the annual General Household Survey (GHS) applicable to fatherhood. These are the latest available statistics from the GHS 2019.

GHS data focuses on the co-residence (or not) of children with their biological fathers. As we suggest in SOSAF 2018 and in this Introduction chapter fatherhood entails much more than co-residence. While co-residence and physical proximity are important factors, we also understand fatherhood to include: 1. non-resident fathers; 2. social fathers who are not biologically related to the child; and 3. the fact that some co-resident biological fathers may have low father involvement with children.

Figure 10 on p. 18 shows a combined picture of children living with men, and men living with children. This distinction is often overlooked. In simple terms, two or three children may, for example, share a household with one man. 'Children living with men' is therefore different from 'men living with children'.

Figure 10 shows that, in 2019, 78% of children shared a household with an adult man<sup>9</sup> (who

Figure 1: Focus on four dimensions of co-residence and involvement

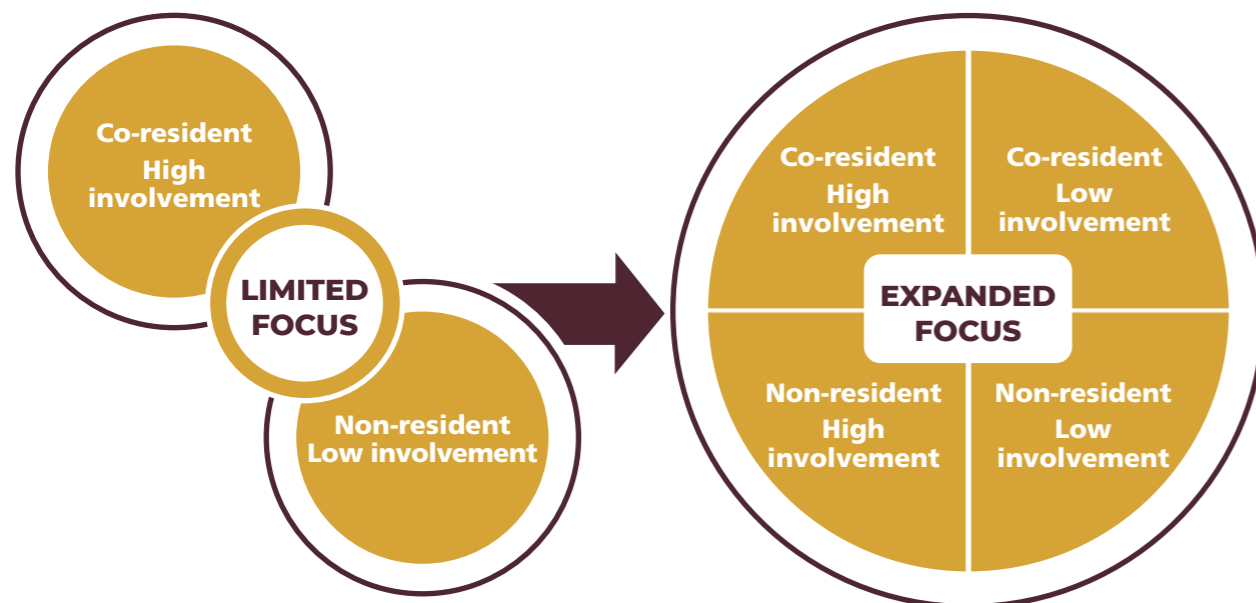


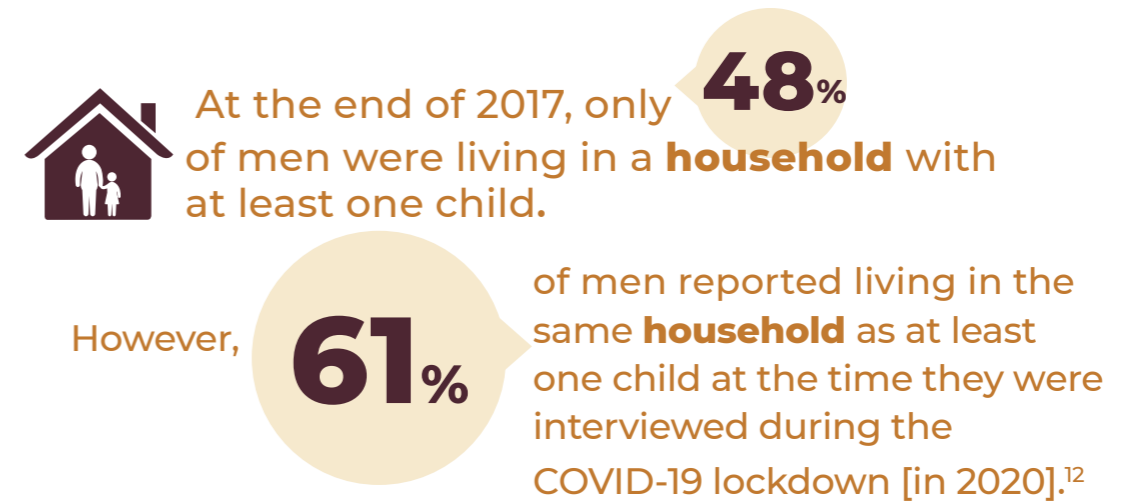
Figure 2: Children co-resident with men who are not their biological fathers, 2019



may or may not be their biological father) – an increase from the 71% shown by the GHS 2016<sup>10</sup>. The 2019 percentage total was calculated by adding up the 41% of children who were living with adult men who are not their biological fathers, and 37% of children who were living with their biological fathers.<sup>11</sup>

The increase in the percentage of children sharing a household with an adult man may

have been more exaggerated in 2020 because the data collection may have coincided with the period when men were under lockdown. In 2020, the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) found that the percentage of men who co-resided with children had increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in South Africa:





# FATHERHOOD STATISTICS FROM THE GENERAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY 2019

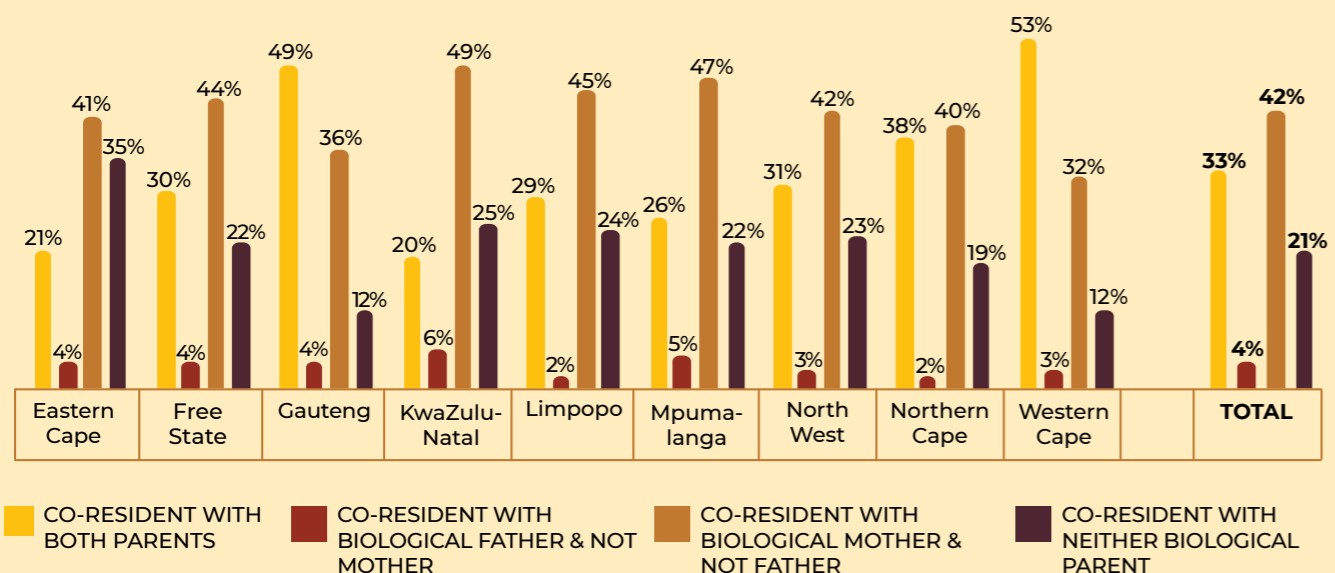


Figure 3: Children co-resident with biological fathers, national and by province, 2019

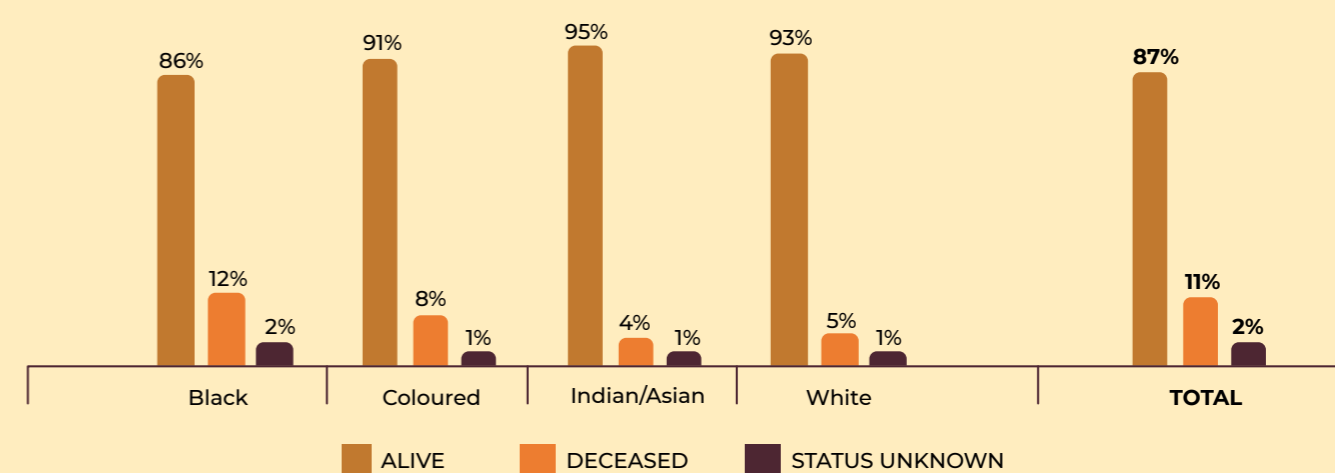


Figure 6: Children whose biological fathers are alive, deceased or status unknown, by race, 2019

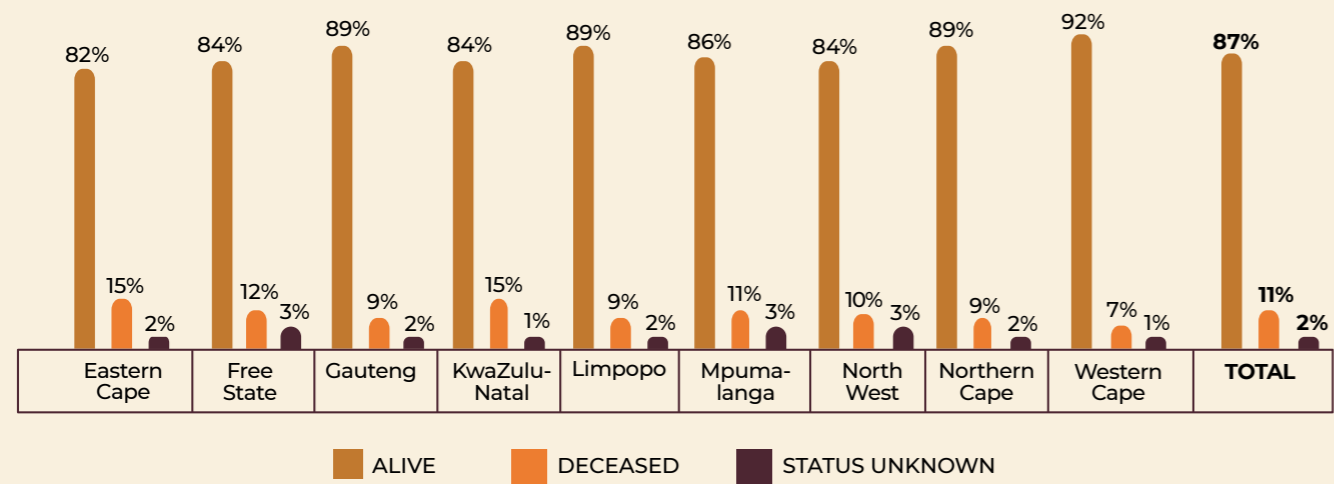


Figure 4: Children whose biological fathers are alive, deceased or status unknown, by province, 2019

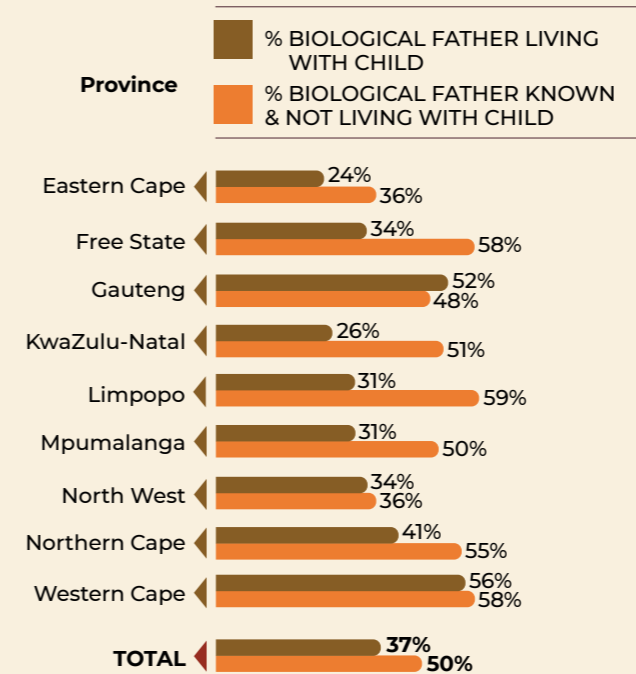


Figure 7: Percentage of biological fathers living with child, national and by province, 2019

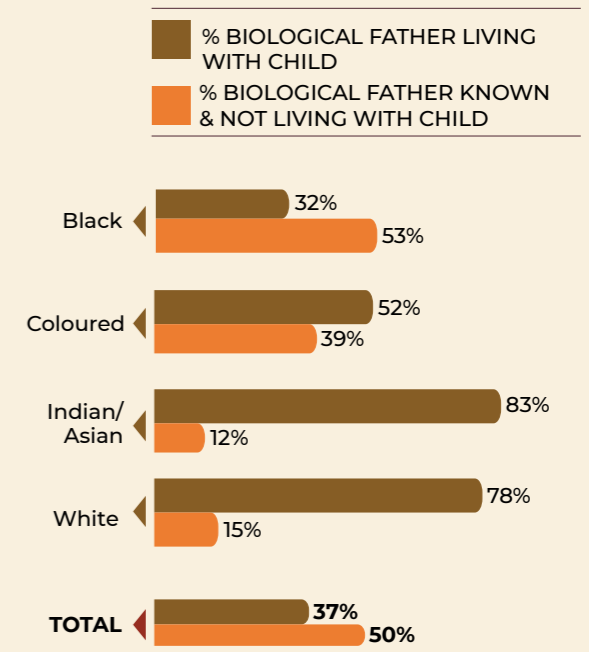


Figure 8: Percentage of biological fathers living with child and not living with child, by race, 2019

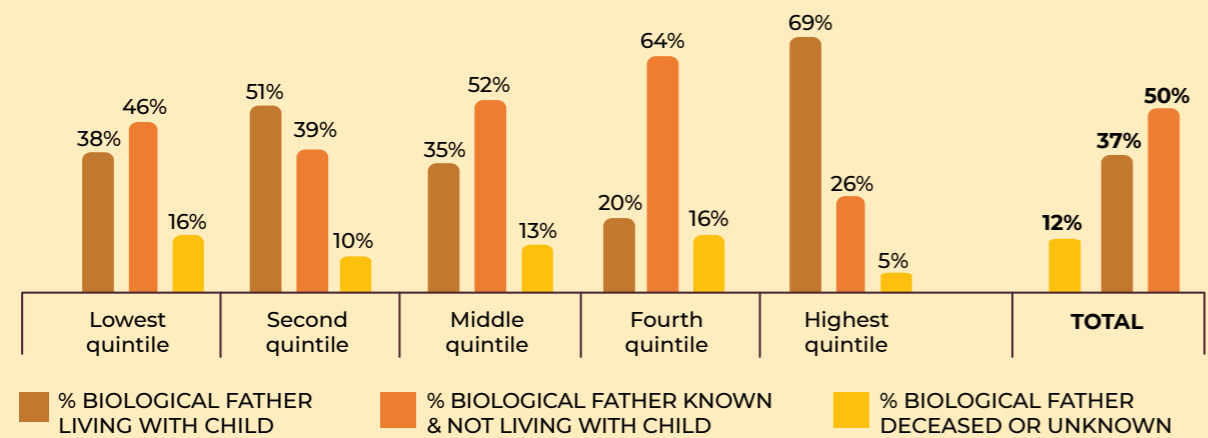


Figure 5: Children co-resident with biological fathers, by income quintile, 2019

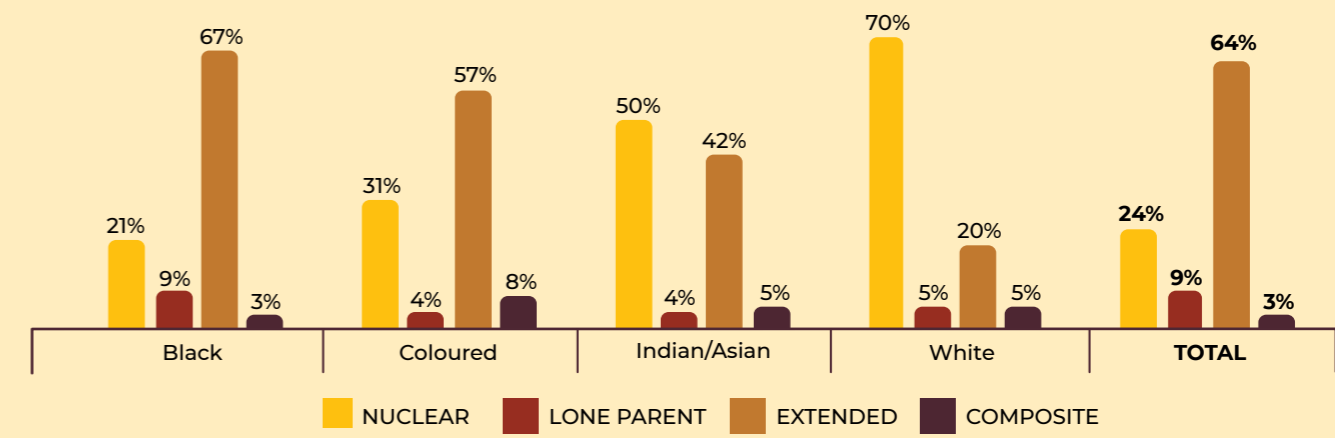
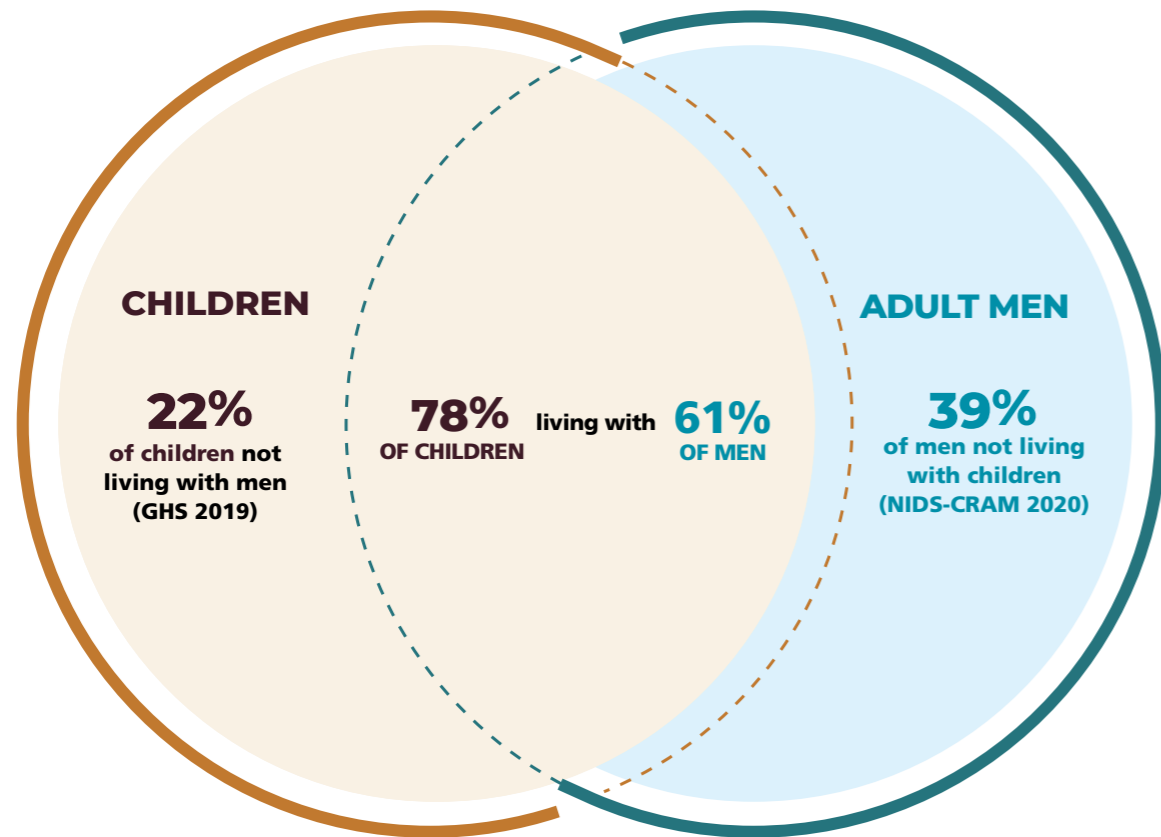


Figure 9: Children's residency in different household types, by race, 2019

In other words, the Venn diagram (below) of men living with children (61%), compared to children living with men (78%), changed during lockdown. There was an increase in co-residence between men and children. In summary, more children and men are living together than before, although some of this change may be attributable to the lockdown.

Figure 10: Men living with children compared to children living with men during COVID lockdown, 2020



### Policy, legal and programmatic developments since 2018

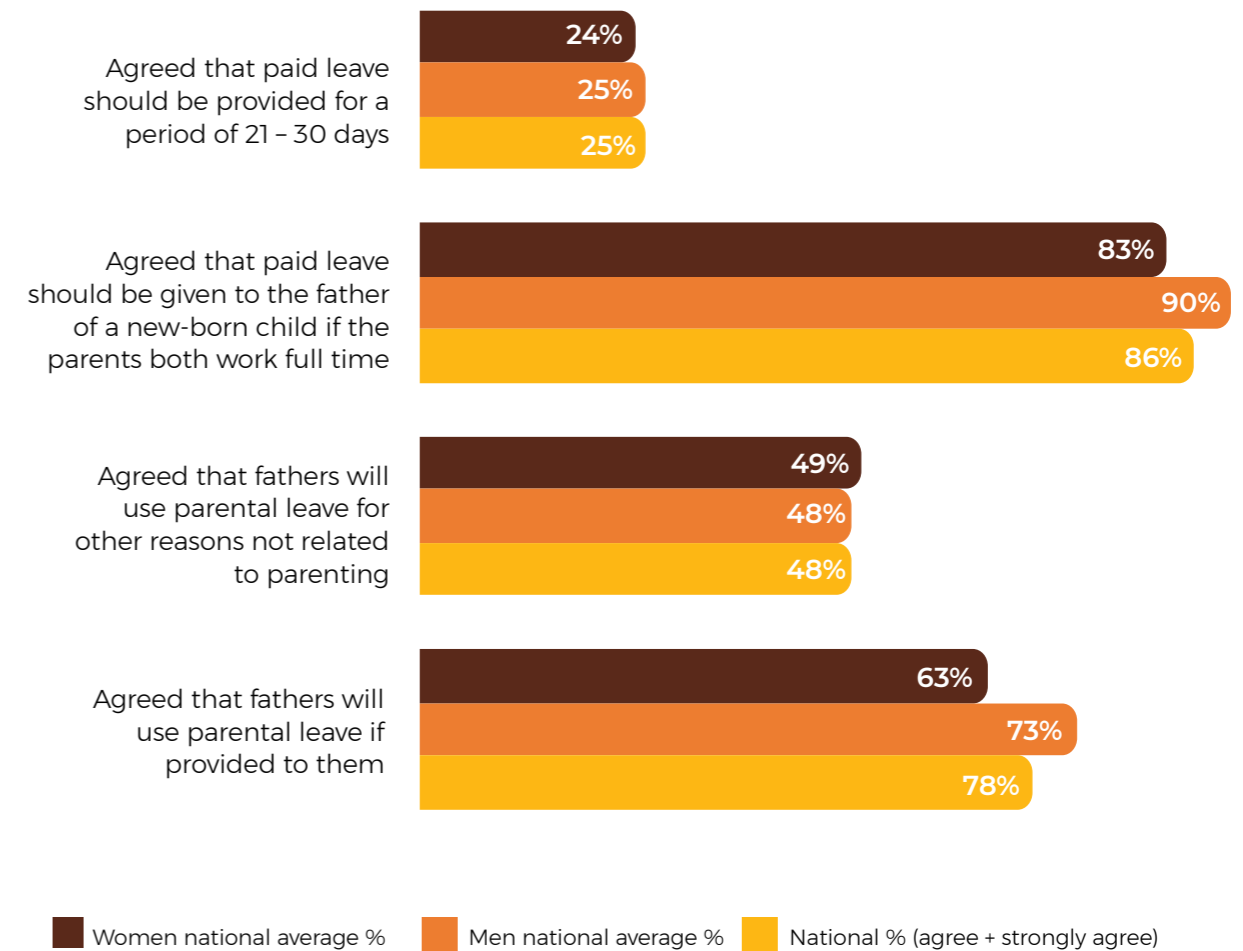
A summary of fatherhood-related policies was depicted in SOSAF 2018, and the past three years have seen a number of policy and law changes that added important milestones to this list (see p. 10). These include the eventual approval and implementation of the Labour Laws Amendment Act and the Labour Relations Amendment Act. The amendments provide for improved parental leave and benefits for parents, including better paid maternity leave, and 10 dedicated paid

parental leave days for parents who do not qualify for maternity leave (mostly fathers).<sup>13</sup>

In a set of questions asked in the South African Social Attitude Survey<sup>14</sup> men and women agreed with the principle of paid leave for fathers, but respondents seemed sceptical about whether men would use this leave for childcare (see figure 11). Encouragingly, when we asked fathers in the SOSAF 2021 survey, most reported that they actually did use their leave for childcare (see p. 169).

Parental leave for fathers was originally suggested in the first White Paper on Families in 2012.<sup>15</sup> The White Paper has also been updated and re-published as a Revised White Paper on Families in 2021, with a revised focus on fatherhood.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 11: Summary<sup>17</sup> of social attitudes towards parental leave in South Africa



Another change in law that is significant for parenting in South Africa was the finding, by the Constitutional Court in September 2019, that the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' was unconstitutional, thereby effectively prohibiting all forms of physical punishment of children in South Africa, in all settings.<sup>18</sup>

A third significant policy change related to fatherhood was the launch of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence & Femicide.<sup>19</sup> This plan is significant to fatherhood since it overlaps with engaging men in the prevention of and responses to gender-based violence and includes some focus on addressing violence used against children by adults, parents, and caregivers.

The fourth significant policy change was the confirmation by the Constitutional Court, in 2021, of the finding of the Makhanda High Court, that section 10 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act is unconstitutional with respect to the right of unmarried fathers to register the births of their children. The Constitutional Court found that the section discriminates against both children and their unmarried fathers and infringes on their dignity. The Court held that it is not justifiable to differentiate between children born to married parents and children born to unmarried parents in terms of regulating what surname may be given to a child. The Centre for Child Law and Lawyers for Human Rights explained in their press statement<sup>20</sup> that:

“Section 10 essentially left these children stateless and were also deprived of their ability to access basic rights and services. Children without birth certificates are at greater risk of exclusion from the education system, from accessing social assistance and healthcare, and crucially, to access to their nationality. The judgment also affirms the children’s intrinsic worth and sense of belonging.”

After this Constitutional Court finding it is now the responsibility of the Department of Home Affairs to do everything possible to ensure the implementation of the court order.

In terms of programmatic developments related to fatherhood, while violence against men remains neglected, there has been an increased focus from academics and non-profit organisations on the intersections of violence against women and violence against children. How these fields of violence can be addressed together inevitably involves an engagement with the roles that men play in families, and particularly how fatherhood may feature as a factor to consider in responding to such forms of violence. In popular non-fiction literature, an increased focus on the roles that fathers play in children’s lives has also begun to receive more attention, for example with the publication of the book *Seuns sonder Pa’s / Sons without Fathers* by press journalist Julian Jansen.<sup>21</sup>

Another important programmatic focus that deserves mention here is an emerging community of practice and body of research about men working as paid caregivers in early childhood care and educational settings.<sup>22</sup> This is important for fatherhood since it normalises men’s caregiving practices for institutions and communities, as well as presents children with models of men in accepted caregiving roles.

<sup>i</sup> Here, and elsewhere in this report, the four racial categories (Black, Coloured, Indian and White) are used to refer to the Statistics South Africa categories of African/Coloured/Indian and White. We use the term ‘Black’ to refer to Black African people, and we have replaced ‘African’ with ‘Black’ where we report on statistics. This is in acknowledgement that categories other than ‘Black African’ people may identify as African. It is, however, a compromised position, given that the same applies where Coloured or Indian people may also identify as Black.

## A first-of-its kind survey of South Africa’s fathers

The 2018 SOSAF report made several recommendations for policy and research. These include:

- calling for national-level research about fathers and fatherhood;
- encouraging father involvement in the first 1,000 days of children’s lives and across the life course at policy level;
- designing contextually, culturally and age-appropriate and gender-sensitive programmes and policies for fathers; tracking fathers’ use of the Child Support Grant (CSG) and parental leave provision,
- basing policymaking on credible evidence; and
- informing programmatic interventions with a nuanced practice-based understanding of what living arrangements, including father absence and father involvement, mean across income, race<sup>i</sup>, province, and age.<sup>23</sup>

The SOSAF 2021 report has given effect to several of these recommendations, the most significant of which is that this report includes the findings of the first-ever and largest non-probability survey conducted on fathers and fatherhood in South Africa. Commissioned by the editors and conducted by a research company, the SOSAF 2021 survey on the state of fathers and fatherhood in South Africa covered 1,003 men, from all the provinces of the country, who reported having biological children or acting in the capacity of fathers for children. The survey goal was to examine a range of attitudes and practices related to the lives of fathers and fatherhood in general and the survey items were adapted from available, valid global and local surveys.

In this report, the survey data is discussed alongside pertinent data from the latest available GHS and scholarly work on research topics related to fatherhood including kinship, non-normative fatherhood, the economy and fathers, fathers and mental health, and fathers and violence. While a synopsis of the survey results is presented on pp. 168 - 172, more results appear throughout the different chapters of the report for easy consultation and reference to readers.

## Recent thinking, research, and changes on the status of fathers and fatherhood

This report contains six related chapters by researchers who are involved in various independent research projects related to fatherhood in South Africa. The chapters were led by experienced authors in the field of fatherhood or related areas, with a key focus on recent thinking, research, and changes on the status of fathers and fatherhood in South Africa. Content for the chapters was carefully curated to reflect a pluralistic account of fatherhood

in South Africa, including at times divergent perspectives.

Authors of the chapters also paid close attention to contextual legal, economic, political, and cultural developments in the country, as well as elsewhere in the world, that influence the lives of fathers. Chapters are supplemented by cases on fathers and fatherhood. Essays on fathers, written by children and young people of different ages, follow each chapter. The essays were drawn from a writing competition run by the FunDza Literacy Trust and Heartlines.<sup>24</sup>

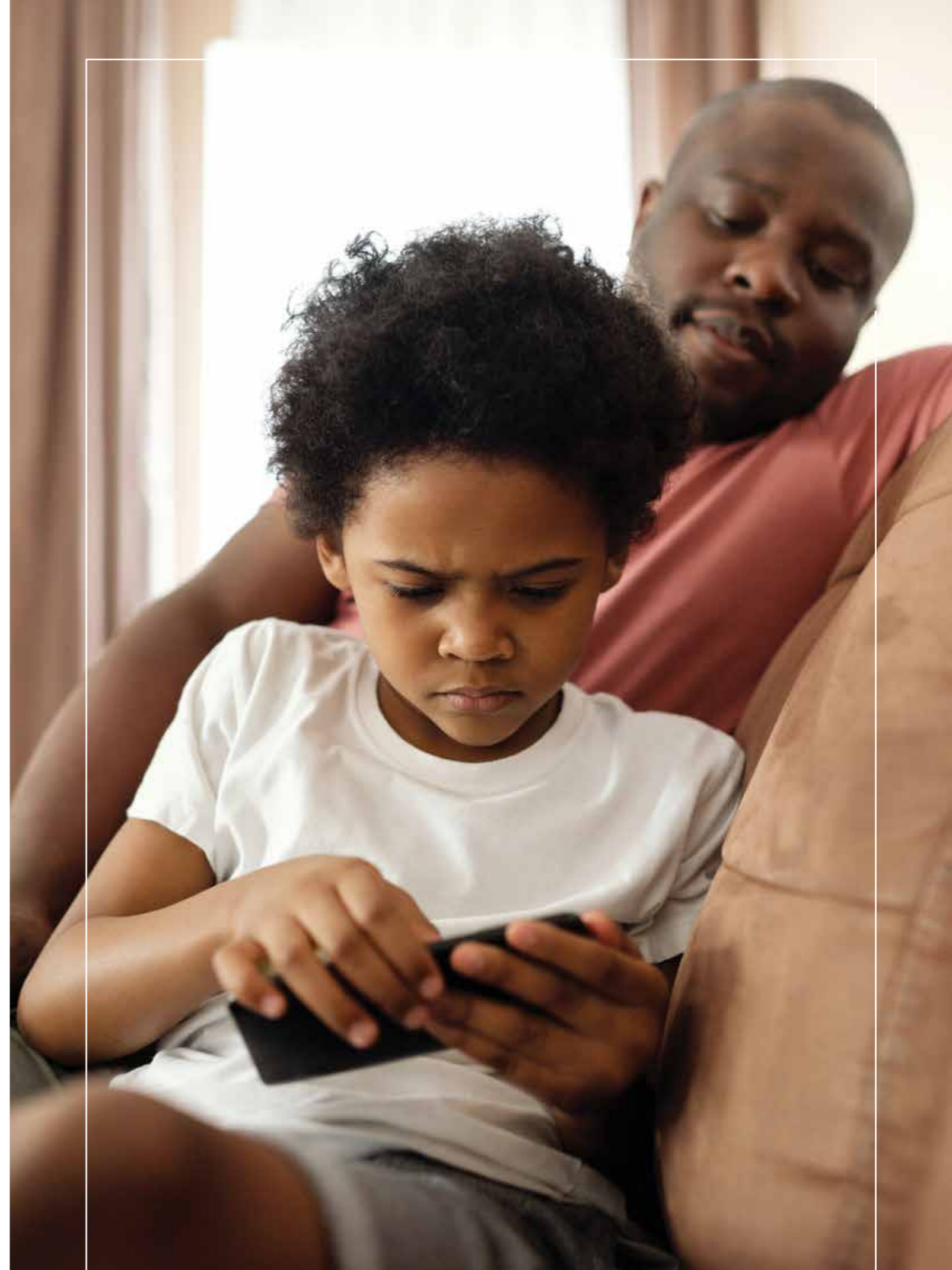
In conclusion, SOSAF 2021 is a further contribution to the vision planted in SOSAF 2018 of increased, positive involvement of men in their own children’s lives, and to every child who needs to see nurturing, nonviolent adult men as part of their lives. From inception, the hope that drove this work was that it would connect research, the implementation of programmes, future policy choices, and advocacy.

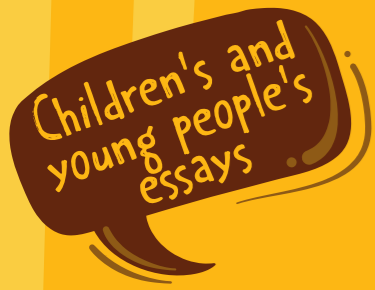
The long-term vision of the SOSAF project is to facilitate increased public engagement and social change in how to perceive men as fathers, and fatherhood, in South Africa.



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# Dad with a plan

**Author:** Rayyan Ebrahim

I sat there for hours, staring at the blank page in front of me, drowned in frustration. It was a simple maths problem, an easy sum that anyone could do. Not me, clearly, I had come to realise four hours into my calculations. I felt helpless, I had absolutely no idea what to do. Eventually my struggle turned to tears and God knows what would have happened had my father not come to my aid at that exact moment.

That is what a father is to me. A figure to look up to, a superhero in disguise. The support, the sincere love and belonging I feel around him is overwhelming in the best way. When I did not think I was capable, when I perceive my dreams to be too big, he assures me that it most certainly is not and that anything I could dream of I could make possible.

My father is the one who pushes me out of my comfort zone, inspiring me to take risks, insisting that limitations do not exist. He sees things in me that I do not always see in myself. I am thankful for all the times he pushed me into the water, knowing I would swim, believing that I would conquer whatever pool I was in.

Gently my father knocked on the door, opening it slowly so that I would not get startled. His warm expressions brought light to my dark mood, as it always does. At first he did not say a word, he simply put his hand on my shoulder and brought my head to his chest. Immediately I calmed down.

“Why are you crying, my son?”, he asked, and I told him how hopeless I felt that I could not complete my maths homework.

I showed him the sum and he analysed it critically. He looked at me and smiled, that same smile that is my incentive to grow into at least half the man that he is. Suddenly my difficulty seemed irrelevant; if I was trying my best it was good enough.

His reputation speaks for himself. He is a constant in my life, someone who will always be there for me, who I can trust and count on in times of need. His belief in me makes me believe in myself. He gives me the confidence to follow my own journey and no matter where the path takes me, I know he will always remain close.

I wiped the tears off my cheeks and asked my dad what the answer to the sum was. He did not tell me the answer, rather he showed me how to get there. That is what I love most about my dad; he truly embodies the traits he instils in me.

“It is pointless to have knowledge if you do not share that knowledge with others”, he often reminds me. There he was, uplifting me through his immense wisdom.

Step by step I followed his instruction, until eventually I arrived at the answer. How elated I was! Instinctively I hugged my dad and he shot me with yet another smile as he left my room, slightly warmer than it was before.

*This was a winning essay in the 'My Father' competition by the FunDza Literacy Trust in collaboration with Heartlines. It was originally published on fundza.mobi*

# FATHER CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS

Elmien Lesch, Lesley Gittings, Shanaaz Dunn, Pranitha Maharaj, Helenard Louw, Athena-Maria Enderstein, Erika Nell, Razia Nordien-Lagardien & Blanche Pretorius

## Chapter 2

# Father connections and disconnections

Elmien Lesch, Stellenbosch University; Lesley Gittings, University of Cape Town and University of Toronto; Shanaaz Dunn, University of KwaZulu-Natal; Pranitha Maharaj, University of KwaZulu-Natal; Helenard Louw, Vrije University of Amsterdam; Athena-Maria Enderstein, University of Hull; Erika Nell, Stellenbosch University; Razia Nordien-Lagardien, Nelson Mandela University; Blanche Pretorius, Nelson Mandela University

## KEY MESSAGES

- Fathers desire close relationships with children.
- Fathers report participation in a range of daily caregiving activities.
- Conflictual family relationships hinder father-child connection.
- Transformative approaches to family mediation can support non-resident father-child connection.

In South Africa, fathers often are seen mainly as material providers with rather distant relationships with their children.<sup>1</sup> However, studies indicate that father involvement often extends beyond this role, to include nurturing and emotionally expressive care.<sup>2</sup> The first State of South Africa's Fathers report<sup>3</sup> highlighted the need to generate more contextual knowledge on fatherhood, and the diversity of fathers and father involvement in South Africa.

This chapter draws on research that provides knowledge about the ideas and practices of fatherhood of men from diverse fathering contexts. The first part of the chapter foregrounds studies that offer further evidence that men are taking up ideas and practices of fatherhood which include close involvement

in their children's lives. These studies highlight how men talk about wanting to be present fathers with close connections with their children, and the factors that foster such connections.

The chapter also focuses on the other side of the coin: fathers who struggle to develop and maintain close bonds with their children. Biological fathers who do not live with their children are one group of fathers that often experience such challenges.<sup>4</sup> We turn the spotlight on these fathers and the barriers to close connections with their children by presenting studies that respectively explored absent or infrequent contact between non-resident fathers and their children, and how parental conflict could affect fathers' engagement with children. The role of family mediation to help address barriers to father involvement is also highlighted.

## Father connections

This section draws on three recent qualitative studies that explored fatherhood ideas and practices of men of varying ages who live in different contexts in South Africa: in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape provinces. These studies are presented in the sequence from young prospective fathers wanting to do better than their own fathers,

to current fathers doing better than their own fathers, and, finally, 'being there' as fathers.

### Wanting to do better than their own fathers: Young men on future fatherhood

The first study<sup>5</sup> (as part of a bigger project<sup>6</sup>) investigated how 36 Black, isiXhosa-speaking adolescent boys and young men (ages 13 – 24) who are living with HIV in the Eastern Cape talked about being fathers. Nearly all the men in this study wanted children and imagined their futures with a female partner and children.

This ideal was demonstrated in the drawings by 17-year-old Jenovo<sup>i</sup>, in which he depicted his hopes for the future by drawing his family and desired home. On one of his pictures he wrote, in isiXhosa, "having a lovely family" accompanied by an emoji of a man, woman and child huddled together happily. Above this he wrote: "I want to have 3 children". He also wrote that he wanted to be an accountant and drew his house, a sizable, concrete home with big green trees. In the interview with him, Jenovo also spoke about the type of father he wanted to be; that is, a "good" father, like the father that he never had:

“ I want to be there every time they [my children] need me; I don't want them to grow without a father like me [...] I want to see that I can be a good father to my children. – Jenovo

Similar to Jenovo, other participants often framed their fatherhood aspirations and their desires to be present, supportive fathers in contrast to their own experiences as children. Most had deceased or uninvolved fathers:

“ I want to give my child what I never had, that love ... Even now [I don't have that]. So, I want that bond with my child, to have time for my child. – Mr Shade

“ I want them to stay with me so that whenever they need something, I can give it to them. I don't want them to be like me, because look at me, I grow up in a shack. That's hard. – Ndoda

Besides their desires to be present and loving fathers, material provision was foregrounded in participants' talk about fatherhood. Drawing on responsible and caring narratives of fatherhood, they also spoke about the timing and the number of children they wanted in relation to finances, demonstrating that they had a strong awareness of the costs of having children, and desired to act as material providers. Such forward thinking stands in stark contrast to the dominant assumption that young, poor, and Black men are irresponsible – an assertion that has been documented and challenged.<sup>7</sup> Participants' responses also demonstrate how economic aspirations are tied up in family and the gendered role of 'provider'.<sup>8</sup> Material provision was intertwined with emotional care of children in complex and multilayered ways.

This connection between material provision and physical and emotional presence is important. It has been suggested that the failure to be primary providers is experienced as intolerable for many men and may lead to neglecting children's other needs, such as emotional support and caregiving.<sup>9</sup> This is central in a context of high unemployment and poverty which make it difficult for men to earn money and occupy the provider role.<sup>10</sup> The frustration of not being able to meet expected fatherhood roles such as building a home and providing for children<sup>11</sup> can undermine such men's sense of value and success.

<sup>i</sup> See the note (i) in the Introduction chapter, p. 20, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

<sup>ii</sup> Not his real name. This applies to all participants and their kin who are named in this chapter.

This is especially true for men living in poverty and those who are unable to live up to such expectations, including for reasons of HIV and illness.<sup>12</sup>

The young men in the Eastern Cape study also spoke about the emotional impact of fathers' absences and challenges of identity and disconnection from their patrilineal ancestors. For example, Khwezi spoke about his father's absence, not knowing his surname, and his disconnection from his paternal ancestry. In his drawing and life history narrative, he depicted his father far away from the rest of his family. He used an angry emoji to express his frustration about the lack of presence and support from his father and paternal family. He also visually represented the gap in his life for not knowing his father during his transition into manhood, something that he said was important to him in his current life stage. In this way, his father and his patrilineal kin represented an important life event through their absence:

“ I know where he [my father] lives but I never saw him in reality [...] I don't even know his surname [...] Not knowing my father at this certain age, it affects me somewhere, somehow because I need things like rituals from my father's side ... His family knows that their child has a son ... They know that I'm a man and I have needs concerning my manhood ... my [grand]mother met one of their family members and she told her that I was going to the bush. They didn't even show support or even show up or buy me some drinks. – Khwezi

The participants' desires to be future fathers who were present and providing often seemed to be grounded in their own negative experiences as children of uninvolved fathers. Researchers<sup>13</sup> have suggested that such desires can be understood as a way to meet unfulfilled needs through children. In this way, being a loving and caring parent can be a form of compensation for

## The connection between material provision and physical and emotional presence is important.

unfulfilled childhood wishes, and a mechanism to not repeat the suffering they experienced as children.<sup>14</sup> These desired forms of fatherhood may also serve the function of redeeming fathers who were deceased, absent, or unable to provide.

For children who lost parents to AIDS-related illness, living to become fathers may also represent survival and the ability to carry on their lineages. In a context where an HIV-positive status is seen as a barrier to intimate relationships, having children, and breadwinning<sup>15</sup>, becoming a father may also represent being able to do something that is considered outside of the realm of being men who live with HIV.

### Doing better by reshaping fatherhood roles and responsibilities

In another study<sup>16</sup>, 20 young fathers aged 21 – 28 years from various racial backgrounds in Durban were interviewed. Many were new fathers, while others had children aged between two and seven years. Participants felt that transitioning into the role of a father required “sacrifice” that they were willing to make. For John, the sacrifice “... was worth it”.

The men also spoke of the pressure of their new responsibilities and how these changed their lives. One of the fathers reflected that:

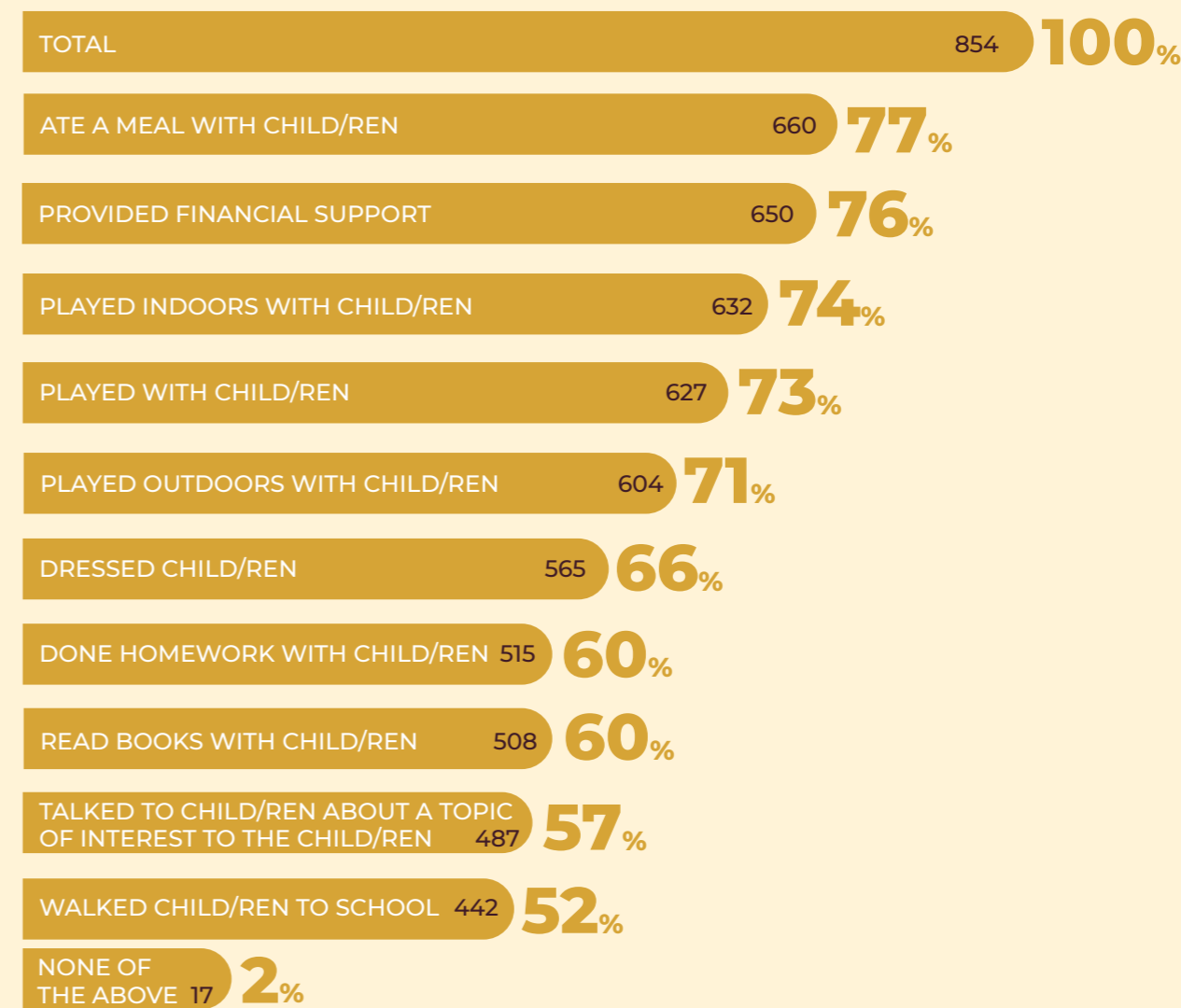
“ You realise what you have to do in life. You have more priorities now; I have to pay for school fees. So, there is a lot that I have to do. I have grown up more than I would have liked. I was out partying all the time but now I am focused on my children's future. – James

All the young men in this study said that they contributed financially towards the wellbeing and upkeep of their children. They believed that the provider role formed the basis of a solid foundation for the father–child relationship. Many of the young fathers, however, recognised that support extended beyond financial contribution. They were actively involved in various caregiving activities, including bathing, feeding, and playing with their children. These emotionally satisfying experiences allowed fathers to bond and cultivate healthy relationships with their children, as was demonstrated by this father:

“ I look forward to giving my child a bath. It is a fun experience for me because he is always playing in the water, and he is happy. It is a fun experience, so I always take charge of that ... I am always taking him to the park where he can play. – Alvin

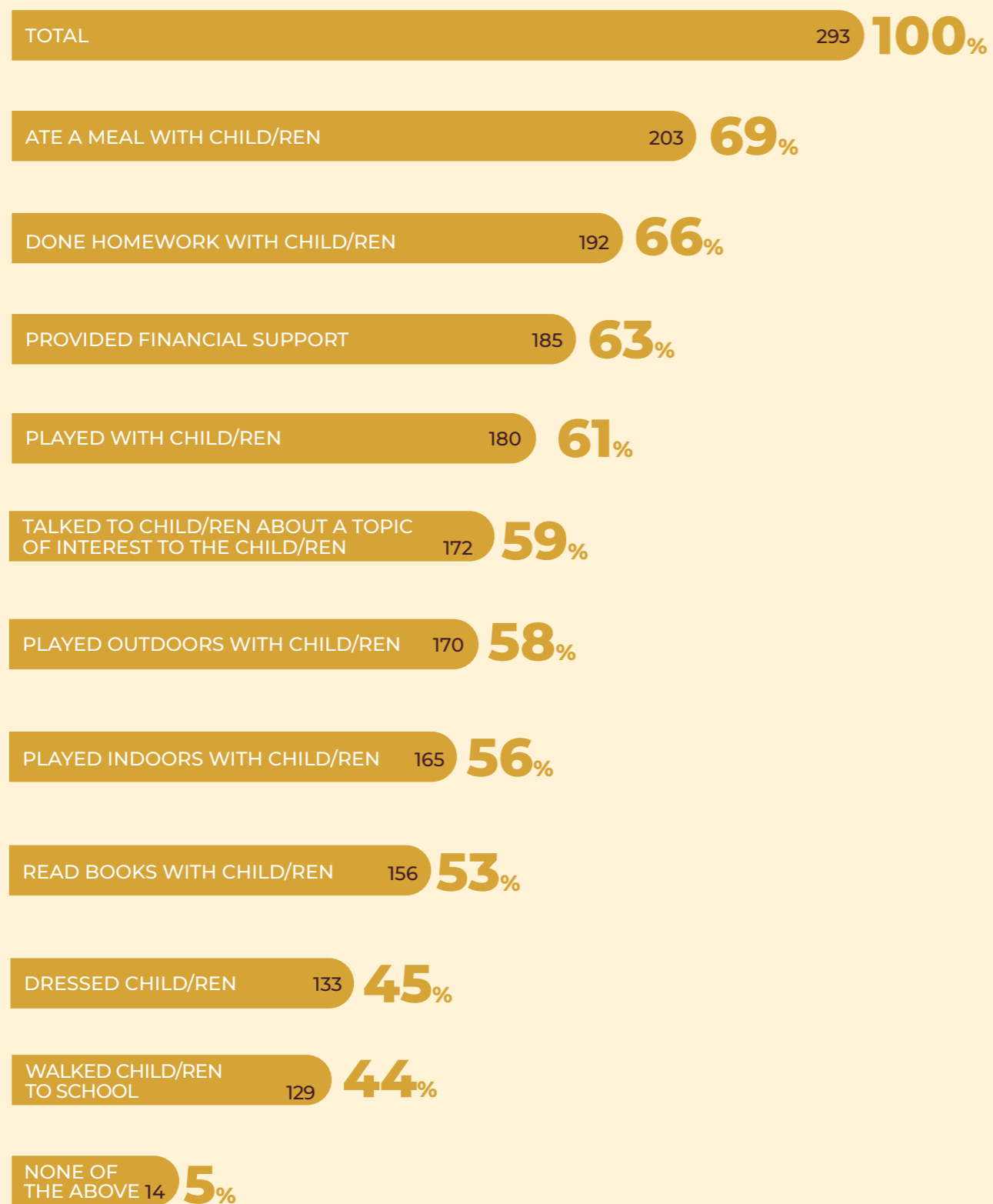
Similarly, the SOSAF 2021 survey found that the surveyed fathers indicated that, besides financial provision, they participated in childcare activities such as reading to, playing with, and dressing children.

Figure 12: SOSAF 2021 survey fathers' reported activities with their biological children in the past three years



TOTAL NUMBER OF FATHERS WHO RESPONDED

Figure 13: SOSAF 2021 survey fathers' activities in the past three years with children who are not their biological children



TOTAL NUMBER OF FATHERS WHO RESPONDED

Beyond this, a father's consistent presence in a child's life was identified as a key component of the father-child relationship in the Durban study. The fathers wanted their children to be reassured of their presence and involvement:

“ I was there from the beginning – I was there from before my child was born. [...] My child must know that I am there. And long after I have gone – like died or something – my child must always remember me as being there – always, always. – Randal

However, some fathers – who mostly were not residing with their children – often indicated that they were not actively involved in daily caregiving activities. Nevertheless, this did not limit their desire to be involved and maintain a presence in their children's lives, as articulated by Thato, who said his role as a father was: “Being there all the time, guiding by being present, like I need to be present”. Siya, a father of three children from different women, maintained a presence in all his children's lives by making an effort to see them: “When I am off, I take turns to see them.”

Family appeared to play an important role in supporting the fathers' involvement with their children. It was easier to transition from boyhood to fatherhood if families were more accepting of their “new” status, and more willing to give them support:

“ They were very supportive when they realised we were taking it seriously and we wanted to raise this child in a beautiful way. – Elliot

“ My family was very supportive from the beginning, which was such a major relief for me. I feel like that motivated me ... or rather that gave me encouragement to be this father. – Randal

**It was easier to transition from boyhood to fatherhood if families were more accepting of their “new” status, and more willing to give them support.**

Some fathers, however, were told that “you [are] on your own” and were encouraged to “man up” or “be a man” (*indoda*). It is also worth noting that young Black fathers received the most support from the maternal grandmothers of their children. This contrasts with views that cultural barriers enforced by the maternal family of the child prevent Black fathers from accessing their children when *inhlawulo* (paying an acknowledgement of paternity) have not been made<sup>17</sup> (see case 1 on p. 36). Mpho highlighted the positive role of the maternal grandmother of his child which enabled him to be involved in the child's life:

“ The mother of my child left me and took the child with. The child was two years old, so I had problems because I was not able to see my child, up until I tried communicating with the grandmother of the child. – Mpho

Similar to the earlier accounts of the young Eastern Cape men, the fathers in the Durban study who experienced father disconnections in their own childhood said they would not want their own children to experience them as absent or uninvolved fathers. Enzo observed that young fathers of today did not want to be like the fathers of the past, and he believed that the contemporary generation of young fathers were better fathers:



**“ What I have noticed is that we young fathers of today, we are better fathers than older generation fathers or your fathers. We have no one to look up to; but their mistakes, we learn from them and try to be better fathers than them [...] Our fathers used to make a lot of women pregnant in different places and having children in different areas. Our generation does not do that. – Enzo**

### Being there: fathers Connecting with children

The desire to remain engaged, involved, and present in the lives of their children was also echoed in research<sup>18</sup> that explored the fatherhood accounts of 10 working class, 21 – 45-year-old fathers from the Cape Flats<sup>iii</sup>. The participants’ stories were deeply rooted in the socio-economic and geographic contexts of the area. These narratives are, therefore, theorised within the context of “*die agterbuurte*” (“the back streets”), which also signifies the periphery of dominant society.<sup>19</sup>

These men constructed their masculinities in this space, relating their perceptions to dominant meanings of masculinity, and fatherhood, on the Cape Flats. Their narratives revealed themes of ‘breaking the generational curse’, ‘being there’, and processes of re-signifying fatherhood. In ‘breaking the generational curse’ they moved away from the ‘absent father’ stereotype, while proactively and reflexively negotiating alternative patterns and practices of fatherhood based on emotional engagement.

When asked, “What does it mean to be a father?”, the statement “to be there for my child” was echoed among the fathers. The men experienced their own fathers as not ‘being there’, characterising presence and

engagement as fundamental aspects of what they see as positive fatherhood.<sup>20</sup> They did not want their children to endure the same sense of emptiness that they experienced due to their biological fathers’ absence<sup>21</sup> and this strengthened their desire to be connected with their children.

Virgel grew up in the same house as his father, yet he did not perceive his father as being there for him. For Virgel, fatherhood had shifted from the traditional perspective of a father as primarily the family breadwinner to one which included closeness with his child through emotional support, caring, and participating in his child’s life.<sup>22</sup> He poignantly said:

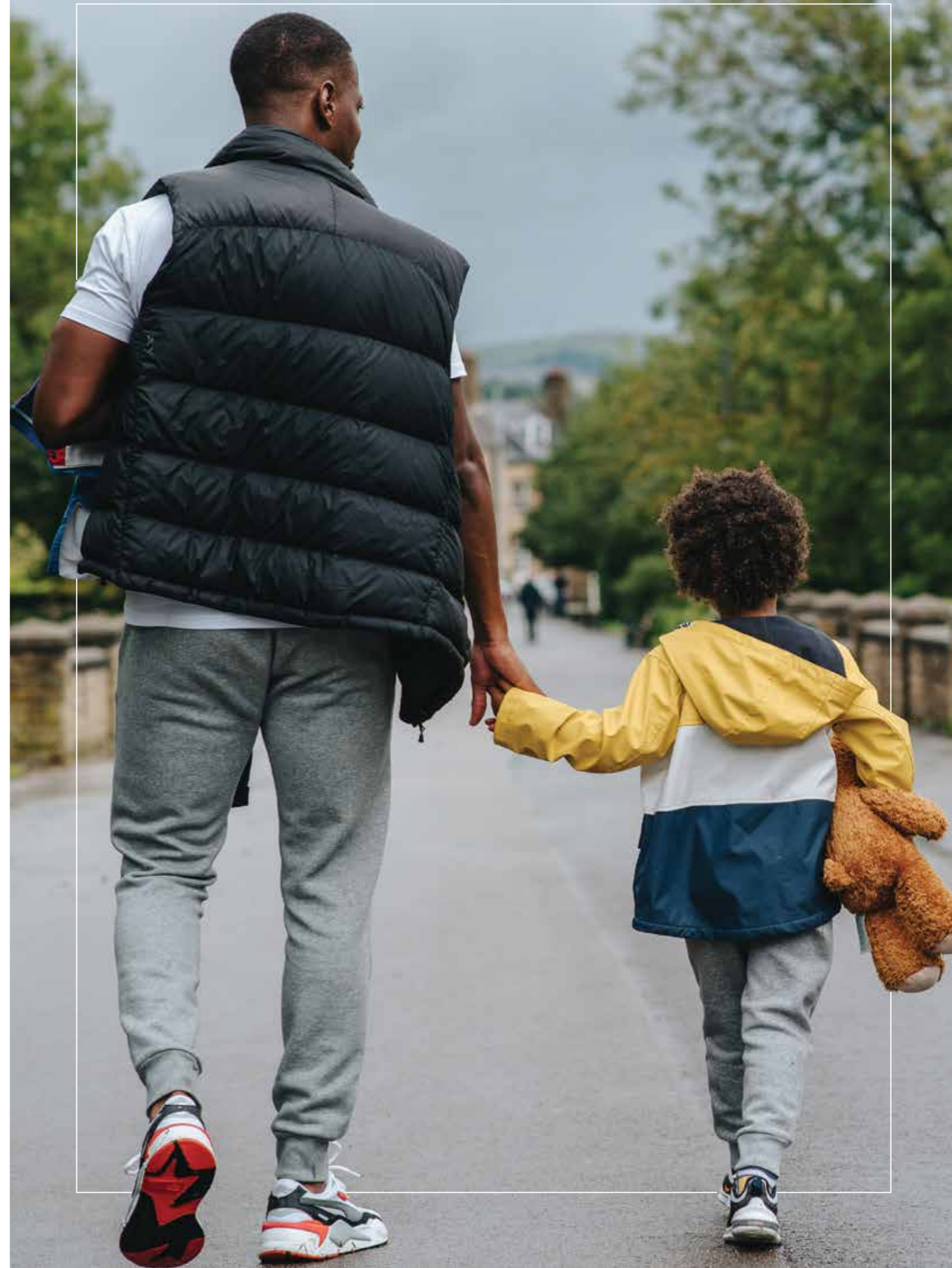
**“ It’s challenging because I did not experience it. For me it is important because, in times when he is sick and weak [...] and in times when disappointment comes into his life, I want him to know that I’m there. – Virgel**

Another father also emphasised physical presence combined with caring:

**“ I must be involved in their academics, in their spiritual life, in whatever they are doing [As long as they see me and know that daddy is here]. – Zane**

For Zane this meant creating a stable home with communicative parents and – essentially – to instill values, discipline, and religious beliefs in his children; thus, moving beyond the opposite notions of absence or presence to one of connection. The men spoke about caring in situations of sicknesses and periods of disappointment and facilitating spiritual growth and academic development as significant ways of ‘being there’.

<sup>iii</sup> During apartheid, people who were classified as ‘Coloured’ were forcibly removed from areas in Cape Town by the Group Areas Act. This Act restricted Coloured people to townships on the Cape Flats. The population in these townships predominantly consists of Coloured people and the dominant language is Afrikaans.



Again, like the fathers in the SOSAF 2021 survey and those in the Durban study, the fathers in the Cape Flats study reported caring activities, such as playing with their children, going on walks and drives, and providing lessons and affirmation. Such caring takes place through everyday activities:

“ **In our walks to crèche and our walks to the shops; we bond in those times through talking about anything, answering all his questions and also questioning him about things. – Alan**

Connecting with their children, however, was not only for positive moments:

“ **My daughter also failed her last year of university ... I try to teach my children ... that if you fail it is not the end of the world. – Clement**

Empirical evidence shows that children of fathers who were encouraging and involved in their educational achievements tended to stay longer at school and obtained better results.<sup>23</sup> These men were constructing masculinities that nurture, give emotional support, and simultaneously obtain a sense of emotional satisfaction from this interaction.<sup>24</sup> In this vein, Clement spoke about going to the park with his daughter on Sunday afternoons to play:

“ **Remember I told you that I must be father and friend? Now there I must now swing together with her, I must kick the ball [...] That is the nicest time for me. – Clement**

A key reference point for ‘being there’ is the figure of the social father. Examples of extended family and other father figures provided the men with a vocabulary to articulate what it felt like to have a fatherly figure who was present, and who taught them fundamental lessons on how

to be there for their own children. This was clear in the narrative of a man who grew up in what he called an orphanage in Athlone. He spoke of the principal as a dedicated non-biological father figure who displayed fathering practices that went beyond biological relation or financial support to emotionally connected presence:

“ **He was 365 days, 12 months, every day and night at the orphanage ... he could have chosen to, like the others, go home on his off days, but that was his home because he had the bigger picture in mind. – Sean**

The role of a social father can be held by more than one person. Sergio explained that his experience of a social father was portrayed by a family member, his grandfather, as well as a figure in his community:

“ **Doctor Donovan became the father role in my life. He taught me how to treat a lady [...] I learned to drive when he gave me the opportunities [...] He would take me to his house to study. He would give me that warm hug a father should give [...] Everything I have and everything you see today is as a result of someone who chose to father me. – Sergio**

Reflecting on his own absent father, and the lessons from this social father, Sergio was brought to tears by the realisation that “Doctor Donovan is actually my father”.

These narratives show how different father figures can take up roles typically associated with biological fathers.<sup>25</sup> This illustrates the multiple ways in which fatherhood can be performed, and how actively fathering is an exercise of agency that comes from awareness of the significance of the fathering interaction. A father can be a carer, a teacher, a learner, and a friend:

“ **When he and I connect is when I play with him ... like his friend. There is that game we play where he falls back and I catch him from behind. I do stuff like that with him to show him that I am there whenever he falls. – Virgel**

The insights which emerge from these men’s narratives find resonance with ideas of many levels of care in fatherhood – physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual – as opposed to simply a father’s biological or economic status.

The men in the Cape Flats study spoke about “being there” and the multiple meanings of this phrase for them: being present and engaged in their children’s lives, offering emotional support and care; transmitting values and sharing beliefs by using play and life milestones to create opportunities for personal development and growth. These fathers contrasted their own emotionally or physically absent biological fathers with social fathers from whom they learnt commitment and caring that went beyond material provision. In this way, the men reflexively shaped their own fathering practices and made choices about how to provide what they felt was missing for them.

### Father connections in summary

The studies presented in this section highlight fathers’ accounts of desiring to be responsible fathers who are closely involved in their children’s lives by “being there” and providing both material and emotional care. Although the men in these studies continued to prioritise their responsibility to provide material care, they also talked about emotional care for their children – using language in which notions of closeness, joy, and vulnerability featured. Furthermore, they referred to using different activities to engage with their children such as play, physical affection, recreational walks, advising, and teaching.

**Empirical evidence shows that children of fathers who were encouraging and involved in their educational achievements tended to stay longer at school and obtained better results.**

These findings are encouraging as they indicate discursive shifts in how men talk about fatherhood. Such discourses about fatherhood that prioritise fatherhood roles beyond those of provider, protector, and disciplinarian play an important role in contesting limiting father ideas and seeding expanded roles for fathers in practice.

Finally, these studies foreground, in line with existing research that refers to the “intergenerational flow of fathering”<sup>26</sup>, that men duplicate good fathering ideas and practices that they themselves encountered in their own fathers, as well as improve upon the deficiencies of fathering that they themselves experienced. In this process, they become more effective fathers than their own.

# Inhlawulo and mothers' reports of father connection in urban and rural KwaZulu-Natal

**Nonzuzo Mbokazi, Chronic Disease Initiative for Africa, Department of Medicine and Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town**

Although the practice of *inhlawulo* is also relevant in other ethnic groupings on the African continent<sup>27</sup>, this case focuses on mothers' accounts of the payment of *inhlawulo* as a means of fostering father-child connection in the Zulu culture. The case is based on the findings of a qualitative study<sup>28</sup> in urban and rural KwaZulu-Natal. Research participants related much to their Zulu culture due to their strong ties to ancestral land, and adhering to cultural mores such as the payment of *inhlawulo* to secure patrilineal belonging.

Despite evidence of modernisation in this cultural group, *inhlawulo* is one of the practices which many Zulu families uphold or want to be upheld by men who have impregnated unmarried women. *Inhlawulo* traditionally involved payment in the form of cattle, which represented the costs caused to the head of household (father of the pregnant woman) and to the woman's broader household.<sup>29</sup>

When a woman finds out that she is pregnant, she is instructed by her elders to name and identify the father of her child. An affirmative answer to the question of whether he "knows" her obligates him to pay the amount set out by her family in damages.<sup>30</sup> In Zulu culture, *inhlawulo* is paid out of respect to the woman's parents and as a sign that a man is willing to take responsibility and acknowledge the 'damage'. The payment of *inhlawulo* is critical when it comes to the involvement of fathers and paternal kin with the child.

This study indicates that the payment of *inhlawulo* ushers a bond and agreement between the maternal and paternal family of the child. This leads to successful father and paternal care because the negotiation of *inhlawulo* allows for the families to meet and clarify roles and responsibilities. By observing this custom, both parties come together in the best interest of the child.

Take the example of Sindy (a 20-year-old mother of one child, a student and shop assistant), who explained that her relationship with her partner was quite good; he was not only a good partner but a supportive and caring father to their child. As Sindy was young and unmarried, and because of the cultural expectations and the pregnancy being unplanned, she strongly considered terminating the pregnancy. Her partner was a crucial player in her decision to have and keep her child through his encouragement and reassurance of involvement in the child's life.

The father and paternal kin of Sindy's child paid *inhlawulo*. They were also supportive and available to help whenever Sindy felt overwhelmed by childcare, work, and her studies.

Although her understanding of a good father seemed to centre on financial support, Sindy's relationship with the father and paternal kin of her child was indicative that, contrary to the stereotype that fathers (and subsequently paternal kin) in urban townships are so-called deadbeat dads, this father was actively involved, financially and otherwise. In Sindy's own words:

**“ He supports me so much with the child, like, financially I do not struggle. And the family [paternal kin] is always there .... even for instance, if the child is not well and I have to be at work, he will take time off work if he can and come stay with the child. – Sindy**

Anele (a 35-year-old mother of three children, and a domestic worker) had a similar experience of a good relationship with the father and paternal kin of her children. *Inhlawulo* was paid by the children's father, and there was a strong relationship between her, the father, and paternal kin, even though she was no longer romantically involved with the father:

**“ Luckily, the father of my children and I get along well. He is very supportive. I open up my chest to him with a lot of things, so he understands when I go through hardships. We are not together anymore but we have a good parenting relationship. His mother, the grandmother, is also extremely supportive, which helps. – Anele**

The accounts of these mothers highlight positive instances where fathers and paternal kin assumed responsibility and caring for children as their own, based on the values of what is traditionally expected of paternal kin, especially where *inhlawulo* was paid.



## Father disconnections

Despite the positive signs of changing fatherhood ideas and practices highlighted in the first part of this chapter, there are many fathers who may not have close connections with their children.<sup>31</sup> This section engages with one such group: biological fathers who do not live with their children and have infrequent contact with them.<sup>32</sup>

### Waiting to be called: Family members abdicating responsibility for regular father–child contact

Although a few local studies shed some light on non-resident fathers and infrequent contact with children, these studies mostly relied on the individual perspectives of either the mother<sup>33</sup>, father<sup>34</sup>, or child<sup>35</sup>. One study<sup>36</sup>, however, embarked from the belief that family relationships are best viewed within a family systems perspective<sup>37</sup>. The researchers, therefore, interviewed four members of 10 families to obtain families' views and experiences of infrequent or absent biological non-resident father involvement.

The families consisted of biological fathers in South Africa who did not live with the family and who had limited contact with their own children (once a month or less); adolescent children (aged 14 – 18 years); mothers or guardians of the fathers' biological children; and extended kin who were identified as having a significant input on each child's life (e.g., an aunt, uncle, stepmother/father, maternal/paternal grandparent). The families identified as Black and mostly lived in the Tshwane area in Gauteng province.

Although they were diverse in terms of income, employment, education, and culture, many of the fathers reported inadequate incomes. Most of the parents' relationships started as romantic dating relationships that progressed to longer-term, co-residing relationships. All the fathers had some contact with their children during infancy. However, in most cases, father–child contact

## Interventions to promote non-resident fathers' involvement with children should target the family system, including the father, mother, child and involved extended kin, rather than individuals.

was disrupted after the parents separated during the child's early childhood years. Father–child contact was thereafter non-existent until the children received their own cell phones (usually by puberty) that enabled independent contact with their biological father. At the time of the interviews, most father–child contact took place via cell phone less than once a month.

This contrasts with the findings of the SOSAF 2021 survey, where 43% of the fathers whose youngest child lived elsewhere reported that they saw these children once weekly or more, and 32% of surveyed fathers said they saw their children once a month or every two weeks. These findings could be partly explained by the fact that survey participants fell predominantly in the middle-class category. They, therefore, were likely to have more resources for more frequent contact with their biological children, unlike many of the fathers in the Tshwane study who reported that they found it difficult to make ends meet.

In the discussion that follows, we unpack a central theme from the Tshwane study, namely that infrequent or no father involvement occurred despite all family members agreeing that biological non-resident fathers should show up as consistently involved and emotionally caring parents.

### The views of children and others in their circle of care

The longing for an involved, accessible, and responsive father was most prominently articulated in the adolescents' accounts. In fact, most of them volunteered to participate in the study with the hope that in some way it would bring them closer to their fathers. One daughter, for example, said that she participated because:

“ I would like my dad to change the way things are between us. Like, I hardly see him. – Leago

The adolescents specifically, and unprompted, made it explicit that they wanted more than financial support from fathers, as was expressed by the same daughter:

“ It's not like I want the money, but it seems like he thinks I want money, but I don't want money, I want him. – Leago

Although the mothers often felt deep anger and resentment towards the fathers for inconsistent, meagre or non-existent financial contributions and/or lack of involvement, they believed that their children would benefit from their fathers showing them interest and care – even if fathers did not contribute financially. One woman, who thought that the father of her child was “useless, and has never been there”, said that:

“ He will always be their father, that will never change [...] I don't want my child to grow up angry because he was not interested in him. – Julia

Talking about the limitations of the father of her child, another mother highlighted the nurturing role that fathers can play:

“ He does not pick up the phone and say ‘baby how are you, I miss you,’ you know. Such things show interest, it shows that you are concerned about your child, your child's welfare [...] Fathers who don't hold jobs do that. [...] Money doesn't buy love. – Ntokuzo

However, when asked about their role in bringing about closer father–child relationships, most of the mothers were adamant that it was the fathers' responsibility to initiate and maintain regular contact with their children. They felt that they sufficiently encouraged father–child contact by allowing and often supporting adolescent children who wanted to have contact with fathers. One mother said:

“ He is the one that should make the effort [...] I told him a long time ago that, if you want to see your child, you can come and see her [...] he's got my telephone number [...] I never denied him to visit us. – Mpho

The extended kin members in this study also supported fathers' broader involvement with children and some of them even contacted fathers to remind them of their duty to their children. These attempts, however, were often premised on the assumption that fathers bear the main responsibility to bring about regular father–child contact.

### Fathers' views

Although all the participating fathers foregrounded material provision as their primary father role, they agreed that fathers could and should make other important parenting contributions. As one man said:

“ I have to play a vital role in all activities, basically [...] motivate them [...] I need to support them in whatever they want to do. – Peter

In exploring why fathers largely failed to participate in these ways, many of the men referred to issues with their strained relationships with the children's mothers. Like this man, who said that when his children asked him to visit them at their home:

**“ I’m honest with them, I’m afraid of that lioness [...] You see, I cannot go there because if I go there and I am not able to provide or bring something, I’m afraid she will insult me. – Ben**

Other fathers explained that, when the children were small and they were dependent on the mothers to access the child, they refrained from doing so as they thought it may be interpreted as them wanting to reunite with the mother. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons offered for their lack to initiate contact, the fathers put the onus on the mothers, and later on the children as they grew older, to reach out to them or to tell them that their involvement was wanted.

### **Adolescent children’s painful experiences**

Despite the fathers saying that they welcomed children’s contact, the adolescent children told of different painful experiences when they reached out to their fathers and then felt rejected. Erica, for example, explained how it took her months to gather courage to phone her father who last saw her when she was two years old, and how disappointed she was that he was not eager to see her. She related with tears streaming down her face:

**“ I’ve been texting him telling him I want to meet him, but he never tells me he wants to meet me too. – Erica**

Other adolescents felt disappointed and disillusioned that they, rather than fathers, had to take the initiative to text or phone their fathers to remain in contact with them.

### **Father disconnections in summary**

The findings of this study<sup>38</sup> illustrate that, although fathers, mothers, children, and extended kin from the same family supported the idea of consistent father–child involvement, each individual family member felt somehow wounded, unsupported or deterred by one other with regard to father–child contact. Consequently, each felt justified in her/his stance of having given up on taking the initiative to enable regular contact between father and child.

This dynamic between family members indicates that interventions to promote non-resident fathers’ involvement with children should target the family system, including the father, mother, child and involved extended kin, rather than individuals. Accessible and culture-sensitive public mediating services could contribute to facilitating family discussions and viable co-parenting plans in the case of unmarried parents where a parenting plan is not mandatory when parents separate; and/or in cases where the biological father is not acknowledged by the mother’s family as a father with rights to his child.

Given that cultural groups have their own traditions and customary practices to preserve families (see the next chapter) – such as the continued use of family meetings in contemporary Xhosa families to address family problems<sup>39</sup> – thought should be given to how such interventions could be used to negotiate and support non-resident fathers’ positive and consistent involvement.

The next section engages with the role of mediation to resolve parents’ conflicts that bar effective co-parenting.

## **Conflicting co-parenting relationships: Transforming families through mediation**

The amended Children’s Act<sup>40</sup> has ushered in a new dimension in the operation and dynamics of South African family law, with mediation playing a significant role as it is mandated for all family disputes. This mediation approach by the Act is based on the law’s principle of needing to act in children’s best interests.

The Act stipulates that, in all matters of dispute pertaining to children, the parents should seek mediation through the services of a suitable mediator. Furthermore, a strategic priority of the White Paper on Families in South Africa is to

promote healthy family life, encourage fathers’ involvement in the upbringing of their children, and to encourage responsible co-parenting.<sup>41</sup>

However, as was discussed earlier, non-resident and/or unmarried fathers are often disconnected from their biological children’s lives, and these men have to negotiate their involvement with the mother after separation.<sup>42</sup> Several factors affect father–child involvement, including the history and the nature of the relationship between the father and the mother, the father’s own attitudes to or interest in being involved, cultural beliefs about the role of fathers, and the attitude of mothers and their family.<sup>43</sup> However, relationship conflict between parents has been found to be the dominant predictor of father involvement in several contexts, and is also a significant contributing factor to poor co-parenting relationships after separation.<sup>44</sup> Parents with unresolved relationship conflict may find it difficult to establish an effective system of co-parenting.

One study<sup>45</sup> interviewed seven unmarried fathers, seven unmarried mothers, and eight mediators to gain an understanding of how mediation can be used to strengthen families and enhance co-parenting after separation. It was found that parents seemed to be on “opposite sides of the fence” after separation. This situation impeded them from focusing on new ways to rebuild the relationship in order to co-parent successfully in the best interests of the child. For example, two of the fathers shared the following:

**“ I am the one fighting to see the child; the mother is the one polluting the child’s brain: ‘your father left us, he destroyed our lives, he is a ...’ whatever they’ve said. I could see the way that child reacted to me. – Shane**

**“ Because she was trying to blackmail me. She was trying to use the child against me. Because she knew I loved the child and then she was forcing me about that thing. – Hashiem**

Some mothers also felt strongly that fathers who were not providing for their children do not have a right to see their children. As one mother explained:

**“ We all know it is a sensitive part when it comes to the father. You know what pushes a mother to say when they are apart, that they are not going to see their child, because they are useless in any case. They don’t play their 100% part which they are supposed to play. They want to be the daddy by name. – Carmen**

Studies have indicated that a positive relationship between unmarried fathers and mothers strengthens paternal involvement.<sup>46</sup> Cooperative co-parenting also increases father involvement and greater father involvement increases cooperative co-parenting.<sup>47</sup> Mediation can facilitate such positive co-parenting relationships. Family mediation has been defined<sup>48</sup> as:

**“ A process in which the mediator, an impartial third party who has no decision-making power, facilitates the negotiations between disputing parties with the object of getting them back on speaking terms and helping them to reach a mutually satisfying settlement agreement that recognises the needs and rights of all family members.**

Family mediation thus aims to assist parties in restoring relationships to function effectively for the benefit of all family members.

There are various models of mediation such as settlement-focused, facilitative, evaluative, and transformative mediation, to name a few.

The emphasis of the evaluative and settlement-focused models is primarily on reaching a settlement. The mediator is seen as the expert in decision-making and takes on a directive role in the process.<sup>49</sup> While these models are effective in reaching an agreement, they do not provide the long-term benefit of enhancing the relationship between parents.

The facilitative model views the parties as the experts who can provide their own solutions to disputes while a mediator facilitates the process.<sup>50</sup> This approach offers elements that can result in positive mediation outcomes as it focuses on problem-solving and facilitates self-determination by the parties involved. It, however, also does not contribute towards the long-term strengthening of relationships because it is not relational or family centred.

The transformative model facilitates the resolution of conflict in a holistic manner that is family centred and relationally focused. Its strengths are that it focuses on healing relationships and has a therapeutic effect on the involved parties.<sup>51</sup> African-centred family mediation<sup>52</sup> and African dispute resolution<sup>53</sup> are also transformative in nature as these approaches focus on healing relationships and creating healthy family relationships – and recognise the extended family in the process. The values that are upheld in these African mediation roles are African humanistic values.<sup>54</sup>

The study<sup>55</sup> on how mediation can strengthen families and enhance co-parenting has indicated that parents who entered mediation were in conflict and that their relationships after separation often were dysfunctional, which prevented them from focusing on the best interests of the child. Mediators' experiences suggest that these conflictual post-separation parent relationships could benefit from transformative approaches to mediation. The views of Janet (a mediator) support this assertion on the basis that:

**“ ... most of the parties who would come to the sessions have unresolved issues from their own relationship, and I think there were fears between either or both parties. The child was sort of being used as a pawn between them. I think if they could see the process as 'no wait, this is actually about the child and not us', it would assist with co-parenting. – Janet**

This kind of 'relationship baggage' that prevents parents from building a positive co-parenting

relationship is demonstrated in case 2, which highlights how parental conflict could affect fathers' engagement with children.

As mentioned earlier, cultural beliefs and the maternal family may also pose a barrier to father involvement. This was presented as a greater challenge when it came to Black families due to cultural beliefs about the role of the unmarried father, as illustrated in Faith's experience as a mediator:

**“ ... if we are looking at relationships and mediation for unmarried fathers, most mothers are coming from, I am speaking in terms of Black mothers; most [young] mothers stay with their parents. And culturally the parents of the mother make decisions in the household. And when it comes to mediation, the biological mother has to make a decision pertaining to mediation, and at times the decisions she makes clash with decisions that the parents are taking. Although in terms of mediation it works well for the biological mother and biological father, for the best interest of the child. But it creates a conflict between the biological mother and her parents. In some cases, the biological mother was kicked out of the house because of decisions she took in mediation. And for me, I felt like mediation didn't give room for cases like that where the grandparents have a say. – Faith**

Faith's experience suggests that some families in South Africa may need a multigenerational approach to mediation where families are viewed as part of the larger system (extended family), and where the needs of the family system are considered in a more holistic and culturally relevant manner. In general, the participation of the extended family in mediation may play an important role in decision-making, and their participation is essential because decisions made, and agreements implemented as part of the mediation process, are likely to impact them as well.

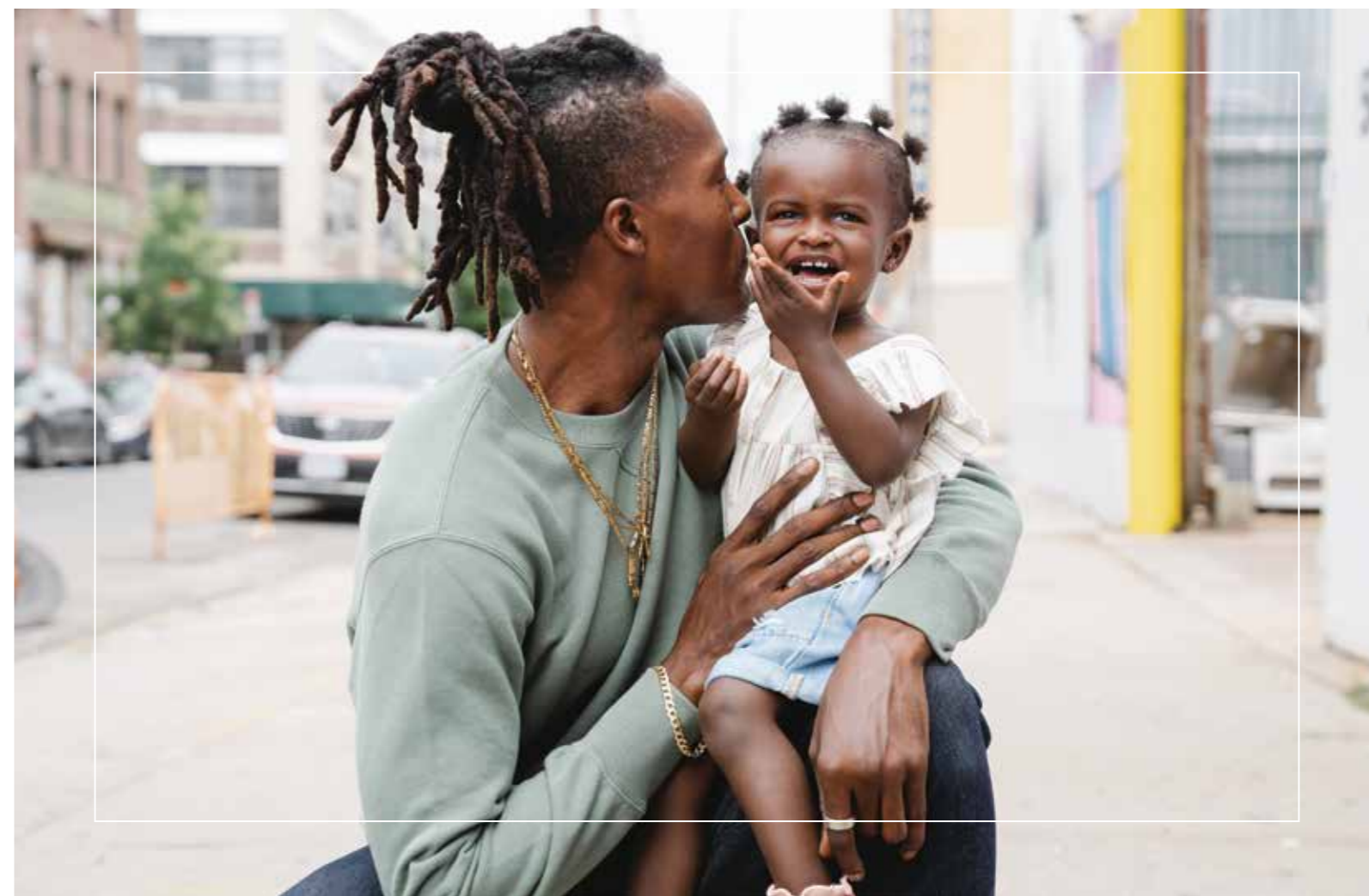
In disputes between a child's unmarried biological parents over whether the father meets the legal requirements for acquiring full parental responsibilities and rights, the Children's Act<sup>56</sup> requires that such cases must be referred for mediation to a family advocate, social worker, social service professional, or another suitably qualified person. Mediation is thus supported by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development through the Office of the Family Advocate, the Department of Social Development, and certain non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The services of the Office of the Family Advocate are free for parents.

While the development of legislation pertaining to mediation is ongoing, for example the development of an "Alternative Dispute Resolution" Bill<sup>57</sup>, more courts are implementing on-site mediation services that also are at no cost to parents. One reason for this is that mediation services can be more accessible because the Office of the Family Advocate is often overwhelmed by the number of parents seeking help. This leads to longer waiting periods for the services of a mediator.

NGOs such as Families South Africa (FAMSA) also offer mediation services at an affordable fee. There is also the option of private mediation where the cost would be the parents' responsibility.

### **Transformative mediation approach in summary**

Transformative approaches to mediation can positively change the co-parenting relationship and strengthen relationships in the larger family system, which can serve as significant support for co-parenting after separation. Transformative approaches can facilitate the restructuring of current South African mediation practices to make mediation family centred and holistic. The transformative mediation approach also facilitates the development of positive co-parenting through acknowledging and understanding conflict between parties; facilitating the transition to new roles after separation; encouraging healing and more functional patterns of interaction between parties; and creating opportunities for positive family transformation.



# The experiences of fathers alienated from their children by manipulated distancing

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Both mothers and fathers could use certain behaviour to alienate their children from the other parent, although they may resort to different strategies.<sup>58</sup> This case engages specifically with fathers as the targets of alienation behaviours to highlight barriers to father-child connection. While parental alienation is a focus issue for many fathers' rights groups, we do not have reliable national data about the prevalence of this behaviour.

Parental alienation occurs when one parent deliberately tries to damage the relationship that a child has with the other parent. In parental alienation, the manipulating behaviour of the alienating parent is typically intended to foster the children's rejection of the targeted parent.<sup>59</sup> Strategies used by the alienating parent include badmouthing, scaring, threatening to withdraw their affection to the children, and forcing the children to reject the targeted parent. These actions are intended to limit contact of the children with the targeted parent.<sup>60</sup>

Although the concept of parental alienation has been used since the 1970s, it is a contested one. It is, however, beyond the scope of this brief case to engage more comprehensively with the various controversies and debates in this area.<sup>61</sup>

Having all worked with families and conducted research in the field of fatherhood, the authors of this case have encountered first-hand experience with parental alienation.

When fathers are denied reasonable access to their children by the mother, guardian, or other caregivers, including grandparents, it can potentially damage fathers' relationship with their children. Parental alienation interferes with a father's active involvement in caring for his child and may feed into stereotypes about fathers being disinterested and uninvolved by default.

Parental alienation affects all parties concerned, including the children and associated adults.<sup>62</sup> The effects of such alienation on the targeted parent are broad and vary from social, psychological, and economical. The actions of the alienating parent are often intended to hurt or destroy the targeted parent.<sup>63</sup> Fathers who experience involuntary alienation from their children may experience high levels of distress. Post-traumatic stress disorder, substance

abuse disorders, and depression are often noted in fathers who have been alienated from their children.<sup>64</sup>

Parental alienation is complex and may happen with married or unmarried parents who co-reside or who do not live together and/or do not share residence with the children. South Africa's legal system historically has favoured the mother as the primary caregiver, and this had a dramatic effect on parenting and rights of access.

Since 1994, new legislation, such as the Natural Fathers of Children Born out of Wedlock<sup>65</sup>, was enacted to assist unmarried fathers with having access to their children. Based on the principles of the 1996 Constitution, the Children's Act<sup>66</sup> also ensures that fathers can approach the courts to enforce their right to contact their children. It is illegal for one parent to prevent the other parent from having contact with the children without a valid reason. Where a mother, for example, attempts to reduce a father's contact with his minor children, the court will make a ruling based on a set of facts that are supported by reports from family advocates, social workers, and psychologists.

Notably, not all fathers have the financial muscle to pursue their legal rights.<sup>67</sup> In family matters, parents are often called to find an amicable solution through mediation because litigation is both costly and time-consuming, and mentally and emotionally taxing for those involved. However, parents may refuse to take part in mediation proceedings, and this necessitates costly and lengthy court processes for fathers attempting to increase contact with their children.

It is illegal for one parent to prevent the other parent from having contact with the children without a valid reason.

Cases of parental alienation are further complicated where travel and/or relocation is in question. One parent may not take the children out of the country without the consent of the other parent, and although the Children's Act does not outline consent procedures for relocation, the spirit of the Act is that this may not be unreasonably withheld if the relocation is in the best interests of the children.<sup>68</sup>

Fathers need to be part of their children's development in a meaningful way and should not be removed from the day-to-day decision-making that helps guide children to adulthood. Parental alienation not only undermines good fatherhood, but also affects the children, mutual friends and others close to the family in a negative way.

Of paramount importance is a comprehensive understanding of parental alienation that considers children's immediate and future loss and the effects that such loss has on involved family members. Such an approach can inform the creation of holistic social work, psychological, and legal interventions that will protect the children, respect their best interests, and help to provide the support that some parents require in cases of parental alienation.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter provided encouraging evidence that diverse groups of men are expanding their ideas and practices of fatherhood by embracing notions of 'being there', wanting to care both materially and emotionally for their children, and finding joy in raising their children. Such an incorporation of close emotional involvement and caring as part of their masculine identities can contest harmful and limiting social norms of fatherhood, and contribute to more gender-equitable practices.<sup>69</sup>

However, our findings are based on individual accounts of fathering in conversation with researchers and are limited in what they can tell us about actual fathering changes on a practical and daily level. More research about everyday fathering practices is needed to determine if the changes in how fathers talked about fathering translate into hardy and consistent changes in fathering practices. More specifically, we need to know if such changed behaviour leads to reconfiguring parenting work for fathers and mothers, and, relatedly, more gender-equitable parenting roles. Also, it would be interesting to know if the COVID-19 lockdown measures that kept more fathers at home during workdays influenced fathers' ideas and practices regarding involvement with children.

It should be borne in mind that fathering takes place in relation to a particular child, co-parent and oftentimes grandparents.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, further research ought to investigate if changing father discourses are associated with better quality father-child and father-co-parent/mother relationships, and if, in turn, these result in better child outcomes. Such research should incorporate children and co-parents' views and experiences of fathering practices.

Researchers should also acknowledge and incorporate in research designs that fathering is influenced by context, family forms, and changes over time as children develop and fathers age.

Lastly, similar to other fatherhood studies in South Africa, the research presented in this chapter were all small qualitative studies that mostly focused on men's individual constructions of fatherhood. Although these are valuable in helping us understand how fathers think about, and make sense of, fatherhood, large-scale representative studies are needed to provide insight about how South Africa's men 'do' fatherhood in different contexts, inside and outside the home, and across the life course of both father and child.

The chapter also focused on non-resident fathers, a growing group of fathers who experience particular challenges in forming and maintaining connections with children. Drawing on one study<sup>71</sup>, it illustrated that involved family members tended to abdicate responsibility to initiate and maintain such father-child contact even though adolescent children, resident mothers, non-resident fathers and extended kin in the same family supported and desired consistent involvement between father and child. It was often left to the adolescent children to initiate and manage contact with their fathers.

Given these dynamics, we suggest that non-resident fatherhood should be approached from a family systems perspective rather than an individual issue. However, very little is known about non-residential fatherhood as a family systems phenomenon. More research about families' views and practices regarding non-resident father-child contact and relationships within these larger systems is needed rather than relying on individual accounts.

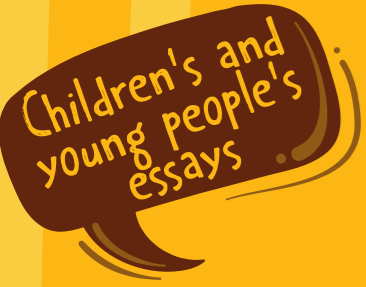
This knowledge will assist in providing feasible and credible interventions for such families. Accessible and culture-appropriate transformative mediation services are proposed as measures that could assist families to negotiate plans to enable close non-resident father-child relationships, especially in the case of unmarried parents. Much more work, however, is needed to explore what such mediation should entail to effectively facilitate consistent father-child contact within specific cultural contexts.

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# I was raised by many fathers except mine

**Author:** Phaswana Asakundwi Emmanuel

My mother used to tell me that my father is in Gauteng working for the family, maybe she was just trying [to] protect his name or my fragile heart at that time. Fortunately enough, I believed her, because most of my friends' fathers were also working there for their families, so it made sense to me that mine was also there working for us.

The only time it did not make sense was when all their fathers came back home at the end of the year for the Christmas holidays, except for mine. I used to ask my mother whether he was coming back this December or was he going to be working overtime throughout this December too, just like all the other years.

"He decided to work throughout this year's holidays, son, we need the money." Those were my mother's famous words year in and year out and they were getting kind of old to me.

When I turned fourteen years old, I asked my mother one question which needed one answer.

"Is he dead or is he alive?" I was tired of living in a box.

My mother cried the whole day that day. It was my birthday – maybe my question was too painful, maybe it brought back memories of my father who had passed away a long time ago, surely he was no more, what else could make my mother cry like that? Those were the questions I had in my mind the whole day.

That evening my mother took my hand – it was pretty warm outside and we were sitting under a tree. She said to me: "Your father is still alive and well and he doesn't stay far from here. It is just a couple of hours. I can show you the direction if you want me to. I will even accompany you to his house where he lives with his wife and children, but I will certainly not enter."

I told my mother that there was no need to take me to him, I have a father. Actually, I have more than one father. The postman that brings the letters every once a week – he is my father, the bus driver that takes me to school every day – he is my father, our neighbour, Mr Mudau, who always needs my help recharging his airtime voucher – he is my father, the security guard at our local supermarket – he is also my father.

They have been there for me when I needed them the most. They showed me what being a father is and I can proudly say that I was raised by many fathers except for my own father.

Because being a father is not only about blood. Yes, I know blood is thicker than water, but water is crystal clear and it cannot hide the truth. And, the truth is that a father is not a man who has a child but it is a man who is there for a child regardless of the biological connection between them.

I hope that one day I will also become a father to my own children and to someone else who needs that fatherly love that I was given by total strangers.

*This was a winning essay in the 'My Father' competition by the FunDza Literacy Trust in collaboration with Heartlines. It was originally published on fundza.mobi*

## BROTHERS, UNCLES, AND GRANDFATHERS: KINSHIP-BASED FATHERHOOD AND THE STATE

Elena Moore

Chapter 3

# Brothers, uncles, and grandfathers: Kinship-based fatherhood and the state

Elena Moore, University of Cape Town

## KEY MESSAGES

- Men, as fathers, are located and embedded in wider kinship structures and practices of care, informed by lineage and the state.
- Social fathers care for children and other caregivers in their wider kin group. The SOSAF 2021 survey showed that more men believe *doing care work* makes a man a father, rather than making a woman pregnant.
- South Africa's plural legal system can give rise to tensions in determining fathers' rights and responsibilities to children in the context of statutory as well as customary law.
- The majority of fathers surveyed for the SOSAF 2021 report believe that, if a child is conceived outside of wedlock, both the mother and father have equal rights to the child.
- The state's discriminatory treatment of unmarried fathers and the lack of state recognition of the role they and their kin play in caring for children is concerning and an area of research and implementation that needs to be strengthened by the Department of Home Affairs.

The focus on the biological father–mother–child triad has overlooked the important role that men play to other children, as social fathers, in their wider kinship networks. Whilst the literature on men as social fathers internationally focuses on stepfatherhood and blended families, there has been little attention on men who are social fathers through kinship norms, i.e., an obligation to provide support to kin, specifically children. This chapter focuses on how men care for children and how this is shaped by kinship norms and the state.

Men, as biological or social fathers, move through relationships with children over the men's life course in relation to their kin and the state. In South Africa, a wide range of care practices and responsibilities based on kinship norms exist for men – as brothers, uncles, and grandfathers. At the same time, kinship norms as well as statutory laws can prevent some biological fathers from being involved in their children's lives, as in the case of biological fathers in woman-to-woman marriages, and in the case of some unmarried fathers.

By turning the lens on men who provide financial and practical support to children, this chapter moves towards a greater focus on father involvement and away from a narrow understanding of fathers as absent vs present, biological vs social, or residential vs non-residential. These binaries do not help us understand the complexities of ways in which men father.

South Africa's racially oppressive colonial and apartheid policies, laws and processes have socially engineered black poverty and created the need for family members to support one another. Persistent inequality, poverty, and poor access to waged labour post-apartheid mean that families, including men, remain a vital source of support and survival.

Much of the literature to date has focused on biological fathers, whether married or unmarried, and less attention has been placed on men who do fathering as a social practice. For example, the mother's brother (*malome*) traditionally acts as guardian of his sister's children, which has been highlighted in both old<sup>1</sup> and recent literature<sup>2</sup>. The 2018 State of South Africa's Fathers report<sup>3</sup> described the role that such '*bomalome*' play in undertaking extensive fathering activities as maternal uncles to children.

This chapter continues the focus on fathering as extending beyond biological relationships and reproduction to include other men who, through kinship norms, take on fathering roles in different contexts. It highlights the tensions that exist between kinship and state definitions of fathers, and the ways in which biological fathers in different contexts contest the lack of recognition of their care work by their kin and the state. The ways in which men, as fathers, get involved with their biological children through a range of strategies are also discussed.

## The concept of social fatherhood

As explained in the Key Terms section (p. 8), a social father is a person who is not the biological male parent of the child but who takes on the responsibility and role of being a father to the child. The term, therefore, expands fatherhood to a social status, rather than a biological one, which may be actively sought by and/or assigned to the person by their family or community. This chapter

The role that men play in supporting kin, especially children, has been missing from many accounts of family life.

further expands the concept by drawing on a clarification<sup>4</sup> of fatherhood as the public meanings associated with being a father.

In the southern African context, a key part of the public meanings associated with being a father, through biology or social ties, is the role that kinship norms play in shaping who is regarded as a father. Furthermore, in exploring the ways in which men become social fathers, cultural norms about older brothers and maternal uncles should be considered. This chapter builds on this consideration by looking at the role of paternal and maternal uncles and grandfathers to examine the ways in which men act as social fathers and how this status is negotiated by the state and kin. An ethic of care perspective is applied that considers care as a practice, standard and moral disposition that encompasses all the culturally defined activities that "maintain, continue and repair" our world.<sup>5</sup>

Central to the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, collective fatherhood, where men act in their capacity as fathers, needs to be understood holistically rather than simply as the actions of one individual relating to another individual.<sup>6</sup> Whilst recognising the cultural ethos of *ubuntu* and interdependence, the chapter reflects how the need for interdependence was produced through state oppression by the colonial and apartheid regimes.

The chapter, therefore, seeks to draw attention specifically to the caring practices and values

(such as responsibility) that men take to ensure the care of dependents in their wider kinship network. Different practices of responsibility that demonstrate a father's key role in maintaining children and children's caregivers are explored. As sons, brothers, and uncles, these men contribute not only to children as people in need of care, but also as kin, and in this way promote their children's membership in the family.

## Collective fatherhood, where men act in their capacity as fathers, needs to be understood holistically.

In South Africa, many children (41%) live with men who are not their biological fathers<sup>7</sup> (see p. 15). Many children are also connected across households to other men such as grandfathers, uncles, brothers, stepfathers, etc. At the end of 2017, 48% of men in the country were living in a household with at least one child; however, during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, 61% of men reported living with at least one child in the same household.<sup>8</sup> Such a dramatic change in men's and children's living arrangements, some of which may have been involuntary, shows how households' arrangements can change rapidly and remind us of children's relationships to men in 'stretched households' and their wider kinship network.

### Men, fathers and kinship obligations

In considering the way men manage fathering and kinship obligations over their

life course, one needs to re-examine the way in which kinship obligations and the need for interdependency have developed and were shaped during the colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid times. Also of consideration are the norms and customary processes that make men responsible for children through biology, kinship, and marriage. The following discussion draws on literature familiar with many scholars or activists in the area of fatherhood studies but with a focus on aspects that have been overlooked to date.

In South Africa, studies have focused on how fatherhood still bears the imprint of the colonial and apartheid eras through the protracted disruption of family life.<sup>9</sup> The ways in which a father's involvement in domestic life was restricted through laws, the migrant labour system and migrant hostels have received attention.<sup>10</sup> This literature often focuses on how apartheid disrupted family life and created absence and separation especially for men. But when this literature is examined, we also see the ways in which colonial and apartheid policies, laws, and processes have increased the need for interdependencies within families, including a greater and increasing need to depend financially on siblings, spouses, or male family members who had access to waged labour or other means of survival.

Colonial rule adopted multiple strategies to enforce racial, gender, and class control at the level of land, taxes, and labour. The system of land tenure dispossessed families of their land, which reduced the ability of fathers to provide for the families and pay *lobola* for their sons. Colonial taxes, including a hut tax, were also imposed on Black<sup>i</sup> families to finance the colonial administration. As men, and later women, were pulled and pushed into mining and other forms of employment, their settlement at places of work was restricted and men (and later women) required the support of their kin to care for their families. Throughout

the colonial and apartheid eras, individuals had to depend on kin in the context of unequal access to welfare policies and poor access to employment or, when employment was accessed via migrant labour, restrictions on where people could live while working meant they had to depend on kin to care for their families 'back home'.

The focus on the disruption of family life, whilst understandable, often overlooks the ways in which families were also sites of solidarity in a deeply unequal, oppressive, and unjust society. Men and women, as wives, brothers, cousins, etc., became dependent on the waged labour and bed holders<sup>ii</sup> of predominantly men in the migrant hostel system. In the face of racial and gender oppression, male bed holders supported family members who lived alongside them, or who lived elsewhere, through both financial and practical means.

The post-apartheid period has deepened the need for family members to support one another and the ways in which they do this at times of high levels of poverty, unemployment, and uneven access to social grants have been outlined in detail.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of waged labour, people living in poverty are dependent on the state for an income. Given that some people receive grants and others do not, people are dependent on family members and kin to survive.<sup>12</sup> The role that men play in supporting kin, especially children in kinship networks, has been missing from many accounts of family life in recent years.

Research on fathers' involvement has typically focused on fathers who are biologically related to children and to a lesser extent on men who care for children through norms of kinship. One of the motivations for this branch of research is to highlight the ways in which both residential and non-residential fathers are involved in their children's lives.<sup>13</sup> These studies highlight the different factors which restrict a father's involvement, such as a lack of resources<sup>14</sup>, ongoing labour migration<sup>15</sup>, decline of marriages, the

## Research has shown that male kin were significant in providing care to children in their role as maternal uncles.

rise of premarital sex, and the role of extended kin<sup>16</sup>. Whilst it is understood that involvement in fathering is heavily reliant on relations with the mother and her family – because fatherhood happens within families and not only among individuals<sup>17</sup> – few studies have theorised or considered why biological unmarried fathers *should* be involved in a child's life when fatherhood, amongst many groups in southern African society, is prescribed through *lobola* and not through biology (discussed more in case 3 on p. 63).

The SOSAF 2021 survey indicated that over three quarters (78%) of the fathers surveyed believed that, if a child was conceived outside of wedlock, both the mother and father had equal rights to the child. In contrast, only one in five fathers (17%) believed that a child born outside of wedlock belonged to the mother or her family.

In reflecting on biological and social fathering, the survey found that most of the participating fathers (55%) believed that caring for a child made a man a father compared to approximately one third (32%) of fathers who believed that making a woman pregnant made a man a father regardless of his role in caring for the child. A rather smaller percentage (13%) of fathers believed that participation in specific rituals (such as *inhlawulo*) made a man a father. These findings indicate that there are mixed opinions regarding the role of biology, custom, and state law in determining who can be a father.

<sup>i</sup> See the note (i) in the Introduction chapter, p. 20, about the use about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

<sup>ii</sup> In the study, the term 'bed holder' is the basic unit of study and is understood as the equivalent of a 'house-holder' in a more conventional setting. In such settings people were limited to a bed as the only space over which they have some measure of control.

Research has shown that male kin were significant in providing care to children in their role as maternal uncles – ‘bomalome’ – who undertook extensive fathering activities.<sup>18</sup> Another recent study outlined how maternal uncles can support children when they are sick, discipline them when they disobey, defend them when required, and take on a leading role in arranging their funerals, should they die.<sup>19</sup> This study highlighted how the flexible nature of Northern Sotho and Shangaan models of kinship, which posit parental obligations by both paternal and maternal kin, accorded them with special resilience.<sup>20</sup>

In order to understand and promote fatherhood, it is useful to revisit African understandings that define fatherhood as a collective social responsibility of the family.<sup>21</sup> Whilst some literature has focused on the way men secure fatherhood through kin work, i.e. through the support of their (generally female) kin members<sup>22</sup>, there is less known on how men who occupy a social father position, and support children, strengthen kinship ties by virtue of their caring role.

### Listening to men

Unpacking fathers’ experiences of intergenerational support within families informs our understanding of what it means to be a social father within a wider kinship group. In doing so, the discussion draws on a study<sup>23</sup> on intergenerational relationships and support in South Africa that was conducted, in 2018, with over 100 research participants in Cape Town and Johannesburg. They were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and generations, and largely from lower-middle to middle-class families. The sample of men selected for this chapter represent men from the research sample who are employed and who are supporting kin as well as their own biological children. In addition to supporting their children financially as biological fathers (in

some cases), the participants supported adult siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles, and in some cases grandnieces and -nephews.

### Men managing fathering and kinship obligations

Rather than focusing on individual relationships, the findings reveal the networks of support that men are engaged in as brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and fathers. The three examples of social fathers who are discussed below map out some of the common patterns found across the group of employed participants who are responsible for children and young adults in their care through kinship obligations. These men engage in a range of care activities, including financial, practical, and emotional support. To illustrate the level of responsibility that some men in South Africa are carrying for ‘other’ children, a family map for some participants, and the monthly budgets for some of the social fathers in the study are used. All names referred to are pseudonyms.

#### Alpha Mosia: Older brother

Alpha was a 25-year-old nurse who has been the primary caregiver for his sister and younger brother for over 12 years since his mother passed away in 2007. Alpha resided with his ‘adopted’ parents who were the retired parents of his best friend. In the household, Alpha lived with his sister, his two older ‘adopted’ parents and their eldest daughter, Lebo, and her three children, and Alpha’s best friend, Sirebani. There were nine people in the household.

The older couple offered Alpha and his sister a place to stay in 2013, following the death of his parent, and Alpha’s commencement of full-time work. This offer of support was necessary to secure the care for his younger sister and it allowed Alpha to manage his work and care responsibilities. As a trainee nurse, Alpha

received a stipend of R10,000 per month. He used this income to support his sister through her studies in primary health care, including the fees, transport, and food. As outlined in figure 14, he used this income to buy food for the household where he resided, and also for a household in Mpumalanga where his younger brother, grandmother and five younger cousins lived. He bought them food every month and paid for school uniforms when these were needed.

At the time of the death of the mother, Alpha was 13 and he was living with her, his sister (9) and his brother (4) in rented accommodation. Following her passing, Alpha looked after the two children for four years before the younger brother went to stay in Mpumalanga with his grandmother when he was eight years old. Alpha described his experience:

“ I was in high school and, in fact throughout high school, I was living with them, and I had to hustle money for food and also go to school and parents’ meetings and all of those things – but then we made it through. I was selling sweets at school. – Alpha

His fathering responsibilities started at the age of 13 and, as the sole provider and caregiver for his younger siblings, he drew on support from his friend, Sirebani and his family, and a neighbour who was a retired teacher. Alpha matriculated and, in 2013, applied for a degree at the University of Johannesburg but was unable to register as the police officer who needed to complete an affidavit for registration purposes did not believe he was the breadwinner in his family. For the next two years he took on different jobs but, in 2015, he applied for a nursing course and secured a place in the class. In 2016, his adopted parents took on the main supervision of his sister as he was engaged in his studies during the week.

Figure 14: Alpha’s monthly budget



\*The course took six months at R1,000 per month. As the school expected payment upfront, Alpha borrowed the money from the neighbour who is a retired teacher.

Speaking about his tight budget to cover all the expenses, Alpha showed me the SMS he received to indicate his balance at the end of

the month and stated: "I have R102 and today is the end of the month." He explained that, for the next six months, it was going to be very tight, but he hoped to complete his training at the end of the year and his salary would then double the following year. In the meantime, he managed by borrowing money from his friend, who was a loan shark.

As Alpha reflected on his experience of caring for and providing for his sister, he commented on his appreciation of how she cooperated and that he regarded this as a form of solidarity:

“ She is very considerate and realises the kind of situation that we are in, and she doesn't follow her friends and she does not want fake hair, manicure etc. So at the end of the day, I also have to appreciate and show that I actually do acknowledge and see what she's doing,

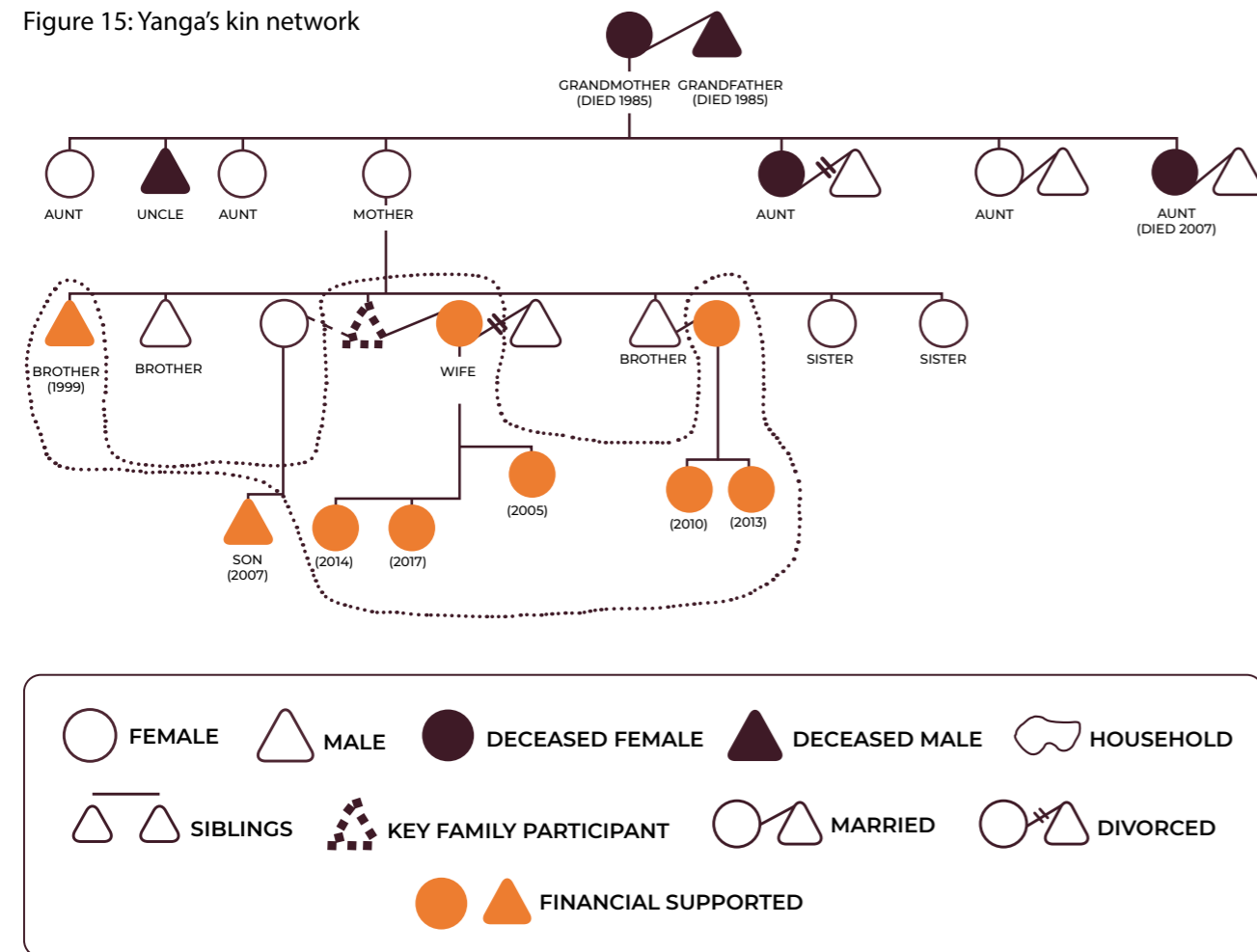
do you understand, because she could have made my life harder than it is.  
– Alpha

**Yanga Vilakazi: Father, paternal uncle, brother**

Yanga Vilakazi was a 41-year-old man who has been employed as a soldier since 2005. He was the second youngest of four siblings. He had three biological children, one child from a previous relationship, and two children in his marriage. He lived with his wife, their two biological children, and the wife's child. He financially supported all four children.

Figure 15 maps how he was connected to others in his kin network. All people within the dotted line were living together in the one household, albeit in separate rooms. The markers in orange indicate people in his wider kin network that he was supporting financially.

Figure 15: Yanga's kin network



His fathering experience started at age 25, with the birth of his first child. Yanga described how he provided for her:

“ She's the child I have raised because she was born on my salary, and was on the bank that day; so was born on my pay day; I maintained her from then on. – Yanga

He completed *inhlawulo* for her, at R10,000. The child resided with a maternal aunt until she was eight years, at which time Yanga wanted the child to be closer to him as he wanted his daughter to attend a 'better' school. The child moved and lived with the mother about 15 minutes away from Yanga's home.








Whilst describing his involvement with his firstborn, he outlined how frustrating it could be to be sidelined from key decision-making. Zoleka, his daughter, is now in grade 10 and she would visit him every week until recently. He was responsible for her school fees, school transport, and her lunchbox money. Unfortunately, they recently have fallen out and he has not seen her for one year after a disagreement about getting a cell phone and related costs. He spoke of how

their relationship has shifted in recent years with the birth of his other children and the consequent constraints on his ability to provide for her:

“ She was a child that was looking for things and if I can afford it, I will get it and if I can't afford it, I don't; so I made her to understand that there are many now at home, so she can't get things as she used to. So they have to share and I don't dispute the fact that I don't stay with her at home; so I must balance. – Yanga

He explained the ways in which he tried to improve the relationship, which included calling a family meeting. Unfortunately, this did not help much with his relationship with his child, or his involvement in decision-making. He tried to show his daughter his monthly costs to cover the food, school fees, and transport for his four children, wife, and younger brother. After marrying his wife, Yanga had two more biological children and he took on the responsibility for an 11-year-old girl who was his wife's firstborn child. He demonstrated how his salary barely covered the cost of supporting people in his care (figure 16).

Figure 16: Yanga's monthly budget

		AMOUNT (RANDS)
	<b>Net income</b>	<b>15,000</b>
<b>COST</b>		
	School fees (four children)	<b>3,000</b>
	Transport (three children)	<b>2,000</b>
	Groceries	(lunchboxes) <b>1,600</b> (household) <b>3,000</b>
	Bank: Car loan repayment	(mainly for sister) <b>2,600</b>
	Bank: Home loan repayment	<b>2,000</b>
	Petrol	<b>2,800</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>R14,200</b>

Yanga was also a 'father figure' to his older brother's children by financially supporting the two children, especially with food but also in terms of discipline. One of the biggest costs he incurred was to repay a bank loan to build a home for his wider family. Previously, he lived in his maternal aunt's house, but he wanted more secure living arrangements through his own family property, which he bought together with his brother. He moved onto the empty plot and built a house in Soweto, with several rooms for his wife, kids, his younger brother, and his other brother's girlfriend and their children. He struggled to cover the cost, so he had to take a bank loan. He financially supported the younger brother by providing shelter and food, but also in other ways:

“ The last born is here too but he didn't go to school, and we have been telling him that we have matric, we will try to push him, and I asked him to come here at [George Thebe] because I will pay. We are in the process of getting that done. – Yanga

In reflecting on the ways in which Yanga fathers, one has to understand many of his practices in relation to wider kinship obligations and responsibilities and how these are shaped by a duty to support a wider kinship network. He described a deeper moral sense of being a good older brother and paternal uncle. These findings were common for other research participants too, especially for men in secure, well-paying employment.

These findings were also echoed in the results of the SOSAF 2021 survey, which found that over 50% of participating fathers paid school fees and transport for their youngest child. Over three quarters of the fathers surveyed also reported paying for food, groceries, and clothing. Only a tiny fraction (3%) of fathers surveyed were not providing in some way for their youngest child.

The discussion in this chapter illuminates the survey findings by bringing to light the

struggles and constraints in supporting not only children, but other dependents in a wider kinship group.

**Lungisile Nkosana: Grandfather, 'malome', brother, father**

Lungisile Nkosana was 64 years old and the second-born son of a large family. He described himself as coming from a middle-class family as his father was a teacher and his mother had a small trading store where he grew up in a village in the Eastern Cape. He went to school in the Transkei and then to university. He started his story of fathering by describing his father's position in a larger polygamous family where his grandfather had five wives:

“ My grandfather was a polygamist; he had five wives, so I have millions of uncles, millions of aunts, millions of brothers, and sisters, because they are all children of my brothers and sisters. I am responsible for them, it's a traditional structure. My father is the firstborn son, but he is also coming from the great house which means my brother and I have the responsibility of the entire clan, of the five wives and the children of my uncles and their children. – Lungisile

Although his brother, as the firstborn son, was the public figure of the house and responsible for all, in reality Lungisile – who had greater financial means than his brother – took on more financial responsibility:

“ He is responsible, I am invisible, I don't matter, and my work is secondary. The dynamics now in my family between me and him is I am more blessed than he is, which means that he makes the decisions. I mean I have more than him, so he is responsible for asking from me. – Lungisile

Lungisile has three adult biological children who have attended university. In the interview he spoke less about his biological children and more about other children in his wider network. The sense of duty to provide and take care of the family came from different members of the family and occurred at different moments of the year, for different occasions and over his lifetime. As a 'malome', he was called upon over the last 10 years to assist with the payment of university fees for all nieces and nephews.

Lungisile referred to the beneficiaries as grandchildren; they were his father's grandchildren. His care, however, extended beyond financial support. He explained that recently he wanted to support his sister's daughter:

**“ I was telling my sister I am worried about her oldest daughter. Her behaviour is not right. We just think that maybe we were [a] little worried about her. We tried to fix that. And she is old; she is 20 years old but she behaves like 16 years old, so not taking responsibility seriously. – Lungisile**

Lungisile helped his brother and sister extensively in their business projects but also in supporting them with everyday costs. Many of the expenses related to family gatherings at times of specific celebrations or funerals:

**“ We had two funerals; one of the cousins by my aunt's son; the second person was my uncle's daughter; they are both my siblings. So, we had to make sort of ritual; it's a tradition, so I had to offer him money. Two weeks earlier we had the ritual function that has to be done when the father has passed on, to please the ancestors. It is a cultural event that had something to do with directly honouring my father. I am sure we spent a good R15,000 just to make sure that there is food and everything. – Lungisile**

Whilst recognising that Lungisile and his wife were better resourced and they had the means to support, he still reflected on why he did it and what it was like to feel connected to a wider network of kin who could depend on one other.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The findings presented in this chapter show that men, as fathers, were located and embedded in wider kinship structures and practices of care. Their relations to children were not solely driven by biology but were fundamentally shaped by lineage and the state. The fathers' practices of care and responsibility need to be understood in relation to wider responsibilities to others (in terms of kin and state) and not just dyadic (father-child) or triadic (father-child-mother) only. Whilst some have argued that men secured fatherhood through working on kinship, it can be argued that the opposite was also true: that men secured kinship through their fathering practices.

Employed men who were brothers, social fathers, paternal and maternal uncles, and grandfathers were fathering and giving care to many children in their wider kin group. The family budgets and level of responsibility, which often left fathers in a state of subsistence precarity despite being employed, tell of the practices of sacrifice and interdependence that they embarked on. Therefore, a focus on employed fathers highlights another aspect of responsibility and the financing of social reproduction and care work. Whilst the concept of precarity has been applied mainly to insecure wage work, the way in which men, as fathers, supported many kin can also expose even the secure and well-paid to financial hardship. Therefore, responsibility in this instance converts at times into precarity for all but those who were well off.

In South Africa, the rights of biological fathers are governed by statutory as well as customary law. Biology, under customary marriage, does not define fatherhood. The customary law concept of fatherhood is governed by lineage and raises important questions about the tension between statutory and customary laws in relation to biological fathers (genitors) of children born of woman-to-woman marriages. As case 3 on the next page indicates, a genitor, under customary law, has no right to access a child because fatherhood is bestowed through lineage, either through marriage or specific rituals. A genitor is therefore not always a father in the eyes of the community.

There are forms of kinship relationships where men are excluded from their children's lives, based on norms of lineage. Such as woman-to-woman marriages, variations of which can be found across the continent<sup>24</sup>, which take a range of forms, each of which somehow extends one or more local kinship principles. Case 3 highlights how the female husband married to establish her own independent homestead or to extend her lineage by bearing children by men she chooses, by deputising a man to impregnate her wife, or both. The men's biological role in generating these pregnancies did not usually confer much, if any, legal or social role; it was instead the female husband who was the children's father. The ways in which the genitors carved out a role and access to the child are outlined in case 3 that draws on extensive research in Limpopo.

Case 4 highlights how unmarried fathers were also impacted in different ways by the contestation between the rights and responsibilities of a genitor. It reveals that the state legitimates fatherhood largely through recognising legal rights which are often 'neglected' in cases of customary marriage, extramarital births (in the case of birth registration), and the recognition of a foreign

**Under customary law, a genitor has no right to access a child because fatherhood is bestowed through lineage via either marriage or specific rituals.**

customary marriage. Men come to represent themselves, and to be represented by others, in terms that the state enforces, both when appealing for recognition as fathers but also when accessing state resources in their role as caregivers. The state's brute enforcement capacity bestows or restricts rights to access, custody and to be a father.

The case outlines how the historical advantage of civil marriages over customary marriages remains evident in South African society. Customary marriages, whilst recognised by the state under the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act<sup>25</sup>, were often unregistered, poorly understood by state administrative systems, and perceived as a local traditional marriage unrecognised by the state. In such instances, fathers who might be part of a customary marriage, or unmarried and not present on the birth certificate of their child, were not deemed as fathers, even if and when they have been present and engaging in care activities with the child. The recent Constitutional Court finding<sup>26</sup> goes some way in addressing some of the shortcomings experienced by unmarried fathers who are often not listed on their child's birth certificate.



# Negotiating fatherhood in woman-to-woman marriages in Limpopo

**Kagiso Maphalle, PhD student, University of Cape Town**

A woman-to-woman marriage is concluded under customary law when a woman marries another woman for purposes of procreation and lineage continuation.<sup>27</sup> In these cases, the woman who initiated the marriage relationship is referred to as the female husband. One of the main purposes of a woman-to-woman marriage is to produce and raise children as legitimate heirs for the family head without creating a completely new house. This means that children born of a woman-to-woman marriage belonged to the family into which the female husband was married into, or the maiden home she belonged to and not to the biological father.

The concept of fatherhood in woman-to-woman marriages was difficult to navigate because of the provisions of customary law which regulate and determine who a child belongs to, and the parental rights attached to that. Under both Lobedu and Bapedi customary law, it is said that *ngwana ke wa dikgomo*, which means that “a child belongs to s(he) who has paid the bride price”. This, therefore, means that the emphasis of fatherhood and paternal rights under customary law in these communities was not determined by biological paternity, but by social fathering in terms of the paternal rights vested in the female husband.

The study<sup>28</sup> involved individual interviews and focus group discussions with female husbands, their wives, traditional leaders, traditional healers, biological fathers and community members in the Ga-Mphahlele, Moletjie, and Mamone villages of the Limpopo province. It highlighted the complex relationships between the biological fathers – men who were either members of the female husband’s family, or a suitor of the woman’s choice – and children born of woman-to-woman marriages.

The findings highlighted how customary law provided for and addressed the issue of biological fathers and their rights. Firstly, it was found that customary law in these communities did not provide for the biological fathers’ rights of access to children born of woman-to-woman marriages as provided for in terms of section 21 of the Children’s Act.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, it was found that customary law in these communities did not allow for the existence of, and the direct parent–child relationship between the biological father and the child.

Thirdly, the interviews indicated that customary law did not provide the platform and opportunity for the child to access their biological father, and that this was due to how family relationships and information access

were managed within the family setup. The study also revealed that the children’s spiritual and cultural ritual needs were taken care of throughout their lives through the female husband’s family customs and traditions. It was found that the children used their mothers’ female husbands’ surname and not the biological father’s surname.

The customary law provisions regulating biological fathers’ parental rights in woman-to-woman marriages are seemingly limiting and restricting. They do not allow for direct engagements between the biological father and the child, and both the fathers and adult children interviewed reasoned that the basis of their decision not to challenge these provisions was because they were raised to respect *setso* (culture). They thus could not pursue actions contrary to what *setso* provided, the common answer received was “ke setso sa gagabo rena” which means “it is our culture”.

The findings however revealed that, even though it seems biological fathers did not have direct parental rights and access to children born from women-to-women marriages, there were ways in which they have navigated their positions and gained indirect access, often on the basis of customary law provisions. In the Lobedu case, the biological fathers of the children born of women married to the Modjadji Queen were obliged to pay damages (*ditshenyagalelo* in Sepedi) for impregnating the Queen’s wives. The reason given for this was that the damages paid were an acknowledgement that the men had done wrong against the Queen and against what was referred to as her “property”.<sup>30</sup> The damages were paid in the event that the man responsible for the pregnancy was not a member of the royal family. The men also had the obligation to maintain the children financially after the damages had been paid.

It is important to note in this case that, even after the damages had been paid, the children only used the surname of their mother’s female husband. When the man was part of the royal family and was commissioned, approved, or appointed by the female husband, no payment of damages was necessary.

In the Bapedi case, a biological father’s obligations towards the child often were referred to in spiritual matters affecting the child. In the event of the child’s unexplainable illness, a traditional healer would be consulted by the female husband’s family. During such consultations, the cause of illness often was explained as that the biological father’s ancestors wanted to be recognised in the child’s life through a performance of rituals according

One of the main purposes of a woman-to-woman marriage is to produce and raise children as legitimate heirs for the family head without creating a completely new house.

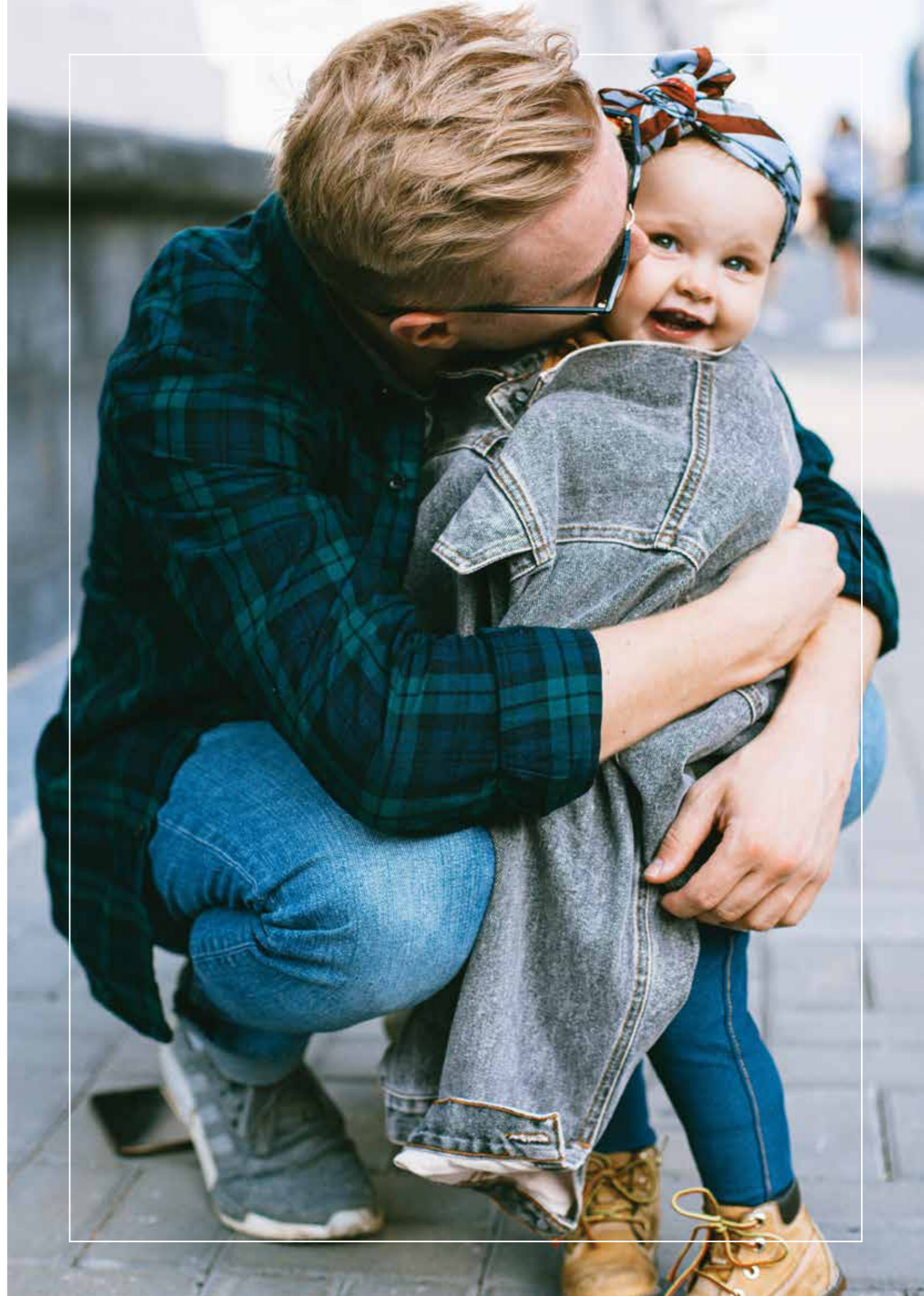


to the biological father's family customs and traditions. The biological father would be consulted and called upon to assist with the child's spiritual matters, thereby making his identity invariably known to the child.

In cases of the biological father's absence or inaccessibility, it was explained that traditional medicine offered 'bypass' processes which allowed for spiritual connections to be established with the biological father's family on behalf of the child to facilitate the healing process of the child.

The paradox presented by both the Lobedu and Bapedi research is that, although customary law provisions did not give biological fathers expressed and direct rights of access to the children born of the woman-to-woman marriage, it was through customary law processes that biological fathers were included in their rights of access to the children.

It is important, however, to note that although the customary law provisions seem to disadvantage and disallow biological fathers' direct parental rights and access, the biological fathers did not contest this apparent unfairness or pursue avenues of challenging it. This largely was found to be due to the fact that many of these biological fathers were in existing marriages and these indirect opportunities which offered points of access allowed for minimal disruptions to their marriage relationships.



# Unmarried fathers and their invisible children in the Eastern Cape

**Mbonisi Nyathi, Children's Institute,  
University of Cape Town**

A recent groundbreaking judgment by the full bench of the Eastern Cape High Court declared that children without birth certificates were “invisible”.<sup>31</sup> This case, *Naki v Minister of Home Affairs* and the subsequent application to the Constitutional Court<sup>32</sup> for confirmation have raised attention to the state's discrimination against ‘unmarried’<sup>iii</sup> fathers by preventing them from registering their children's births with the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). These children can also not use their fathers' surnames.

The Naki case revealed that the state's lack of recognition of unmarried fathers in the civil birth registration system exposed their children to the risk of being excluded from the education system and from accessing social assistance and healthcare. They were effectively denied the support and assistance considered necessary for their positive growth and development.<sup>33</sup> Some of the details of the judgment are mapped out below together with some insight into the state's failure to recognise unmarried fathers and their invisible children.

## The facts from the High Court judgment: *Naki and Others v Director-General: DHA and Another*<sup>34</sup>

Mr Naki was a South African citizen who had a relationship with Ms Ndovya, a citizen of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) while posted as a peacekeeper in that country.<sup>35</sup> Two children were born of that relationship, and the couple subsequently married in the DRC. The marriage was not registered, and no marriage certificate was issued because customary marriages are not registered in the DRC.<sup>36</sup>

Mr Naki returned to South Africa and, in 2016, Ms Ndovya travelled to join him on a visitor's permit. She was pregnant at the time, and she was unable to travel back to DRC or extend her visa when it expired. She gave birth to a child (“NN”) in February 2016 in the Eastern Cape. The couple attempted to register the child's birth, but their application was refused by officials of the DHA.<sup>37</sup> The dispute was based on the interpretation of section 9 and 10 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act and relevant regulations.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> I have chosen to write ‘unmarried’ in inverted commas as in some cases the fathers are part of an unrecognised customary marriage and are not regarded as married by the state.

The High Court found regulation 12, which gave effect to the provisions of section 10, to be unconstitutional but dismissed the constitutional validity of section 10. After the Centre for Child Law appealed this part of the judgment, the High Court subsequently found that section 10 was unconstitutional.

## Appeal Court findings

The applicants argued that section 10 discriminates against the father on the basis of his status as not married to the child's mother. This directly violates constitutional right to equality in section 9(3) of the Constitution and amounts to unlawful discrimination against unmarried fathers.<sup>39</sup>

The court also held that, by extension, the discrimination also has the effect of denying children access to a birth certificate even when they have a legitimate claim to a nationality from birth. In this manner it discriminates against children born out of wedlock on grounds that are arbitrary.<sup>40</sup> The Appeal Court found that a law that engenders discrimination with potentially enormous consequences cannot be said to be in the best interests of the child.<sup>41</sup> The court found section 10 unconstitutional and ordered that it be amended to allow for a notice of birth of a child to be given under the surname of an unmarried father.<sup>42</sup>

In September 2021, shortly before the publication of this report, the Constitutional Court declared that legislation (section 10 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act) which prevented unmarried fathers from registering their child's birth under a father's surname, unless the mother was present or gave consent, was unconstitutional. This finding will have a significant impact on the lives of many fathers who are largely unrecognised and unable to access basic state services.

## Case studies from Qunu in Eastern Cape

Mr Naki's case highlights some of the challenges unmarried fathers face when attempting to register their children. Since 2018, as part of a Children's Institute legal services project, I have been assisting unmarried fathers caring for undocumented children in Qunu, a village outside Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, to apply for birth certificates and social assistance. I have assisted five unmarried fathers, where the whereabouts of the mother was either unknown or the mother herself was present but undocumented, similar to the Naki case. I have observed many similarities in the experiences of these unmarried fathers at government offices such as the DHA and the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA).

In two cases, where the mother had abandoned the family and the respective fathers approached the Mthatha DHA office to apply for birth certificates for their children, the DHA officials unlawfully defined these children as abandoned and ignored the biological fathers' presence and their parental rights and responsibilities in terms of the Children's Act.<sup>43</sup> DHA officials similarly defined children as orphaned or abandoned when their paternal grandmother, who was caring for them, attempted to apply for birth certificates, even though they were clearly not abandoned but in the care of their grandmother.

In both cases, DHA officials referred them to social workers for a section 156 'childcare and protection' court order in terms of the Children's Act. However, the social workers were unable to assist as they pleaded lack of capacity and resources to help with the applications for a birth certificate. The social workers in turn referred them to Legal Aid for guardianship applications.

At the Mthatha Legal Aid Office, the unmarried fathers were told that their guardianship applications would take six months subject to getting a report from the Family Advocate. However, the office of the Family Advocate also lacked capacity. These unmarried fathers therefore waited for over 12 months for a response from either social workers or Legal Aid. One case was finally solved by the father going directly to the clerk of the Children's Court and obtaining a court order which he could then take to Home Affairs. The other case remained unresolved, and the child was still undocumented.

In another case, where the mother was present but was herself undocumented, DHA officials refused to allow the unmarried father to register the birth and told the unmarried father that he cannot apply for his children's birth certificates as the regulations require the mother to be documented. This case occurred a year after the Eastern Cape High Court had amended the regulations via a 'reading-in remedy' to enable unmarried fathers to register their children in cases where the mothers

were not documented. However, the DHA officials had no knowledge of the judgment and said they could not apply it until they received a directive from the national office of the DHA.

I have also assisted unmarried fathers to apply for social assistance at SASSA by using alternative forms of identification, such as an affidavit or sworn statement for applicants without birth certificates or identity documents, as determined by the Social Assistance Act.<sup>44</sup> Officials at the SASSA office sometimes informed these fathers that children without birth certificates did not

qualify for social grants. A further challenge was that Child Support Grants accessed by our clients were routinely terminated after three months.<sup>45</sup> This was despite clear evidence that lodging an application for a late birth registration and finalising the birth certificates took much longer than the three months allowed by SASSA, particularly in the case of unmarried fathers.

The state's discriminatory treatment of unmarried fathers and the lack of state recognition of the role they and their kin play in caring for children is a much under-researched topic. Further research in this area will outline the extent to which these challenges relate to the systemic marginalisation of men as fathers, and/or which issues were more administrative failures on the part of the state.

## The state's lack of recognition of unmarried fathers in the civil birth registration system exposed their children to the risk of being excluded from the education system.

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# Bastard of Bhacaland

**Author:** Lamla Bam

"Your father says his wife has died," my mother reported. I knew her sad eyes were an attempt at common decency. Behind the veil of supposed empathy lay a tornado of excitement. I am her daughter and know her like I know myself. I managed to quickly get her off this fake sympathy into excited giggles shared with a cup of coffee.

"I can finally go home. The bastard of Bhacaland can finally go home!"

My father once told me in a call that my dear mother was aware that he had a wife in the former Transkei but Alexandra, Johannesburg, in the late eighties was a place where 'migrant' workers from the bantu homesteads could not live with their wives. So the men fell in love with beautiful maidens who had come to work as domestic workers in Sandton and the rest is history.

I was born a sin in 1998 and until a concerned wife deep in the belly of the Transkei started realising her husband sent too little money home, I had a father in my life.

It was a sunny day and a photo of Joe Slovo, the heroic communist, hung above the pillows where the three of us were lying, listening to Lucky Dube and laughing like doves in a nest. A father, a mother and Sunshine. My father calls me Sunshine. The angry wife beat my mother off her husband with a stick and called her a "township whore".

Later, I would grow up with an aunt in my own mother's hometown in the Transkei. When I asked of my father, I was dissuaded from contacting him as "women from Bhacaland in Mount Frere poison children born out of wedlock".

That is why 19 years later - when my father called to tell my mother and I that his wife had died - we were elated.

That is because we are foolishly hopeful women. I waited for my father in Mount Frere, next to the stand where another aunt of mine sells fruit, for days.

I was 21 and he had promised to meet me there and we would take a car to his village where I would meet my half brothers and sisters. For weeks, I went back to my aunt's house dejected until the end of the December holidays when he suddenly told me he had gone back to Johannesburg.

He had dodged me. He had run away from the Sun.

When I got back to Port Elizabeth, where I studied, I counted my blessings and moved on. I thought of my many aunts and cousins. My tribe who had raised me. And, I was contented. I know my people love me.

I think of my Father as an elusive dream. Silk escaping my hands never to be caught again.

*This was a winning essay in the 'My Father' competition by the FunDza Literacy Trust in collaboration with Heartlines. It was originally published on fundza.mobi*

# ECONOMIC PROVISION AND FATHERHOOD

Mandisa Malinga

## Chapter 4

# Economic provision and fatherhood

Mandisa Malinga, University of Cape Town

“ Things like those, like doing groceries for the children, paying school fees; I do it in full when I have money; I do all of that then I know that I will be able to survive because the children do not understand not having food to eat, you see, then I do groceries. – Themba

## KEY MESSAGES

- Financial provision remains the most central dimension of fatherhood for many men. Having a job and providing for your children are still considered the most honoured form of masculinity and fatherhood.
- Unemployed and poor men who are unable to provide for their children and families face shame and humiliation, and they are more likely to disengage from their families.
- Some unemployed or precariously employed men avoid contacting their children and families when they are not able to give financial support.
- The gender-based division of labour frames childcare as an arena for mothers, while limiting fathers' role to financial provision.
- To encourage men's participation in childcare, the concept of 'care' needs to be stripped of its gender bias in a way that allows both men and women to perform such care work.

Themba<sup>1</sup> moved from the Eastern Cape province in search of work and has since been 'working' as a painter in Cape Town. Themba does not have a stable job, so he seeks work on the side of the road outside a popular hardware store, approaching customers who come to the store to buy paint to offer his services. In the quote above, Themba was responding to a question on what he thought the role of a father is and, like many other men interviewed in the same study<sup>1</sup>, Themba made reference specifically, and almost exclusively, to his role as a financial provider to his children, and with no reflection on other roles that men can and do play in children's lives.

Fatherhood is understood and defined by men mostly in terms of the responsibilities they associate with being a father.<sup>2</sup> While other responsibilities such as being a present and nurturing father were cited as important, many studies showed that financial provision remained the most central dimension of fatherhood for many men.<sup>3</sup> The significance of financial provision in men's constructions of fatherhood was heightened in low-income contexts that are characterised by poverty and unemployment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Not his real name. This applies to all participants and their kin who are named in this chapter

A detailed history on the role of labour migration as a function of colonial and apartheid powers, and its impact on fatherhood, has been documented by several researchers.<sup>5</sup> These scholars reflect on the disruption of the Black<sup>i</sup> family as a result of labour migration, which saw men leaving their families to work in mines and factories. These men measured their success as fathers based on their ability to provide for their children and families, solidifying the significance of economic provision in constructions of fatherhood and masculinity.<sup>6</sup> Being able to fulfil the financial responsibilities associated with fatherhood, then, became an important aspect of constructing their identity as men.

These responsibilities include providing for their children's economic wellbeing, buying them clothes, providing money for their healthcare, and making sure that they have the necessary schooling requirements. Like Themba, Spikiri (27) and Jabu (37) cited economic provision as the "first" aspect of men's responsibilities as fathers<sup>7</sup>:

“ You must first make sure that children eat [my] sister, you must make sure that you provide them with clothes to wear and [only] then you have to make sure that they get a father's love at all times. – Spikiri

“ There is only one thing I see for a father is to provide for his children. Anything else must be [done by] the mother. – Jabu

While often acknowledged as important, other responsibilities, such as providing love and emotional support, nurturing, and physical presence were often considered by men like Jabu and Spikiri as secondary to economic provision. The South African study<sup>8</sup> of men who sought work on the roadside found that a few of the men who were interviewed expressed the desire to be present, nurturing fathers who also

<sup>8</sup> See the note (i) in the Introduction chapter, p. 20, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

Studies have reported that men who are not able to fulfil the role of financial provider often experienced shame, humiliation, and depression.

provided for their children's financial needs; and they acknowledged the importance of fulfilling each of these roles. However, these men were not able to provide for their children's and families' economic needs while at the same time being present and nurturing fathers because they spent most of their time away from home, seeking work. In the interviews, the men revealed that they avoided making contact with their children and families when they were not able to send financial support.

Poverty, unemployment, and physical absence from home have made co-resident, present, and nurturing fatherhood unattainable for economically marginalised men who find themselves having to prioritise financial provision over other aspects of fatherhood. This study's findings<sup>9</sup> highlighted the ways in which socio-economic and other factors (e.g., history, culture, politics) shape how men experience and practise fatherhood. These factors should, therefore, inform our understanding of fatherhood.

## Unemployment, underemployment, and precarious work

Unemployment, underemployment, and precarious work present a serious challenge

for South Africa's men. These concepts refer to those who are without a job (unemployed); those who work fewer hours than they are willing and available to work (underemployment); and those who are in casual and seasonal forms of employment that are characterised by low wages, lack of a work contract and security, long working hours, and little to no regulatory protections (precarious work).<sup>10</sup>

Those who experience these (un)employment conditions often have very little control over their lives and, due to uncertainty and economic instability, struggle to provide for themselves and their families. Yet, they cannot stay at home – they are too poor to sit around and not do anything<sup>11</sup>, economically speaking. In the context of poverty, being active and nurturing fathers may be experienced as doing nothing to support a family. For such men, being at home was not only more frustrating but it offered no solutions to their most pressing problem – poverty – forcing them outside the home to seek work, even when they knew they had little to no chances of finding work on a particular day.<sup>12</sup>

Unemployment in South Africa is high among women, too.<sup>13</sup> However, while it is culturally and socio-economically more acceptable for women to stay at home and look after the home and children, this is less so the case for men, who are expected to be the ones providing for their families' financial needs.<sup>14</sup> Men are most often the ones who are expected to leave the home in search of opportunities to provide for their children and families – an expectation which reflects the “persistence of patriarchal histories and habits”<sup>15</sup>.

Studies have reported that men who are not able to fulfil the role of financial provider often experienced shame, humiliation, and

depression.<sup>16</sup> Those fathers who fulfilled their financial responsibilities towards their children were reportedly more likely to be actively involved in their children's lives and often had more positive relationships with their children than those fathers who did not fulfil this responsibility.<sup>17</sup> It has been argued<sup>18</sup> that wives and children tend to antagonise fathers who are not able to provide for their families' economic needs. The tension that emerges from the pressures on men firstly to be economic providers, and men's inability to provide, creates a further barrier between marginalised men and their families, and disrupt bonds that may facilitate positive parenting between men and their children.

Results from the SOSAF 2021 survey showed that, out of 1,003 men who participated in the study, 270 did not share residence with their youngest child, although most of these (89% of the 270) did get to see and spend some time with the children. Of the 30 (11% of the 270) men who did not see or spend time with their children, eight cited unemployment, unpaid, or incomplete *lobola*; and unpaid or incomplete *inhlawulo* as reasons for not having access to their children.

While this number seems small in relation to the total number of men who participated in the study, it reflects the reality of many of South Africa's Black and unemployed men who – because of their economic circumstances – also experience cultural barriers that prevent them from accessing their children and being present fathers.

It should be noted that this small number of fathers who do not have access to their children reflects the profile of some men who participated in the SOSAF 2021 survey (described on pp. 168–173 together with some key findings) and is not a reflection of the experiences and realities of most fathers

in South Africa. It should, therefore, not be understood as nationally representative of fathers' access to their children, but that men's socio-economic and employment status often determines whether they have access to their children or not.

For example, of the 1,003 fathers who participated in the survey, 61% were in full-time employment (either working for a company or self-employed); while only 14% were in part-time employment; and only 24% were either unemployed, pensioners, retired, or students. The survey findings present a different picture from that observed and studied in the broader South African context and confirms, as was argued<sup>19</sup>, that it is often men in middle-class families who have access to and participate actively in their children's lives.

In contexts where financial provision remains a significant marker of fatherhood and masculinity, men are more likely to spend time outside the home seeking work than at home looking after their children. Even where shifts in parental roles happen, men were more likely to consider economic provision their most important role within the household.<sup>20</sup> Men who are poor, unemployed, and those who (because of precarious work) have no control over when they work or the conditions of their work, are often not able to plan their lives, plan time with their children, or provide sufficiently for their children's needs, and are reportedly more likely to withdraw 'fatherhood'.<sup>21</sup> The failure to provide for their children's financial needs, and the shame and humiliation associated with such failure, are said to be the driving force behind men's retreat from actively participating in their children's lives.<sup>22</sup>

Being unemployed, not working sufficient hours, and being forced to participate in unstable precarious forms of work that may

Poverty, unemployment, and physical absence from home have made co-resident, present, and nurturing fatherhood unattainable for economically marginalised men who find themselves having to prioritise financial provision over other aspects of fatherhood.

involve long hours and low wages negatively impact men's ability to fulfil their roles as fathers. Men's involvement in their children's lives, therefore, is limited either through their inability to provide, or their absence from the home while working long hours or seeking work.

Case 5, on 'Black tax' and societal expectations of fathers, shows that men not only have to work towards providing for their immediate families, but also for extended family members, making present and nurturing fatherhood even less likely for them. This is especially the case when men have to migrate to different cities, provinces, and even countries in search of employment opportunities.

# 'Black tax' and the societal expectations on fathers

**Ngoakwana Modubi, masters student, University of Cape Town**

This case draws on a qualitative study<sup>23</sup> which aimed to understand the fathering practices of men who were precariously employed in higher education institutions in the Western Cape province. Fathers who were employed under precarious working conditions in higher education institutions were recruited for the study.

Men from two of the province's universities responded to the call for participation. They had to meet several criteria to participate in the study: they 1. self-defined as fathers; 2. were employed as academic staff within a higher education institution in the Western Cape; and 3. were on non-permanent contracts.

In total, seven men volunteered to be interviewed for the study, even though multiple efforts were taken to recruit more participants. They were aged between 34 and 57; and of the seven, five were married, one divorced, and one never married. Each participant had between one and three children.

Findings from this study showed that society placed certain expectations on men if they wanted to get married and start a family. Men were expected to have a 'stable' paying job and be financially responsible. For some of the men interviewed for the study, it was not necessarily paid work itself that gave meaning and dignity to their lives because paid work in itself could be demanding. It was having the ability to embrace the challenges associated with some forms of paid work for the sake of one's family which gave meaning to the work done. There was, in other words, honour in self-sacrifice for the family.

This was the fate of 34-year-old Peter, a migrant who, at the time of this research, was furthering his studies and working as a non-permanent contract staff member in one of the Western Cape higher education institutions, while his wife and two children were in Uganda. This case focuses on Peter.

Being a migrant father impeded Peter's ability to be involved in his children's lives. The reality was that he was not able to be physically present when he was needed by his wife and children. Being employed meant taking up certain responsibilities, and his employers also had certain expectations of him, which mostly involved loyalty. This he showed by working longer hours than he was contracted for, something he considered important for building his career, and with the hope of being employed permanently.

Peter was aware of how the physical distance between him and his children while working in South Africa would impact their relationship. But he also knew that he needed to make sacrifices to provide for his family's material needs and expectations:

**“ She knows that daddy is in an aeroplane and when he comes back, 'he will bring me this and that'. So I think I get the feeling that [she thinks] 'daddy is going to give me this' and therefore sees daddy as the provider... – Peter**

Another societal pressure, shaped to a certain degree by cultural expectations about gender, was the need for the father to provide not only for his household but also for extended family members. For Peter, being a father and a provider meant taking financial responsibility for both his immediate and extended family.

**“ A challenge of being a male parent is that there is a part of being the provider and you are not the provider of your house only. So you also have to look at your brother, parents and extended family ... So this has to come to me as the father of the house. Then there is also my wife's family: her brothers, sisters, mother and father. – Peter**

This form of cultural expectation about providing economically for one's extended family is known among many Black South Africans as 'Black tax'. This is a term used to define specifically financial support – by those who are better off – to not only extended families but also their families of origin. Note should be taken that, while this form of provision

to both immediate and extended families has been conceptualised as 'Black tax', some people have challenged the term because they do not consider providing for their extended families as a form of 'tax'.

Apparently, something like 'Black tax' can be found in Uganda. Peter's reason for feeling the need to provide for his extended family was due to the society he was raised in, which has moulded

his understanding of his role as the man and father of his household. Peter expressed that, even though he might have wanted to ignore the expectations of extended family members and provided only for his immediate family, it was something he felt he could not avoid.

Even though Peter wanted to save some of the money he received from his employment, he could not save enough because he must spend some of it on his extended family. Ultimately, providing for extended family members hindered his ability to create a good future for his immediate family.

Young professionals who come from disadvantaged backgrounds often remain in the same financial positions for a long time because they need to support their parents, siblings, and extended family on their salary.

**Being employed meant taking up certain responsibilities, and his employers also had certain expectations of him, which mostly involved loyalty.**






## Economic provision and fatherhood

It has been suggested that the intersection between employment, race, class, and gender is an important dimension to pay attention to when seeking to make sense of fatherhood in any context.<sup>24</sup> Culture is another dimension to which attention must be paid, as is evident from the 'Black tax' case. This suggestion highlights the need to pay attention to the intertwining contextual factors that shape parenting for men when seeking to understand their role as fathers and involvement in their children's lives. Such factors include men's socio-economic status.

Of the men who participated in the SOSAF 2021 survey, 44% were ranked in the middle socio-economic group, while a further 42% fell in the higher socio-economic group. Of the 1,003 participants, only 13% (133) were found to be within the low socio-economic bracket (see pp. 168 – 173 for an overview of the key survey findings and measures used to determine the socio-economic ranking of participants). These rankings were further analysed in relation to the men's engagement with their children.

Figure 17 depicts the survey respondents' engagements with their biological children in the past three years, based on a selection of activities that men listed in the survey.

Figure 17: SOSAF 2021 survey fathers' reported activities with their biological children in the past three years

	 Low to medium socio-economic brackets: 480 fathers	 Highest socio-economic brackets: 374 fathers	 Total fathers: 854
Survey fathers who reported doing activities with their biological children	62%	76%	70%
Provided financial support	73%	80%	76%
Read books to their child/ren	54%	67%	60%
Played with their child/ren	68%	80%	73%
Played indoors with their child/ren	69%	81%	74%
Played outdoors with their child/ren	64%	79%	71%
Dressed their child/ren	64%	70%	66%
Walked their child/ren to school	48%	56%	52%
Done homework with their child/ren	55%	68%	60%
Ate a meal with their child/ren	75%	81%	77%
Talked to their child/ren about a topic of interest to the child	49%	67%	57%
None of the above	3%	1%	2%

Based on survey participants' reported household and community demographics, responses of the fathers were divided into two supergroup formations made up by the low to medium socio-economic measure (SEM) brackets (1 – 3) and the two higher SEM brackets (4 – 5).

Figure 17 shows that, although father–child engagement was generally high, it remained consistently higher among those men in the two highest socio-economic brackets than those men in the low-to-middle socio-economic groups. The data also shows that, of all 854 participants who had biologically fathered children, only 2% had not engaged in any of the activities listed in the survey.

The SOSAF 2021 survey findings confirm previously highlighted class differences in how men engage and interact with their children, as well as the frequency of such interactions.<sup>25</sup>

Men who are poor and unemployed are, therefore, less likely to participate actively in their children’s lives. This is not to say that they do not desire to be present and nurturing fathers, but that they will prioritise financial provision over other aspects of fatherhood.<sup>26</sup> Poor, unemployed fathers have to contend against constructions of fatherhood that not only shame them for not being able to provide material resources for their children, but that also undermine other non-economic forms of fathering.

Some men would go to the extent of ‘giving’ up their child by not acknowledging a pregnancy when they were not able to provide for their partner and unborn child.<sup>27</sup> For example, Siya, a Cape Town-born father of one, spoke about how he had to watch another man raise his child as their own, all because he could not afford to take care of the child and the mother. Siya broke up with his partner early in her pregnancy, and she met another man shortly thereafter. This man, who did not know she was pregnant at the time, assumed the baby was his when he learnt of the pregnancy, and married the woman and raised Siya’s child as his own. Siya talked about how painful it was for him to watch his son being raised by another man, while at the same time he felt he was not in a position to claim the child as his because this man was taking care of his child in a way that he would not be able to provide<sup>28</sup>:

“ I have a child but what is happening is that, my child ... his mother was from the rural areas ... but we fell in love, I think in the end of the year, we dated,

dated, dated. We started disagreeing as time passed, because she became pregnant. In our disagreeing we fought ... and that is how we broke up ... Two months into the pregnancy with my child she started dating another boyfriend and they were in a relationship. So when the pregnancy came out, she said it was his and he also accepted. But I knew that it was my child, you see, but I was ... I am a quiet person, and that guy does not know, and she is now his wife. – Siya

Siya can be seen here as sacrificing the ‘status’ of fatherhood to ensure that his child is well taken care of. Alternatively, he could be seen as shifting the responsibility to take care of his child to someone else. For some men, being a father means sacrificing in the present to ensure a better future for their child. Luke, a 24-year-old father and university student spoke about the financial sacrifices he had to make in the present (see case 6). For him, this meant he had to study while not being able to provide for his child in order to obtain his degree and secure a better life for his child in the future:

“ So yeah, obviously with me being a student, a full-time student, I cannot go out there and get a job ... Some things are going to suffer, either my studies or my job. – Luke

Luke further explained that, although he could get a job, he would not be able to focus on both his studies and working, which would negatively affect the completion of his degree – a goal which he believed will set him up for a better future and, therefore, a better chance at being able to provide for his child. National statistics affirm Luke’s assertion that completing his degree might put him in a better position for employment. For example, of all unemployed persons in the second quarter of 2021, around 2% were graduates, while the majority of unemployed people had education levels below matric (approximately 52%), matric (38%), and other tertiary qualifications (nearly 8%).<sup>29</sup>

## CASE 6

## Experiences of fatherhood among university students

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Student-fathers in South Africa experience a number of challenges while trying to navigate the roles and responsibilities associated with these two identities. They encounter several internal and external conflicts such as time poverty and needing to find ways to be actively present in both parts of their lives. These conflicts are often intensified by socio-economic and cultural challenges within the context of South Africa.

The importance of these contextual factors is often not taken into account, as can be seen by the dearth of research currently available on this topic. This is particularly evident when focusing on university students within South Africa. It is necessary to explore the subjective experiences of student-fathers as they are not only underrepresented within research, but do not receive adequate institutional or social support.

In illustration of such experiences, this case draws on examples from a recent qualitative study<sup>30</sup> which explored fatherhood among university students in South Africa. The study drew attention to the way in which these individuals navigated their often-conflicting identities and responsibilities.

Eight participants were recruited using various methods, including social media. These men met the study criteria which included: 1. being aged between 18 – 30 years; and 2. being biological fathers while enrolled for a university degree. Four of the participants identified as Coloured, three identified as Black and one participant identified as White. Five of the participants were 24 years old, two were aged 22, and one was 29 years old. Four of the fathers were married, one was with their child’s mother but not married, one was not with their child’s mother but had a good relationship, and two participants were not with their child’s mother and had bad relationships. Only one participant had more than one child, twins.

These student-fathers were recruited from three universities within the Western Cape. Their accounts highlighted the need for not only more social and institutional support for student-fathers but also continued research into their experiences.

All the participating student-fathers identified intense pressure to provide financially, which is a normalised societal expectation placed on men. They identified a range of difficulties which made fulfilment of their role as financial providers much more challenging. These influences

included lacking the qualifications needed to get a job, not having the time available to study and hold a job, and not making enough money to provide, even if employment was secured. The pressures and ability of student-fathers to provide financially for their children were complicated by layered socio-economic and political challenges.

Despite these financial challenges, participants expressed views often not addressed in much of the literature on fatherhood. The participating fathers made powerful points about long-term pay-offs and sacrifices. They believed having a job while studying might in fact be detrimental to their overall success in the future. For example, Luke, a 24-year-old Coloured male in an unmarried but committed relationship with his child's mother said:

**“ If I just did a normal 9 to 5 job my kid could have anything he wants right now, he could have it all. But then, I've done 9 to 5s before ... and then again you spend way more time away from your kid because you're always working. I feel like being a student and still being a father, I am actively trying to provide a better future for my son, because, you know, I'm trying to better myself. – Luke**

Such experiences shed light on the disparity between wanting to have a job to provide but also wanting to focus on completing studies as a long-term benefit in the future. The pressure of needing a job seemed to be reconciled with the fact that this would mean time away from their child – and impact the father-child relationship. Overall, the idea of making present-day sacrifices was very common.

The young fathers in this study felt that a lack of education would hold them back from being a “good father”. The student-fathers also felt an immense amount of pressure to provide better lives for their children, especially the fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants experienced financial pressure not only about immediate provision, but also in relation to sustained provision in the future. They believed that completing a higher education would give them access to stable job opportunities that would enable them to provide a better future for them and their children. A father expressed this internal conflict:

**“ So, I feel like, me going to work now and leaving my studies won't be beneficial to him in the future. Because I'd love to put money away for him for university. But I feel like, economically, it's a major challenge to juggle the two, really. – Luke**

The view that education can improve one's own future, as well as their child's future, was common and highlighted the fact that young fathers were planning ahead. This finding is usually not common in studies and media representations of young fatherhood, which tend to present young fathers as irresponsible<sup>31</sup>, and highlights the importance of continued research on this group of fathers.

Data from several other South African studies shows that there are many ways in which employment, or lack thereof, might impact on fathering. For example, being unemployed often meant for many men having to migrate to other provinces and even countries for work and, therefore, not sharing residence with their children.<sup>32</sup> Another study<sup>33</sup> found that, even when they lived near their children, some men were not able to share residence with them due to poor living conditions. For example, Jabu, a 37-year-old father of three who sought work on the side of the road as a painter, spoke about the condition of the home he lived in, which he described as uninhabitable and dehumanising.

**“ You see the kind of place we live in, yho, if you could see it my sister you wouldn't say there are people that live there, it's just another ... what do you call a shack? Yes, we live in shacks, so people in squatter areas do not use a [sewage] drain even if there is one; they will never take their waste such as urine and dispose it in the drain, you see, it is just dirty, you see, it is not a place suitable for people to live in. – Jabu**

Jabu spoke of flooding, sewage problems, and sometimes collapsing homes where he lives, making it unsafe for his children. Jabu did not want his children to live under what he described as uninhabitable living conditions, so they had to live with their mother instead. Of the 46 men interviewed for the study<sup>34</sup>, only 15 (32%) lived with their children, echoing the already high rates of children living apart from their biological fathers in South Africa<sup>35</sup>. In 2019, close to 33% of children in South Africa lived with both parents, while only 4% lived with only their fathers, and 42% lived with only their mothers.<sup>36</sup>

This highlights the physical absence of fathers in children's lives, which can be attributed to a wide range of reasons including unemployment, poverty, and other related social issues, such as poor housing, as was seen in Jabu's story.

It is worth noting that some of the challenges experienced by fathers described in this chapter (not sharing residence with and not being able to see their children regularly) are not exclusive to unemployed and poor fathers.



Similar experiences were reported by some men (in higher earning academic positions at a South African university) who, due to labour migration, were not actively involved in their children's lives<sup>37</sup> even though they were able to provide financial support.

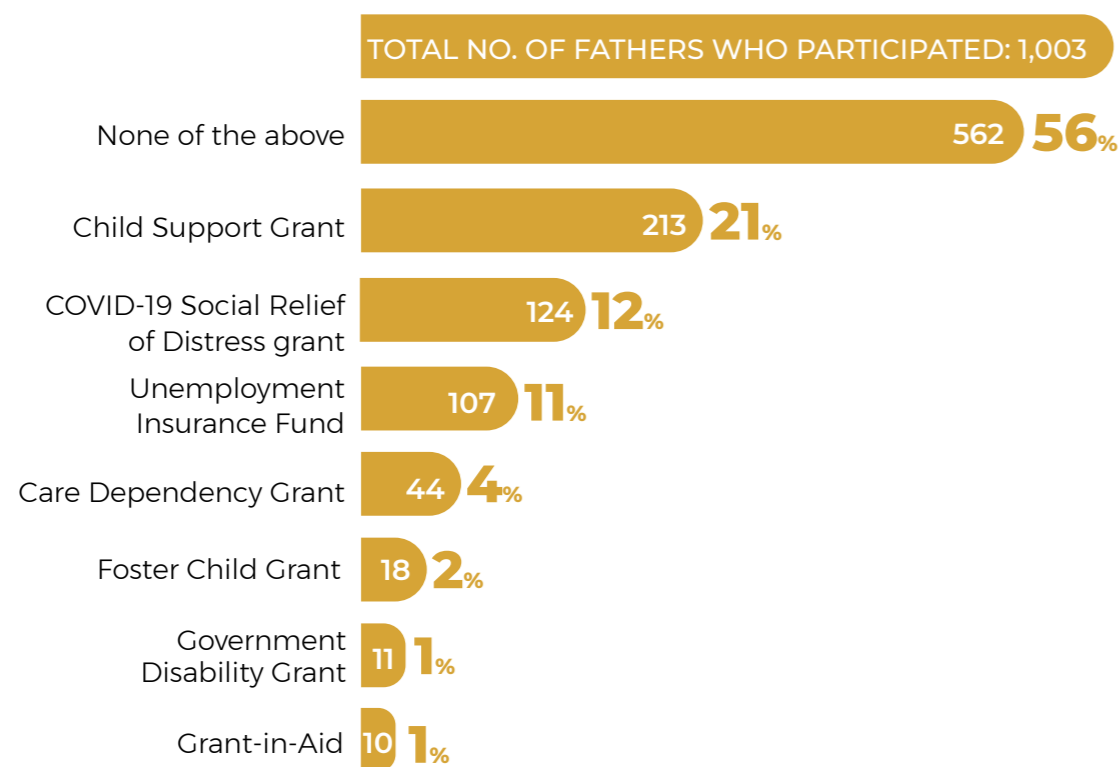
The predominant focus on the experiences of poor and unemployed fathers in this chapter is a deliberate attempt to draw attention to the ways in which poverty and unemployment, which are extremely high in South Africa, impact on fathering and fatherhood, and to highlight the importance of paying attention to men's economic participation and position when designing interventions targeted at men and fathers. Men who are unable to provide for their children's economic needs are less likely to participate in programmes that encourage positive fathering, especially

if these programmes do not address what they consider to be their most primary responsibility as men and fathers – providing material resources for their families.

In the context of increasing unemployment in South Africa, we need multidimensional approaches that incorporate financial assistance for healthy working-age men who might not qualify for any of the existing social grants.

Participants in the SOSAF 2021 survey were asked whether they received any social grants or have claimed from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). Figure 18 shows that, of the 1,003 participants, 56% did not receive any social grant, while the remaining 44% received a social grant, ranging from the Care Dependency and Child Support Grants, to the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant.

Figure 18: SOSAF 2021 survey showing social grants received by participating fathers



The survey also asked men about their use of their social grant money. The findings show that three basic needs were at the top of the list: 1. they bought food/groceries; 2. they bought clothes for their children; and 3. they paid for their children's school fees.

Research has suggested that, with these basic needs taken care of, men were more likely to participate more actively in their children's lives<sup>38</sup>, which highlights the need to advocate more actively for social support for unemployed working age persons in South Africa, such as the proposed Basic Income Grant, which would be another intervention towards alleviating poverty and reducing inequality.

### Challenging (economic) constructions of fatherhood

The previous section highlighted the ways in which constructions of fatherhood that are centred on economic provision may limit men's involvement in their children's lives and undermine their performance of alternative non-economic forms of fatherhood. Not only are fathers out seeking work in other parts of the country and away from their children, when they are employed, they spend most of their time working long hours, with limited opportunity to negotiate their working hours and conditions.<sup>40</sup>

There are also other factors that shape how the role of fathers in South Africa is conceived, such as the gendered division of labour that frames childcare as an arena for mothers, while limiting fathers to financial provision.<sup>41</sup> Such (gendered) constructions of parenting portray mothers as primary caregivers who are responsible for nurturing children and performing all forms of care work, while excluding men from childcare practices and decisions on child-rearing, while they (men), too, continue to make minimal effort in this area.

**The high unemployment and poverty rates in South Africa make a balance between providing for children's material and non-material needs impossible for many men and their families.**

Even when presented with opportunities to disrupt dominant gendered constructions of care work, men often avoid or refuse these opportunities, citing their own incompetence and, therefore, leaving care work up to mothers.<sup>42</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic presented an example that supports this argument. In South Africa, as was the case in many other countries, a lockdown was imposed as a way of reducing the spread of the coronavirus, leading to the closing of many businesses and job losses<sup>43</sup> across various sectors.

One could assume that this would lead to men spending more time at home caring for their children, but research has shown that women were even more burdened during lockdown by unpaid care work in the home than men. A study on gender inequality and the COVID-19 crisis showed that even though men's contributions towards care work within the home increased during the lockdown, women still spent more time than usual (i.e., pre-COVID) on childcare<sup>44</sup> than men.

There was some evidence of changes in attitudes, however, which shows that men may be beginning to shift from a construction of fatherhood that is primarily centred on economic provision towards an integration of fatherhood roles (to include nurturing

and presence).<sup>45</sup> The SOSAF 2021 survey provides new evidence in this regard as it asked participants whether they thought men needed to be employed to be good fathers. Of the 1,003 men who responded, only 17% strongly agreed with this statement, 20% somewhat agreed, while the remaining 63% were either neutral (21%), disagreed somewhat (14%), and strongly disagreed (28%).

These findings show a shift in men's thinking about fatherhood and what it means to be a good father, at least within this specific sample of men. At the same time, the survey results indicated that the majority of men were still undecided, neither agreeing nor disagreeing as to whether being employed was needed for a man to be a good father.

The survey also shows, as was argued in previous research<sup>46</sup>, that men tended to view themselves as less competent to care for children. More specifically, the SOSAF 2021 survey showed that 548 (55%) of the participants thought that mothers were naturally better parents than fathers, with only 23% of the men disagreeing with this statement.

Figure 19, which presents the complete distribution of responses to this statement, shows that the majority of men considered themselves less equipped for parenting than mothers. When mothers are regarded as naturally better parents than fathers it reproduces the feminisation of care work. This also functions to maintain inequitable gender relations within the home and uneven patterns of care work.

Researchers<sup>47</sup> have argued that, in order to encourage men's participation in childcare, the concept of 'care' needs to be stripped of its gender bias in a way that allows both men and women to perform such care work. These scholars also argue for an expansion of existing constructions of masculinity and fatherhood to incorporate more nurturing and caring ways of being a man. It has been proposed<sup>48</sup> that forms of household labour such as caregiving, and more specifically childcare, are acknowledged as a critical aspect of the non-monetary economy, regardless of who performs such labour.

Non-monetary parenting practices are an important aspect of child development<sup>49</sup> and these rely on non-monetary resources such

as a family's cultural and social capital, and parents' attitudes and practices that promote child wellbeing.<sup>50</sup> These resources may, in some cases, not be accessible to children whose fathers are not present, or who deny paternity. This is a big concern in South Africa, where many families live in poverty. In this context, men often have to weigh up being present and providing non-monetary resources against being able to provide for their children and family's economic needs, which also could mean better healthcare and schooling opportunities for children. The high unemployment and poverty rates in South Africa make a balance between providing for children's material and non-material needs impossible for many men and their families.

It is important to consider how the exclusion of home-based childcare as a recognised form of work, particularly in a patriarchal society, continues to shape how childcare, and who can perform it, are understood. Childcare performed by mothers or women within the home are not understood (by both men and women) as a legitimate form of work that is performed in the same way that paid forms of work are performed outside the home – work that can be performed by both men and women.<sup>51</sup>

Researchers<sup>52</sup> have called for a societal approach to 'restoring' gender relations, and a move away from the exclusive focus on men when engaging in such transformative work – and this is particularly because women play a significant role in maintaining patriarchal divisions of labour within the home<sup>53</sup>. This is evident in the ways in which men, in some cases, are humiliated by their partners for their inability to provide<sup>54</sup>, and shamed for being at home while unemployed. Similarly, the recent spike in social media threads in South Africa shamed men who do not fulfil dominant constructions of masculinity and fatherhood by highlighting the need for men to be financially secure and provide through the popular phrase and hashtag "IndodaMust" (a man must).

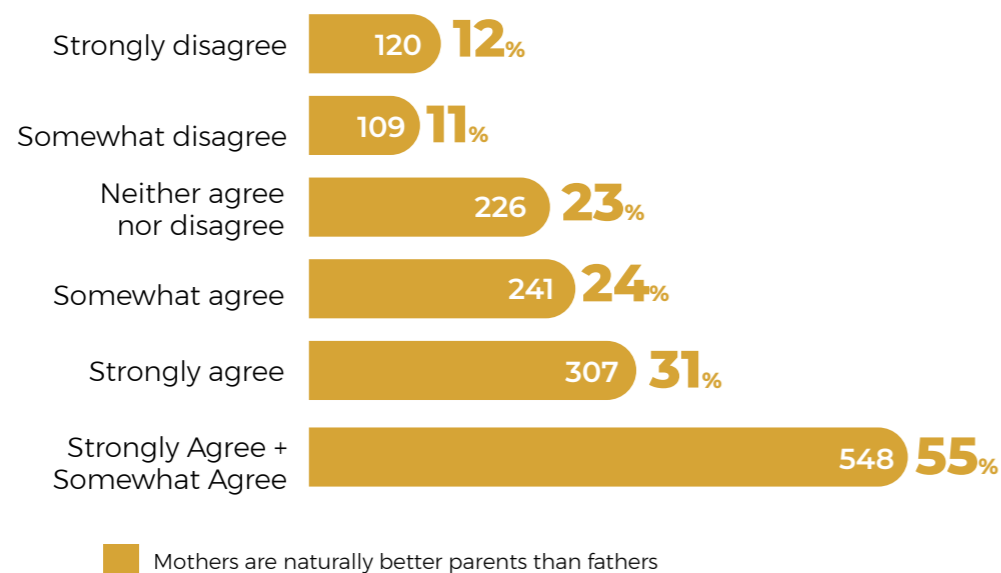
The study<sup>55</sup> with men who seek work on the side of the road found that some of the men wanted to be at home with their children, but they did not want to be at home while their partners went to work; so they would leave the house every morning, creating the impression that they had a job. While these men on some days spent all day on the side of the road seeking work opportunities, and while their families benefitted when they were able to get work on some days, these men could also make a meaningful contribution within their homes, and towards caring for their children.

## Conclusion and recommendations

In the context of high poverty, men are expected to focus on finding employment to provide for their children and families.<sup>56</sup> In South Africa, in addition to poverty, many men adhere to patriarchal constructions of fatherhood and masculinity<sup>57</sup> that prescribe how they should father and define the forms of fathering that are most acceptable. In this context, having a job and providing for your children is the most honoured form of fatherhood, while unemployed men who are unable to provide face shame and humiliation, and often disengage from their families when they are not able to provide for them.

These experiences of shame and humiliation have negative implications for women as well as children. In this report, the chapter on fatherhood and violence (starting on p. 119) illustrates patriarchal and capitalist masculinity as a problem for everyone in society by highlighting the increased risk of homicidal violence experienced and perpetuated by men who are disconnected from others. Such disconnection could include not only separation from their children, but also from their partners and families because of unemployment and poverty.<sup>58</sup> Violence may also be used in such cases as ways

Figure 19: SOSAF 2021 survey participants' perceptions of mothers as naturally better parents than fathers



## The cultural stereotype of the male breadwinner tends to be reinforced in the United Kingdom through a variety of policy and legislative frameworks that take an economic view of fatherhood.

in which men assert their dominance over their partners, children, and family members in their households in the absence of other relevant forms of social currency, such as having adequate paid employment.

Several recommendations follow from the research presented in this chapter. First is the need to deconstruct broader perceptions of unpaid care work by challenging the feminisation of such forms of work. This task requires a culturally sensitive approach particularly in contexts where the “patriarchal legacy”<sup>59</sup> persists, and where meanings of fatherhood and masculinity are drawn from religious beliefs and cultural practices. These beliefs and practices are often harder to challenge and should be engaged in work with men and fathers.

The second recommendation speaks to working with men on fatherhood, which often only includes men. Programmes to improve men’s parenting practices and increase their participation in childcare should also include women and children as an approach towards

changing broader societal perceptions on fathering and parenting. How we understand economic participation clearly excludes forms of household labour such as childcare, making it difficult for men to take on such forms of work without facing public scrutiny or questions about their masculinity. Such gendered constructions of childcare would be better ‘undone’ in programmes that focus on the whole family structure, and not on fathers alone.

Researchers<sup>60</sup> have argued that “the cultural stereotype of the male breadwinner tends to be reinforced in the United Kingdom through a variety of policy and legislative frameworks that take an economic view of fatherhood”. The same applies in South Africa where such economic ideals of fatherhood are perpetuated structurally through the maintenance courts, which continue to neglect men’s active participation in their children’s lives while legally enforcing financial provision.

As a third recommendation, there is a need to engage and challenge institutions such as maintenance courts’ approach to father involvement in South Africa to include a focus on men’s active engagement in addition to financial provision.

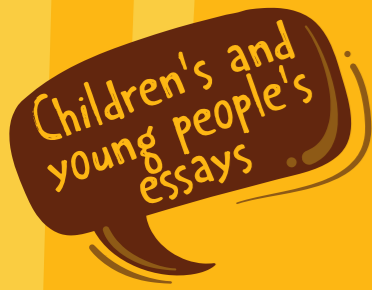
We need an ‘undoing’ of gender to challenge and question men’s practices, but also the practices of women who, in some cases, enable and encourage men’s lack of involvement in childcare. In this way, men’s involvement within the home can be encouraged while taking into consideration the context of poverty that forces men to seek work outside the home. Such shifts will also encourage men’s participation in childcare and other forms of care work within the home, whether they can provide or not, subverting gender norms that force men to choose between their roles as fathers. While clearly highlighting the importance of not only providing but also ‘being there’, for many poor and unemployed men, this integration of fathering roles remains an unattainable goal and desire.

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# There's a man in the kitchen

**Author:** Angel Mhlongo

"This is how you clean the stove!" he says this with so much excitement even though his sweat is dripping onto the collar of his old torn ANC t-shirt. He has been wiping the stove top for a while now making sure it's squeaky clean before he can walk to the local primary school to pick his grandson up.

My father is in his retirement now but he's still so strong and likes to keep busy. One important thing I've picked up from this man is his open-mindedness. My dad walks my sister to the taxi rank in the early AMs and waits till the taxi takes off. Exactly an hour later he calls to check if she arrived safely at work.

In this house there are no gender roles, you'll fully experience this when you come back from job hunting in town and as soon as you open the door you feel the warmth from the heater because dad wanted you to be warm after a cold, busy day.

"These are killing me!" I say as I take off my white All Star tekkies, which are not so white anymore after three years of being worn.

"Mati mohisa makona," he says (meaning - there's hot water). What more do I need?!

It's the little things he does that says he loves me. Him waking up in the morning to boil water, so that when my kids are up, they can quickly bath and be ready for school on time, is priceless.

I learn a lot from just watching him live. The way he protects us says, "I'd catch a grenade for you, literally". When you love someone, do it wholeheartedly today, tomorrow is not promised.

I'm typing this text while he's in the kitchen making soft porridge for my mom. It's not the yummiest thing he makes, but it's the effort for me. Dads are the best. I call him Pa.

In the society we find ourselves in, a man is seen as a strong bull that takes charge, one that controls the situation at all times, calls all the shots and doesn't do "women's work". Things are way different in our household. "Angie sweka xixevho." (Angie cook some meat.) He says this because he's already cooked the pap while I was doing some girl's hair, that's how I make pocket money.

The small RDP house is well kept, it is clean and everything is packed away neatly, because it's a joint effort. When my little brother mops the floor, I cook and Pa helps with the dishes. We do this while playing some gospel music on full volume and singing along.

Fathers are special beings and can be whatever they want to be and not blame the society for how they turn out.

"Ahi fambeni," he always says on Sundays when it's time for church, meaning, "Let's go".

We're a Tsonga family and my dad is the best!

*This was a winning essay in the 'My Father' competition by the FunDza Literacy Trust in collaboration with Heartlines. It was originally published on fundza.mobi*

## INCARCERATED, SINGLE, GAY OR TEENAGE FATHERS: DISRUPTING STEREOTYPICAL NOTIONS OF FATHERHOOD

Malose Langa & Lynne Goldschmidt

### Chapter 5



# Incarcerated, single, gay or teenage fathers: Disrupting stereotypical notions of fatherhood

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## KEY MESSAGES

- The experiences of fathers who are incarcerated, single, gay or teenagers demonstrate the difficulty in disrupting stereotypical notions of fatherhood.
- Whilst incarcerated fathers feel guilty, embarrassed, ashamed, powerless, and helpless for not supporting their children financially, some of these fathers are committed to their roles as fathers; and they hope for assistance to sustain healthy relationships with their children.
- Some single fathers believe they can raise children on their own just as mothers can, while others say their experience as single fathers made them realise that both the father and the mother are important to a child's development.
- Gay men who choose to be fathers are not only perceived as a threat to stereotypical notions of fatherhood – their pathways to parenthood are deemed as a transgression of the nuclear family, reproduction, and gender-based expectations of parenting roles.
- Teenage fathers, like teenage mothers, face many challenges such as limited support from society, friends, and family members.

Fathers and fatherhood in South Africa are often discussed from a disparaging perspective, with emphasis on absent biological fathers.<sup>1</sup> Such a judgmental perspective may detract from the legislative and psychosocial support fathers need to facilitate improved involvement, contact, and engagement with their children. An increase in paternal involvement has been shown to benefit fathers, mothers, and children emotionally and psychosocially in direct and indirect ways.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst increased focus and support are required for fathers and fatherhood overall, fathers who do not fit the socially and culturally accepted constructions of fatherhood, for example fathers who do not live with their children, need to be perceptively considered in legislation, policy, and practice. Such consideration, however, requires extra care and effort as the majority of existing programmes tend to reinforce stereotypical gender roles.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we critically discuss practices that may disrupt generalised notions of fatherhood in South Africa with a specific focus on fathers who are incarcerated, single, gay or teenagers. Traditionally, as argued in other chapters of this report, the definition of fatherhood is usually based on biology: a man becomes a father through conception. South Africa, however, provides a complex sociohistorical and sociopolitical milieu<sup>4</sup> in which fatherhood is best understood as going beyond conception and extending to a network of other close social relationships

between adult males and children who may or may not be biologically their own<sup>5</sup>. For this reason, ascribed fatherhoods, which include social fathers such as uncles, brothers, grandparents, and other positive male role models, are recognised.<sup>6</sup>

The contested traditional definition of fatherhood supports a discourse that holds that a father is a heterosexual male who is providing caregiving to a child or children with a heterosexual female. This heterosexual father discourse is also more likely to convey the belief that a father's primary responsibility is to provide financially, entrenching a stereotype that is detrimental to fathers, mothers, and children.<sup>7</sup>

The heterosexual father has traditionally been considered to represent dominant fatherhood. Heteronormative conceptualisations and the emphasis on financial provision raise the question: are there alternative fatherhood practices that disrupt stereotypical notions of fatherhood?

What about gay fathers? Despite the progressive views that fatherhood cannot be reduced to biology, questions are often raised about gay men as fathers. These include whether gay men are good fathers, especially if they raise adopted children or children born through surrogacy. Their fatherhood is non-traditional and therefore regarded with suspicion. As such, heterosexuality shapes the traditional norms and politics of family and the caregiving of children.<sup>8</sup>

Relying on this discourse is the belief that children need to be raised in nuclear families by a mother and a father. The idea of children being raised by fathers who identify as gay disrupts the discourse of a heterosexual nuclear family. How do fathers who identify as gay feel about their fatherhood despite the hostile homophobia that they experience daily? How do fathers who identify as gay raise their children? And how do they challenge stereotypical discourses of fatherhood?

And what about incarcerated fathers? How do the expectations of progressive fatherhood

The idea of children being raised by fathers who identify as gay disrupts the discourse of a heterosexual nuclear family.

apply to incarcerated fathers who are not able to be with their children and provide for their needs both emotionally and physically? How does incarceration affect these men's sense of fatherhood? How do incarcerated fathers feel about their experiences of fatherhood while in prison?

A lot has been written about single parenthood but with a specific focus on women as single mothers. In this literature, fathers are generally represented as absent.<sup>9</sup> However, very little has been said about single men who are rearing children on their own without a female partner. How do these men feel about being single fathers? What challenges do they encounter as fathers?

Teenage fathers are another group that disrupts the stereotypical notions of fatherhood. Research has not paid much attention to teenage fathers to date, although it is recognised that their life stage may make them particularly vulnerable to the challenges of parenthood. What are these challenges, and what do they mean for teenage fatherhood?

## Incarcerated fathers

Approximately 97% of the prison population are males<sup>10</sup>, with 112,190 sentenced and 46,369 unsentenced inmates<sup>11</sup>. Some of these men are likely to be fathers, although there are no statistics available in this regard.

Despite the high prison population, the topic of incarcerated fatherhood has not received significant scholarly attention in South Africa.<sup>12</sup> The limited literature available has emphasised the lack of positive father figures and the implications of incarcerated fathers' involvement in criminal activities for themselves as fathers, their children, and the impacted families.<sup>13</sup> A further study<sup>14</sup> has looked at how incarcerated fathers may be taught skills to strengthen their relationships with their children while serving their sentences. Despite the significant impact of incarcerated fathers on children's psychosocial wellbeing<sup>15</sup>, it remains a neglected area in terms of research and intervention.

The SOSAF 2021 survey of fathers indicated a particularly fractured perspective of whether incarcerated fathers could be good fathers (see figure 20). Only 21% of the respondents agreed strongly that incarcerated fathers could be good fathers, with a further 21% only

somewhat agreeing with this statement. The majority of the participating fathers either felt uncertain (28%) or disagreed with this statement (29%).

The findings therefore suggest that incarceration bears social stigma and judgement, given that 83% of the same participants agreed that a man can be a good father even if he does not live with his child or children.

International and local literature shows that incarceration negatively affects fathers' relationship with their children.<sup>16</sup> Such fathers often lose contact with their family members, including children, once arrested. This lack of contact is attributed to various factors, including poor economic conditions, which impact family members' ability to visit the incarcerated men regularly.<sup>17</sup> Some family members stop visiting the incarcerated fathers due to stigma associated with imprisonment

or strained family relations following the arrest.<sup>18</sup> Children of incarcerated fathers are often referred to as "orphans of justice".<sup>19</sup>

Incarcerated fathers and father-child separation cannot, however, be considered in isolation. Additional variables that may impact on the quality of the father-child relationship are the quality of contact prior to incarceration and the level of exposure to possible trauma linked to the father's incarceration.<sup>20</sup> This is of relevance as fathers who are incarcerated may have engaged in activities that the child witnessed, such as intimate partner violence, substance abuse or other trauma-causing activities.<sup>21</sup> Some children even may have been direct victims and survivors of the trauma and abuse.

Mothers may also be perceived as gatekeepers, thus significantly impacting on the level of contact between incarcerated fathers and their children.<sup>22</sup> Previous research<sup>23</sup> found that some mothers did not tell their children that their fathers were incarcerated. Their paternity remained unknown until some children in their teenage years started asking questions about the whereabouts of their fathers. It is at this point only that they discovered that their fathers were incarcerated.<sup>24</sup>

Some incarcerated fathers have also attested that they were not aware that their partners were pregnant when they were arrested.<sup>25</sup> As a result, such fathers were not aware that their children were born until a few years later, which made it difficult for them to connect with their children. Some incarcerated men had questions about the paternity of such children as they suspected that their partners may have been unfaithful.<sup>26</sup>

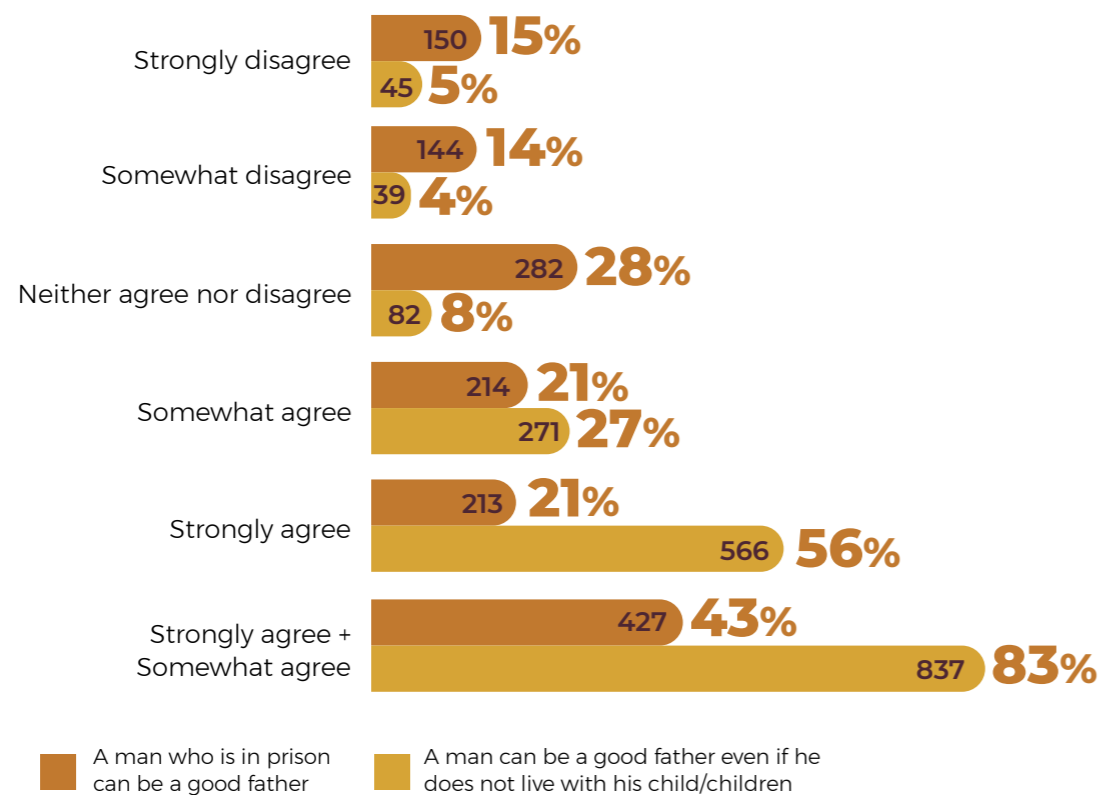
fathers generally still defined good fatherhood based on one's ability to provide materially for their children.<sup>27</sup> Emphasis on financial and material provision was likely to be influenced by the knowledge that parental incarceration was linked to an increase in child vulnerability given a decrease in access to financial resources.<sup>28</sup>

How do incarcerated fathers define their fatherhood and their identities as fathers, given their inability to provide any material assistance to their children? Incarcerated fathers have often spoken about feeling guilty, embarrassed, ashamed, powerless, and helpless for their failure to support their children financially.<sup>29</sup> Despite these tensions, the narratives<sup>i</sup> shared in case 7 indicate that some fathers who were incarcerated were committed to their roles as fathers, and that they were hopeful for approaches that could assist them in sustaining healthy relationships with their children.

Fathers in prison rely on people outside (such as partners, relatives, friends) to bring their children to visit them, especially when children are still too young to come on their own. Some fathers did not want their children to visit them in prison.<sup>30</sup> They hated to see their children cry or feeling sad when visiting hours ended, or their inability to provide material support.<sup>31</sup> Adolescent children<sup>32</sup> spoke about feeling traumatised when visiting their fathers in prison, especially when the men were not yet allowed contact visitations.

Beyond the emphasis on financial and material provision, research suggests that the absence of consistent parental presence has a greater influence on both the father and child. It is inferred that, when fathers cannot be physically present and engage in daily paternal functions, it impacts on their capacity to perceive themselves as fathers.<sup>33</sup> This may over time result in fathers disengaging from their fatherhood identity, which in turn presents a risk to the father-child relationship.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 20: SOSAF 2021 survey participants' perceptions of incarcerated fathers



### Fathering while incarcerated

Despite some shifts about the importance of meeting their children's emotional needs,

<sup>i</sup>All names of fathers referred to in this chapter are pseudonyms.

# Incarcerated fathers: Breaking the cycle of fatherlessness

## Thabang Khumalo, Leeuwkop Correctional Centre

The case includes interviews<sup>46</sup> with 68 inmates<sup>ii</sup> about their lived experiences as incarcerated fathers. Among them, 45 inmates shared that they also grew up without their fathers, while others described their fathers as emotionally and physically abusive. The lack of positive father figures was described as traumatic and painful. As explained by one incarcerated father:

**“ ... growing up without a father made me have so much anger when I was young. The anger stayed in me and I started fighting with other kids. I was just angry until I started committing crime. – Kenneth**

Links were made between behavioural problems and a lack of positive male figures in these fathers' lives. A programme was initiated in this correctional centre to encourage incarcerated fathers to be involved in their children's lives, despite their imprisonment.

Following workshops on fatherhood, some inmates were eager to maintain healthy relationships with their children. However, others acknowledged that this process was not easy as their children were too young to visit them on their own.

Economic difficulties or geographic distance also made it difficult for incarcerated fathers to see their children regularly. In some cases, strained relations with the mothers of their children or families also presented difficulties. One incarcerated father explained:

**“ Children need assurance that their fathers love and care about them even though we are in prison. – Thulani**

Another inmate shared the following:

**“ We are still fathers in prison, you see, prison cannot change our parenthood status, so it is not the end of our parental role in being in children's lives. We must work towards the goal of having relationships with our children and families. Prison is a challenge to a father-child relationship but the best thing to do in this challenging time is to open lines of communication between fathers and their children. This connection is helpful for the growth and development of both the father and the child's relationship. – John**

Incarcerated fathers agreed that programmes by the relevant authorities to support them to negotiate their new practices of fatherhood were needed and that one may still be a good father from prison if the relevant support was provided. Such programmes may contribute to breaking the cycle of fatherlessness:

**“ It kills me every day that my children are growing without me. I wish to be there to guide and support them. – Maxwell**

<sup>ii</sup>The interviews were part of an intervention and healing project with inmates about the challenges of fatherhood while in prison.



The incarcerated fathers' narratives in case 7 suggest that such fathers can still be 'good' fathers even though they are not able to provide materially – as long as they are able to bond with their children and be a positive role model. Support structures and programmes were, however, considered pivotal to facilitate this process.

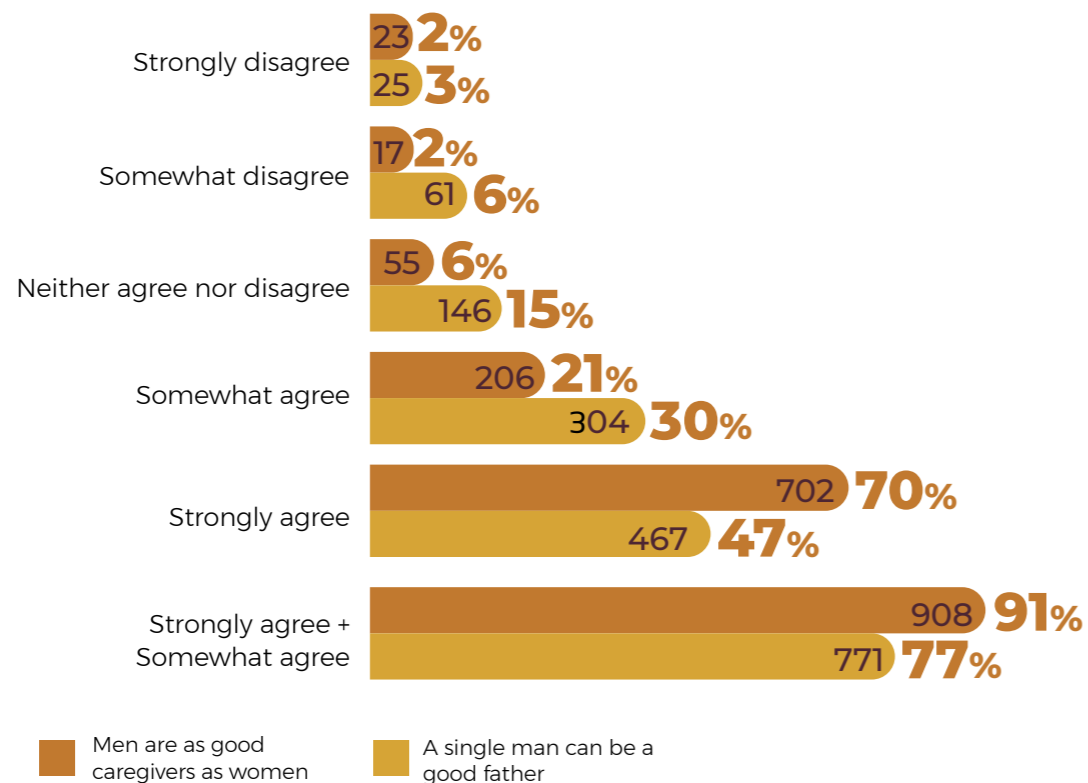
### Single fatherhood

South African literature is saturated with an emphasis on single-mother households and the likely implications for such mothers and children.<sup>36</sup> There is, however, a dearth of literature on single-father households. This gap contributes to the marginalisation of single fathers, their experiences, and the experiences of their children.

In South Africa, 42% of children reside with their mothers as the primary caregivers, whilst 4% reside with their fathers as primary caregivers.<sup>37</sup> While the percentage of children living with single fathers is comparatively low, it is known that fathers continue to experience significant legal difficulties in accessing their parental rights to care for their children. It is, therefore, difficult to determine to what extent legal difficulties impact on the lower incidence of single-father households.

The SOSAF 2021 survey indicates that 91% of respondents agreed that a single man can be a good father, while 77% of the participating fathers to varying degrees recognised that men are as good caregivers as women.

Figure 21: SOSAF 2021 survey participants' perceptions of men as good caregivers and single men as good fathers



### Defining single fatherhood

'Single fatherhood' can be understood as a term that describes a role played by a male figure who is the primary caregiver. The role of primary caregiver is played by the person who takes primary responsibility for meeting the daily care needs of that child.<sup>38</sup> This role may involve a man living alone with his child or children, or with other adults in a household. Single fatherhood is influenced by various biological, social, political, economic, and contextual factors, as well as diverse family dynamics that characterise the South African population.

Single fathers operate within various family structures.<sup>39</sup> Among those are fathers who are solely responsible for the caregiving of their children (biological, stepchildren or adopted) because they are separated, divorced, widowed, or never married, or living without a cohabiting partner.<sup>40</sup> The relevance of being divorced or widowed for single fathers is supported by the narratives shared in case study 8.

### Factors contributing to single fatherhood

Globally, various factors have been identified as contributing to men becoming single parents. These included an increase in divorce rates, a rise in the number of babies born outside of marriage, and changes in legislation pertaining to custody (which is no longer automatically awarded to women).<sup>41</sup>

Other reasons included the death of a partner, adoption, and surrogacy.<sup>42</sup> Additional considerations were a mother's incapacity to raise her child or children due to drug abuse or illness, or a mother's physical or emotional abuse of children.<sup>43</sup> The latter highlights the possibility of children being exposed to various forms of neglect or trauma prior to being raised by a single father.

Single fatherhood due to loss of a spouse is subject to the implications of grief and loss, as well as having to manage the manner in which the child or children may be experiencing grief.

There are no studies on the causal factors contributing to single fatherhood or the experiences of single fathers in South Africa.

Parental death is recognised as a significant trauma that can have psychosocial implications across the child's developmental trajectory, thus increasing the parental responsibilities of the single father.<sup>44</sup> Although fathers who entered single fatherhood due to the death of a spouse perceived themselves as meeting their parental responsibilities, they acknowledged the heightened levels of stress and the implications for their own psychosocial wellbeing.<sup>45</sup>

The above discussions are based on international literature since there are no studies on the causal factors contributing to single fatherhood or the experiences of single fathers in South Africa. In case 8, local fathers' experiences are shared, based on interviews with men who were responsible for childcare as single fathers who were the main parental figures in the lives of their children.

# Experiences of single fathers in South Africa

**Erick Kabongo, masters student, Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand**

Interviews<sup>46</sup> were conducted with seven men who identified as Black<sup>iii</sup> single fathers. Out of these seven, four were divorced and three became single fathers due to the death of their partners. The participants' children were aged between 17 and 26 years.

In instances where fathers were the main caregivers, mothers were often uninvolved as they became preoccupied with other relationships and seemed to have left the task of child-rearing to the father. One of the fathers stated:

**“ So there was only one income [he was financially supporting his children alone], I didn't ask [their mother]. Their mother never sent money to me to say [use this money to also support our children as they are staying with you]. – Sam**

Another father also alluded to the same issue, reporting that:

**“ ... one of the court orders was that ... okay we have an arrangement that she [must also contribute financially in supporting children] ... but you know I can't [force] ... [sighs] ... I can't go after her and try to force her [to pay maintenance as he was staying with the children]. – Tshepo**

However, another father, who opted for joint custody, stated:

**“ I did not want to be a father who just is submitting maintenance money. I wanted to play an active role in the upbringing of my kids. So, I fought very hard to make sure that the kids do not become part of the divorce battle ball. I'm very happy being a single father. The fact that I am spending time with my kids. But also the fact that they also have equal access to their mother and she spends as much time with them, I am happy. – Alex**

Among the four participants who were single fathers through divorce, three reported an amicable relationship with their child/ren's mothers, while one said he was not in contact with the mother at all. Participants who were in contact with their children's mothers reported benefiting from their collaboration, mostly when it came to addressing challenges related to their role as single fathers.

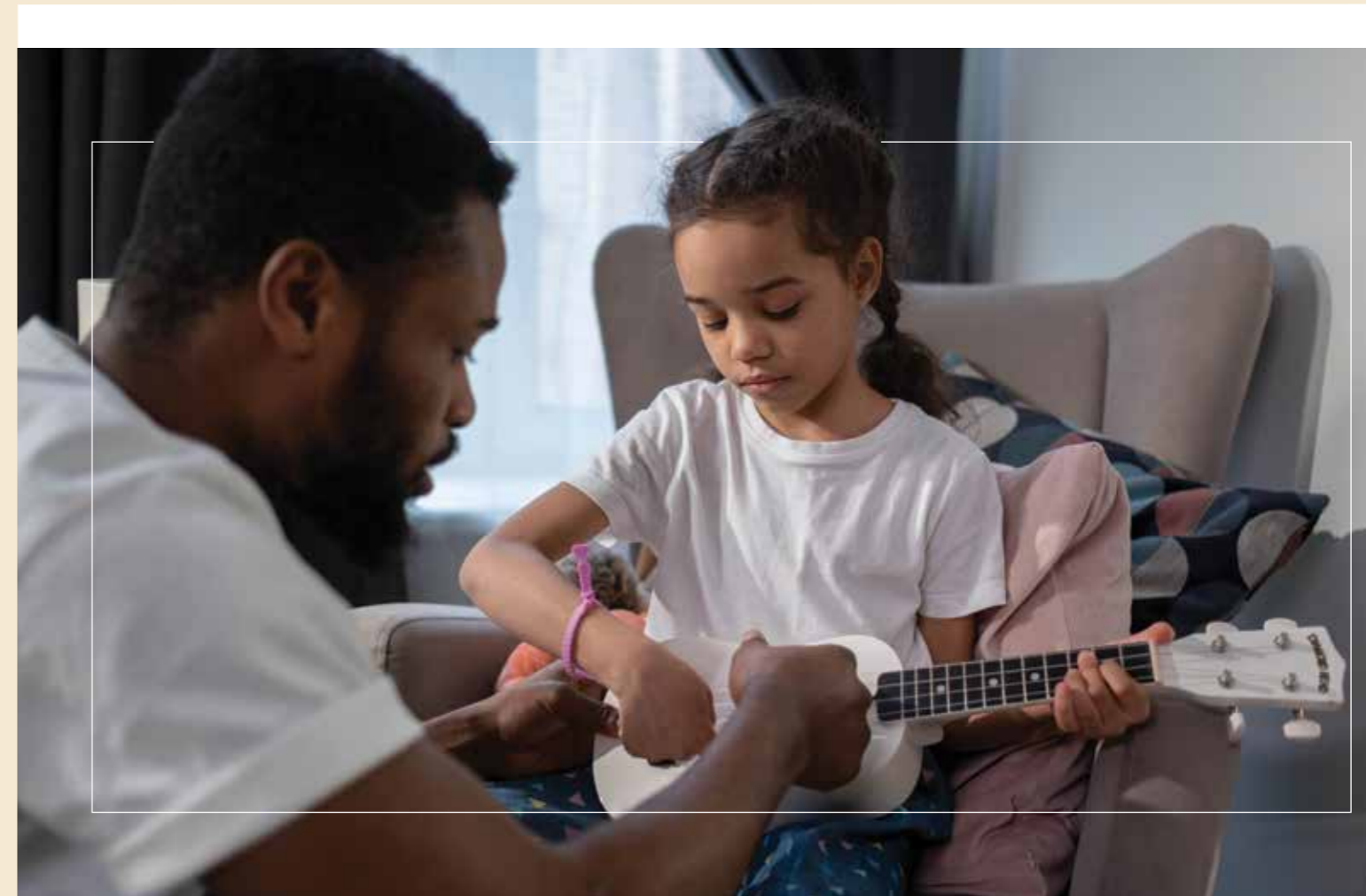
<sup>iii</sup> See the note (i) in the Introduction chapter, p. 20, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

The seven fathers interviewed described their experiences as single fathers as difficult, especially those who decided to date immediately after their divorce, or their wives' death. Other challenges that they highlighted included financial difficulties, lack of information and experience on how to raise daughters, especially challenges related to a daughter's first menstruation.

While most participants reported receiving support primarily from family members, especially their mothers and siblings, others also reported being discriminated against and stigmatised in their family for assuming the role of a single father. Generally, participants reported experiencing difficulties rearing younger children and daughters, compared to older children and sons. This could be related to gender differences between the caregivers and their female children.

Participants who became single fathers due to the death of their wives reported having experienced greater difficulties as they were dealing with grief and loss while simultaneously adjusting to their new roles as single fathers. Other challenges reported by participants included balancing the demands of being employed full time and being a single father.

The fathers' experiences of being fathered themselves varied. While some spoke about being inspired by the commitment of their own fathers to be involved and active in their children's lives, others had negative experiences with their own fathers and wanted to break the cycle with their own children. Such pattern-breaking included challenging stereotypes about men not being good caregivers.



Case 8 demonstrates that, whilst some single fathers believed that they could raise children on their own just like mothers can, others added that their experience as single fathers made them realise that both the father and the mother were important to the child's development. This emphasised the role of the court to grant joint custody to parents, and supportive structures to facilitate caregiving for all involved.

## Gay fatherhood

South Africa is one of the first countries in Africa to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in its Constitution, and to legalise same-sex marriage.<sup>47</sup> This change in legislation, however, has not drastically facilitated a shift in the existing discriminatory views and practices towards people who do not conform to traditional gender identities. This lack of sweeping change may be attributed to the persisting social and cultural expectations of gender roles.

Various studies report that many people who did not align to heteronormative expectations continued to be victims of homophobic

attacks, humiliation, rape, and murder in South Africa.<sup>48</sup> Despite these ongoing discriminatory practices and violence, men who identify as gay continue to fight for their rights, including their right to parenthood.

A nationally representative survey<sup>49</sup> has indicated that more than two in four South Africans said that they will "accept" a gay family member. Between 2012 and 2015, there has been a 10-fold increase in the number of South Africans who "strongly agree" with allowing same-sex marriage. On the other hand, ongoing discriminatory attitudes towards gays were highlighted by the SOSAF 2021 survey, which found that only 35% of participating fathers strongly agreed that a gay man can be a good father, and 13% strongly disagreed that a gay man can be a good father.

Understanding gay fatherhood requires an understanding of how fathers who identify as gay make sense of their practices as fathers. Case 9 on page 109 facilitates a view of how fathers who identify as gay have to navigate fatherhood in response to continued forms of discrimination and stigma because heteronormativity is promoted as the benchmark for caregiving.

## Defining gay fatherhood

Men who identify as gay have had to explore various pathways to fatherhood.<sup>50</sup> Some of these pathways have included adoption, foster care, and surrogacy,<sup>51</sup> as illustrated by case 9. Adoption or foster care pathways may, however, place gay men at risk of discrimination by social welfare agencies based on homophobic views that men cannot raise children on their own without a female partner.<sup>52</sup>

Many gay men are likely, however, to enter fatherhood after biologically fathering children in previous heterosexual relationships.<sup>53</sup> Whilst some continue to have consistent contact and relationships with their biological children<sup>54</sup>, others may find their relationships compromised by their homosexuality<sup>55</sup>. South African literature indicates that, in spaces where homosexuality may evoke the possibility of family and social exclusion or homophobic attacks, gay men may still choose heterosexual means as a pathway to parenthood. For some, the focus was not only on parenthood but also a means to conceal their homosexuality.<sup>56</sup>

## Gay fatherhood as disruptive

Pathways to parenthood have remained mostly uncontested for people who are perceived to meet the ascribed social and cultural norms. Individuals who fall outside of these norms are therefore subject to increased scrutiny.<sup>57</sup> While this is true for those who identify as either gay or lesbian, gay men are often subject to further penalty. This is attributed to the stereotypical belief that, whilst women are biologically suitable to occupy caregiving roles, men are perceived as biologically inferior as caregivers.<sup>58</sup>

Gay men who choose to be fathers, therefore, are not only perceived as a threat to stereotypical notions of fatherhood, but their pathways to parenthood are deemed as a transgression of the nuclear family, reproduction, and gender-based expectations of parenting roles.<sup>59</sup> And, whilst the quest for parenthood remains unquestioned for

heterosexual individual<sup>60</sup>, gay men are labelled as selfish<sup>61</sup>.

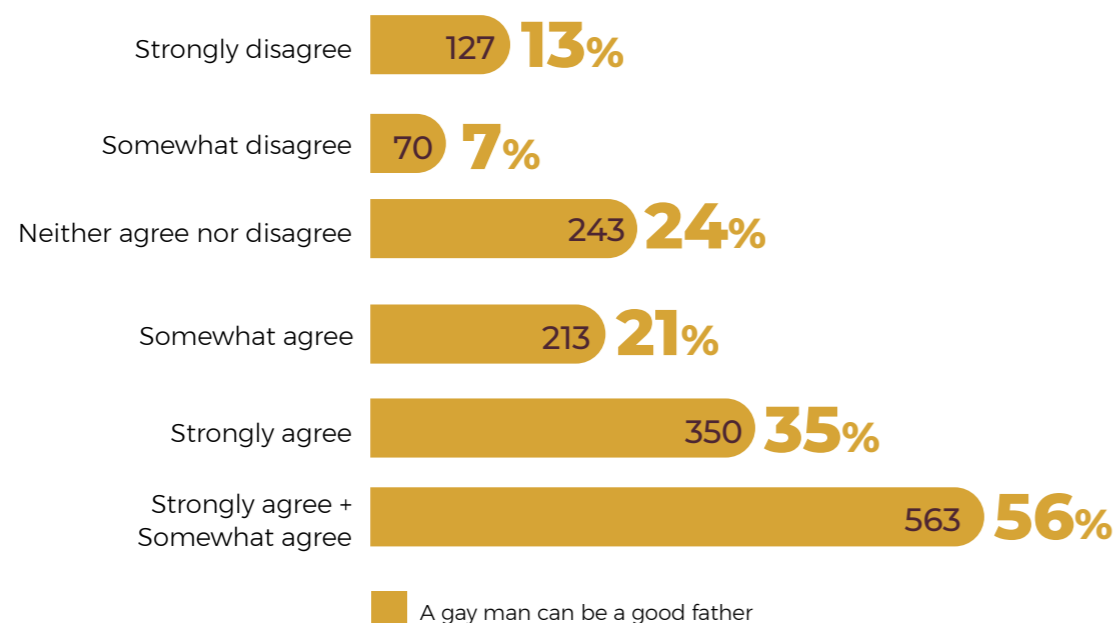
Questions therefore arise about whether gay men can be 'good' fathers or not. These questions arise in response to both stereotypical assumptions about men as caregivers as well as assumptions about the lifestyle choices of gay men. This includes perceptions of gay men as promiscuous and substance users.<sup>62</sup> These presumptions have been highlighted in arguments that suggested that children raised by fathers who identify as gay were at an emotional and psychological developmental risk, including concerns pertaining to the sexual development of children.<sup>63</sup> As such, families of gay men were deemed deviant and in contravention of the norm.<sup>64</sup>

The emphasis on deviance was ascribed to the children of fathers who identify as gay as well.<sup>65</sup> Fathers who identify as gay are therefore subject to multiple challenges. This includes navigating their own parenting processes in an overtly heterosexual social world as well as the continuous awareness of needing to protect their children from possible discrimination.<sup>66</sup>

## Disrupting notions of normality

The continued recognition of nuclear and heterosexual families as the norm categorises all other family constructs as deviant.<sup>67</sup> This places non-traditional families at a significant disadvantage given the continued strain of navigating systemic social norms and rules to ensure a sense of belonging instead of exclusion and marginalisation. This is evident in case 9 as well, which illustrates that this tension is amplified for fathers who identify as gay as they consistently have to disprove assumptions of inferiority and deviance in navigating the social world for themselves and their children. This continued strain persists despite research confirming that gay fatherhood does not place children at risk.<sup>68</sup>

Figure 22: SOSAF 2021 survey participants' perceptions of gay men as good fathers



For children born through surrogacy, their wellbeing continues to be dependent on the quality of attachment and the availability and consistency of the father as a secure base.<sup>69</sup> However, whilst research indicates healthy father–child relationships in surrogacy cases, social stigma remains a risk that may negatively impact on child outcomes.<sup>70</sup> This highlights the persistence of societal discriminatory practices, rather than father caregiving practices.

Interestingly, some studies have indicated

that children who were adopted by fathers who identify as gay have shown more positive outcomes than children adopted by heterosexual parents.<sup>71</sup> This is attributed to the more stringent screening processes that gay men are subjected to, which results in approving fathers with higher levels of psychological wellbeing and economic resources.<sup>72</sup> Whilst these studies have highlighted favourable outcomes for children, they also foregrounded the intense scrutiny that fathers who identify as gay are subjected to compared to heterosexual parents.



## CASE 9

## Fatherhood experiences of men who identify as gay

**Clyde Kotze, masters student, Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand**

This case provides an overview of the experiences shared by five fathers who identify as gay. Four fathers in the study<sup>73</sup> identified as White, and one identified as Coloured. Four of the participants became fathers through adoption and one participant was a father by means of surrogacy. Those who adopted all had two children each, and the father through surrogacy had one child. The children were between the ages of six months and 20 years, with the youngest born via surrogacy.

All fathers in the study spoke about challenges that they encountered even before they became fathers. A common narrative amongst these fathers was that gay men are never imagined as fathers. Some were direct victims of homophobia, and some have witnessed the various injustices the LGBTQIA+ community are subjected to. One father, Jason, conveyed that even though he was comfortable being gay, he and his partner avoided any display of affection in public due to fear of homophobic attacks. Another father, Patrick, remembered the difficulty of growing up being gay and how he was treated differently because of his identity as a gay man. Experiences of homophobia were shared by all five respondents. These difficulties, however, did not deter these men from pursuing their parental desires to be fathers.

They all expressed the joy and satisfaction that fatherhood has brought them. This was described by Jonathan when he explained that, even though it might not be for everyone, the moment he held his child everything changed for him – it was the best experience he ever had. Enzo asserted that “the process to have a child via surrogacy was very difficult”, but that he and his partner loved their child before he was born. Roger mentioned that being a father afforded him the opportunity to provide his children with everything he did not have.

All these fathers concurred that their relationship with their children were regarded as paramount to their own happiness, and that they considered themselves to have good relationships with their children. The hope that these fathers had was that their children would know and understand that they were loved and that their children would undoubtedly accept them as they were.

This hope was contrasted by the fear and anxieties that these fathers have experienced and continued to face as gay men living in South Africa. They hoped that their children would not be discriminated

against based on their parents' sexuality. The men said that they raised their children in a more egalitarian way and challenged all gender roles, including who performed chores in the household.

Some fathers were concerned about what the children would experience when they became aware that their family structure challenged the stereotypical notions of a traditional family. There were fears that their children would encounter a lot of difficulty and discrimination because they were raised by two fathers.

The men's narratives further suggests that, as fathers who identify as gay, they perceived themselves as having access to emotions which

were not typically associated with heterosexual fathers. Jonathan said that being a father who also identified as gay made him softer and kinder and able to express his emotions better, and he felt that this has helped him develop a good relationship with his children. Roger stated that there was no such thing as a "gay father"; that a father was a father regardless of his sexual orientation, and that was how he saw himself.

There was consensus amongst all participants that they regarded

themselves as fathers who identified as gay and not as gay fathers. Their sexual orientation formed part of their identity as much as being a father formed part of their identity.

Whilst a representative sample of fathers who also identified as gay was sought, it was not achieved. For instance, gay men who had children with female partners prior to publicly identifying as gay may have added different views to the narratives in this case.

## They raised their children in a more egalitarian way and challenged all gender roles, including who performed chores in the household.

The urgency to oppose discriminatory and oppressive practices remains ongoing. This includes the quest to facilitate the affirmation of alternative models of parenting. This, however, presents a risk of evaluating gay fatherhood against existing paradigms of families and parenthood.<sup>74</sup> It is instead suggested that various approaches are required to oppose heteronormative discourses on parenthood.

## Teenage fatherhood

Considerable research has focused on teenage pregnancy in South Africa<sup>75</sup>, but most of it has centred only on teenage mothers<sup>76</sup>. Over the years, the statistics released show high rates of teenage pregnancy among young women aged 14 to 18 years.<sup>77</sup> However, we do not have nationally representative statistics available on teenage fathers.

Teenage fathers often are portrayed as unsupportive, neglectful, and unable to provide for or abandon their children.<sup>78</sup> However, teenage fathers, like teenage mothers, also face many challenges, such as limited support from society, friends, and family members.<sup>79</sup>

These challenges are also evident in case 10 on the next page, specifically pertaining to support and financial concerns. Upon discovering that their girlfriends were pregnant, many teenage fathers asserted that they were shocked but also worried about how their parents would react to the news.<sup>80</sup> Such young men also may be unprepared for the parenting role.<sup>81</sup> One study<sup>82</sup> has shown that the age of the baby's father, level of education, and employment status influenced their parenting success. In the same (South African) study, teenage fathers delayed in telling their parents that their girlfriends were pregnant, but they eventually did when the parents of their partners came to report the pregnancy.

Various South African studies<sup>83</sup> showed that teenage fathers accepted paternity, despite their inability to pay *inhlawulo* in cases where this was requested. All teenage fathers asserted that their mothers were highly supportive of them taking on the new role as young fathers.<sup>84</sup> Findings from this study<sup>85</sup> has shown that teenage fathers viewed fatherhood as a life-changing experience. The literature suggests that many teenage fathers spoke about having to stop drinking, smoking, and ending relationships with multiple partners and managed to maintain relationships with mothers of their children. They wanted to be responsible fathers and be supportive of their partners.<sup>86</sup>

Some teenage fathers remained actively involved in their children's lives<sup>87</sup> even if they did not financially support their children. This suggests that some teenage fathers believed fatherhood was not defined by a man's ability to support their child materially. Engaged fatherhood involved men being aware of what was happening in their children's personal lives, offering advice, and providing mentorship. Various local studies<sup>88</sup> showed how engaged teenage fathers created new positive experiences of progressive fatherhood by spending time with their children, babysitting, changing nappies, and taking children to local clinics for immunisation appointments.

Teenage fathers in these studies<sup>89</sup> did not have the finances to support their children but emphasised the importance of being available to meet their children's emotional needs. The young men defined themselves as good fathers based on their emotional support to their female partners, as well as being involved in caring activities that are generally associated with women, such as bathing and dressing children. Their involvement in these caring activities showed that practices of teenage fatherhood were changing positively.



# Teenage fathers in search of support

**Nicole Smith and Malose Langa, Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand**

The case aims to convey the experiences<sup>90</sup> of three teenage fathers. A common narrative amongst these fathers was the lack of clarity in terms of what a planned or unplanned pregnancy meant. As such, for two of the fathers the news of their partner's pregnancy caused significant distress and worry, which was primarily linked to concerns about how their parents might respond to the news.

Only one of the fathers felt happy about his partner's pregnancy, although he experienced considerable distress when his partner, who was still in high school, contemplated having an abortion.

Financial concerns and anticipated life changes were central to these teenage fathers' concerns and worries, since they all seemed to experience varying levels of support from their families. This was evident in the conflicting narratives expressed. For example, one father felt unsupported:

**“At that time when that girl was pregnant, my mother don't want to be involved with me. Every time I ask him for something; she say, 'I don't have it'. – Mpho**

Another father explained:

**“You know how mothers ... they like being grandmothers ... bring the babies to their house. – James**

James received emotional support from his family, though he had to take financial responsibility for his baby on his own. The different experiences suggested a link between the emotional support received from family and the level of contact the fathers had with their children. As in the case with James, who had the most consistent level of contact with his child, despite only receiving emotional and not financial support from his family and being estranged from his friends for being a father. James also shared that it was his own father's absence that motivated him to be an involved father. This appears to have influenced his views about what it meant to be a father:

**“I think from the way I see it most people think a good father is a father who's got money, gives the child money ... I don't know ... but ... [a] good father ... is just [to] be there for your baby ... you might not have the financial stability but just be there. I mean that's, ja, that's the good father. – James**

This demonstrates a shift in terms of viewing a father as someone who provides materially to the importance of being an available caregiver.

Despite the varying experiences of these fathers, there appeared to be consensus in terms of the difficulty of being a teenage father:

**“To be a teenage father is not [an] easy thing. Even when you are in school, you do not feel safe sometimes when they talk about teenage pregnancy. Ja, stuff like ... Ja, I feel bad. – Lesego**

These words of Lesego highlight the possible impact of social stigma in terms of how teenage fathers may engage with fatherhood, and therefore with their children.

It is evident that teenage fathers are vulnerable to various challenges. These include access to financial resources, but also facing the loss of friendships whilst challenged by social stigma. The teenage fathers were also impacted by the support received from their own families. Case 10 suggests that, whilst the teenage fathers would appreciate financial support, they valued the emotional support received.

The emphasis on financial provision was highlighted by the SOSAF 2021 survey as well. The participating fathers demonstrated differing perspectives on whether a man needed to be employed to be a good father (figure 23). Although 37% of the fathers agreed with this statement to varying extents, 21% were uncertain, whilst 42% disagreed to varying degrees. This may suggest disagreement about how important financial and material support was for the father-child relationship.

## Conclusion and recommendations

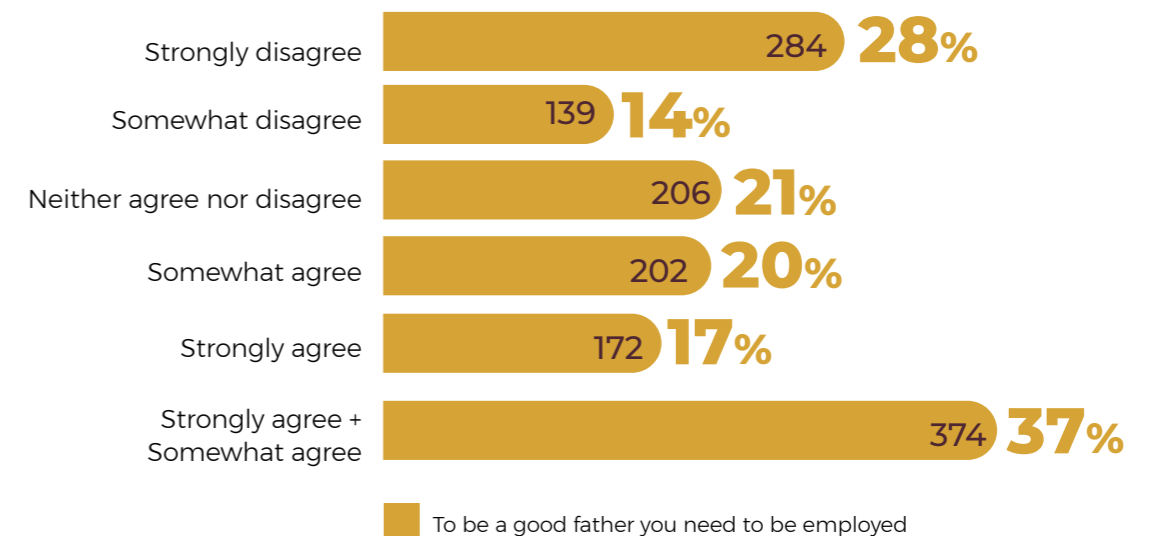
The experiences of fathers who are incarcerated, single, gay or teenagers demonstrate the difficulty in disrupting

stereotypical notions of fatherhood. It is evident that the absence or presence of social and societal support has considerable influence on how fatherhood is experienced. The cases illustrate that many fathers recognised the importance of fatherhood, father-child relationships, and being emotionally accessible to their children. Social stigma and discriminatory practices, however, serve as significant barriers or risks to father-child relationships. These in turn significantly impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of everyone involved.

The dominance of stereotypical beliefs of what it means to be a father appears to provide a foundation for stigmatising and discriminatory ideology to thrive. Whilst the experiences of the fathers discussed in this chapter highlight the importance of changes to, or reforms in legislation, policy and practice, further integrative interventions that challenge societal perceptions are also important.

It is therefore necessary that stereotypical notions of fatherhood are debunked so that incarcerated, single, gay or teenage fathers can be supported to be regarded – and accepted – as good fathers.

Figure 23: SOSAF 2021 survey participants' perceptions of fatherhood and employment



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# Heads or Tata?

**Author:** Moses Phiri

He told me he loved me once. A week before his sudden death. Maybe it was the booze talking. Maybe his soul knew time was running out, to show me his love.

He rescued me from a nightmare that night ...

"Wake up, Junior, wake up!"

I woke, and my eyes were huge. His were bright, star-filled, wondrous. Even the musty alcohol stench couldn't distract me from them.

I was certain something heavy was to flow from his lips, beside the drool. But all that came was ...

"I gave you my name because I love you. My son! My name!"

It WAS heavy. But I didn't know it then because in the week that followed I was trapped in his game.

Heads or tails? When the sun wakes, do I get uTata or a tyrant.

Opposite him at the kitchen table, I ate porridge, but I didn't see it once ... trying my best not to break from his cold gaze. But I trembled, and drops fell to the floor. No chance to gasp, his roar drowned my heart, and my eyes did flood.

I shuddered to come home early after school that Friday. So I came late. Bad choice! When the sky spotted golden streaks on the horizon, I showed red streaks on my thighs. I knew uTata's brown leather belt better than I did his touch.

Six days were all that was left of his life when he woke on Sunday.

Heads or Tails? uTata or a tyrant?

I sat upright at the kitchen table when he came in, smiling. Tata!

Sweet bread after porridge. Ice cream after church. Roadtrip to nowhere. He DID love me!

Three days left.

Heads or tails?

A tyrant!

"I was dragged out work 'cause you got in a fight! That white man won't pay me for today! You know who'll pay? You. Your stomach!" uTata said outside the principal's office, on his knees whispering daggers at me, as I sat quietly on the bench.

When we got home he whipped me.

Bruised thighs, battered hear ... to make up for the threat he'd resolved to not uphold. I was fed meat and potatoes that day. Usual portions, usual goodness, shocking goodness by a bitter hand. But my body ached so much I could hardly enjoy the taste. If the choice was there, I would surely have foregone the delicious food in exchange for no beating.

Wednesday.

Heads or tails? Tata!

Sweet-faced in the morning, gentle-voiced in the afternoon, subtle at night.

Thursday came.

Heads or tails? Tata!

I got an encore performance of goodness. Thunderstuck!

Friday. His last day on Earth.

Heads or tails? Tata!

French toast in the morning. This man dared to smile at me.

I rushed home after school.

"He said he got a call from his Baas, he'll come later. Here are the keys," old man Mkize from next door said to me over the fence.

I was bouncy. Danced the sun away, until darkness sneaked up on me. He'd still not returned. Unlike him! My heart dropped. But when my aunt knocked on the door at 7pm, the thread holding it snapped, and my heart hurried for the floor.

He died. An accident. Tata!

In a week I saw ... Hard, soft. Cruel, kind. Gentle, abrasive. Love, love. Tata!

# FATHERHOOD AND VIOLENCE

Kopano Ratele

## Chapter 6

# Fatherhood and violence

Kopano Ratele, Stellenbosch University

## KEY MESSAGES

- South African society is pervaded by high levels of violence which takes direct (visible), and indirect (structural) forms.
- The likelihood of dying from direct violence is much higher amongst males, including among those who will be or are fathers. The vulnerability of males to dying from violence begins early, during boyhood. Work that engages men towards positive fatherhood must address the vulnerability of males before they reach adulthood and have children of their own.
- There is a need for thorough understanding of the use of money as a form of violence by fathers to manipulate, coerce and abuse mothers and children, as well as for the value of unpaid care work to be included in maintenance calculations.
- A comprehensive strategy against violence in different forms, inclusive of males and females, is imperative. As far as men who are fathers are concerned, the vulnerability of men implies the need to consider both the violence that fathers commit against others and the violence they suffer(ed) from others.
- There is a need for increased and targeted efforts to make gender equality more practical instead of remaining an abstract concept; e.g., by encouraging egalitarian views and practices between partners, gender-neutral toys and play, and by advocating for fathers and sons to do more housework.

A key assumption in my thinking about fatherhood is that, while it is essential to gather the particular details of why an individual man is, for example, abusive or not optimally caring towards his children, fatherhood is best understood as it relates to other social facts at play in each individual man's life. The assumption derives from the fact that being a father implies being in relation to others. In addition, every father is always in an ongoing negotiation with the prevailing societal beliefs and ideas about fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood.

Fatherhood is therefore a personal journey for adult men as much as a widely held cultural expectation of adult men.

A critical yet reparative approach to understanding fathers is adopted here. Such a focus on fathers attends to the subjective attitudes about relationships that individual men have with individual children and, simultaneously, to the shared ideas about manhood and childhood. This approach minimises the hastiness to condemn all men who do not take the expected responsibility for their children.

Those of us who study fathers must resist the easy temptation to summarily dismiss a man who, for example, neglects his child, without carefully studying the circumstances of his life and actions within their complex, dynamic context. Careful probing is required into the attitudes and practices of individual men who are not doing the care work that is assumed fathers should. And we always have to remain critical of our own assumptions and ideas about men, women, and children.

At the same time, to get a rich understanding of men who do not care for their children, the social norms about men and care within society must be examined. *Are men taught to care? How do they understand care – if they indeed received care education? When are they educated into caring? Who teaches care to men?* These are some of the questions we must ask.

There are many reasons why fathers might not take care of their biological children. One man simply may not want to take care of the child, certainly, but another father may be in prison, while a third may be physically absent from his offspring because he works in a different city. The latter was a historically common reality for many families during apartheid capitalism when many men were forced to be migrants.

It must be noted that when *biological* fathers were not around, as was the case during apartheid, the caring work fell mainly on mothers. However, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers also carried some of the care work. This pattern of care, where the work of caring is carried by women and extended family, continues to be true in contemporary times.

## Before we get to direct violence

Of pivotal interest is one reason why some men do not take care of their children: the fact that violence is frustrating a potentially caring father–child relation. That violence can take direct form.

It would be reasonable to assume that direct violence by and against men, expressed through assault, murder or rape, is a constant in fathers' lives because these types of violence are major problems in society. More often though, the form of violence that possibly

**Physical absence does not imply financial or psychological neglect.**

frustrates positive father–child relation is the indirect kind. Examples of such violence are policies that produce economic injustice and high levels of unemployment. The policy of apartheid introduced in 1948 by the White nationalist government that ruled South Africa was an infamous example of indirect, structural violence. The result of the violence from policies is that poor men are rendered less able to support their children economically and, instead, are living with the shame of being 'useless' fathers presumed to have abandoned their children.

It is agreed that, for some of us interested in the emotional character of society, a great concern is the children growing up with caring *biological* fathers absent from their offspring's lives. This is regarded as the full meaning of what is referred to as 'fatherlessness' or 'absent' fathers. Father absence, in other words, is defined as men who have no interaction whatsoever – physically *and* economically *and* psychosocially – with their biological children. However, if a man does not co-reside with his children, yet he economically or psychosocially supports them, he is not absent from their lives.

Whereas we have to acknowledge the presence of adult men such as grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and other kith and kin who help support and care for children<sup>1</sup>, the problem of a child growing up without a caring, biological father is a concern for not only the individual child and immediate family but also for the school, community, and the larger society.

<sup>1</sup>As a country, South Africa could use comprehensive quality data on the care that children receive from social fathers. A recommendation for the SOSAF project is to collect extensive data on social fathers.

The problem of truant biological fathers is partly evident in national data<sup>1</sup> which indicates that, in 2019, 42% of children lived only with their mothers; 21% of children did not live with their biological parents; 33% lived with both parents: and 4% lived only with their fathers. In other words, approximately 63% (over 11 million) children in the country did not live with their biological fathers. Proximity is an important element of being able to provide care; however, we have to interpret these figures with caution as children who do not co-reside with their biological fathers may still enjoy positive relationship with their fathers. Physical absence does not imply financial or psychological neglect.

**Just because a man does not live with his child, it does not mean he does not care for her.**

Whereas the figure of children who do not live with their biological fathers is high, we do not know who these fathers really are. We do not know the reasons why men do not live with their offspring, certainly not from their perspectives as 'failing fathers' (if that is how they consider themselves). We do not know how these men think about care. And, we do not know how they were parented. But, at the same time, we need to appreciate the fact that, just because a man does not live with his child, it does not mean he does not care for her.

It was precisely to draw a richer picture of men

and care that the SOSAF 2021 survey asked fathers about care-related activities such as playing indoors or outdoors with children, doing homework with, or talking to the children about a topic that interest them (see figure 17 on p. 81).

Whereas being physically absent from the household does not necessarily equate to neglect, or lack of care for a child, not living together may decrease, though not eliminate, the possibility of enriching and affective relationships. Prior to the SOSAF 2021 survey, we did not have any large cross-sectional data on fathers. The lack of nationally representative evidence on fathers notwithstanding, government data indicates that *income*, *race*, and *geography* (with the two latter variables possibly being proxies for income or wealth) are associated with biological father-child non-co-residency.

Among these three variables, income or wealth is the one most associated with non-co-residency.

Consider here that social grants are the principal source of income for a significant percentage of South African households<sup>2</sup>, with "more than *three-quarters* of children aged 0–17 living in households with at least one member being a beneficiary of a social grant" in 2018<sup>3</sup>. Black<sup>ii</sup> people (34%) are most likely to receive grants, followed by Coloured people (29%), people of Indian ancestry (15%) and White people (7%).<sup>4</sup>

A large percentage of children, therefore, grow up in poverty and in need of state support: the majority of Black children (73%) are Child Support Grant (CSG) beneficiaries, while 59% of Coloured, 12% of Indian, and around 6% of White children get the grant.<sup>5</sup> Understanding the association between income and co-residency is vital in trying to grasp fatherhood and any policy efforts to support fathers. Understanding how poor, precariously, or

unemployed fathers explain and cope with their life circumstances is imperative. So is understanding how the women with whom these men have children perceive the men and cope, how children perceive (and relate to these men), and what the social and psychological effects are from living in poverty and unemployment.

The latest government statistics showed that race, intersecting with income, remains a determinant of fathers' physical presence in the same household as their biological offspring, with Black and Coloured children least likely to live with their biological father, while White and Indian children are the most likely to do so. The same pattern has been consistent over

time<sup>6</sup>. This does not mean Black and Coloured men are naturally less involved, and White and Indian men are naturally more involved. It also does not mean that Black or Coloured children are condemned to living without a father.

Instead, what the racialised pattern of male involvement points to are two realities evident in South Africa today. The first of these is that the colonial and apartheid classification system that grouped and divided people into four races has had enduring, transgenerational effects. The second is that the racist classification system not only maliciously impoverished those classified 'Black' and 'Coloured' but that the historical racist state also disrupted the sustaining social bonds among Black and Coloured people.



<sup>ii</sup>See the note (i) in the Introduction chapter, p. 20, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report

Forced removals, pass laws, migrant labour, underfunded education, exploitative work conditions, and state violence were used to ensure White power and Black and Coloured poverty. Black and Coloured families were continually destabilised, making it more difficult to stay together. The difference between Black and Coloured families on the one side, and White and Indian families on the other, was produced by a willful and cold logic of structural handicap.

Indian families are interesting in that, while they were also oppressed by White supremacy, today's Indian children are likely to grow up with their fathers in the house. One possible explanation can be derived from structural-psychological analysis of the cultural norms that prevail among Indian families. Such an analysis would point to the fact that under apartheid, they were the least disadvantaged of the oppressed groups and, after 1994, have built economic and social structures that facilitate the co-residence of biological fathers and their children.

In sum, the differences between the various groups reflect the patterns of historical and contemporary economic differences.

## Implications of various definitions of violence

There are different ways to define violence. One view, by the World Health Organisation, regards violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation".<sup>7</sup>

An advantage of this definition is that it makes it relatively easier to measure violence, particularly where there is a clear perpetrator and victim. The definition also recognises that the injury-causing acts can include, for instance, physical acts (e.g., hitting a child) and threats (such as threatening a child with violence).

A disadvantage of this definition is the focus on "intentional use" in thinking about power. Such a focus can be used to absolve those in power, such as politicians and business executives, from making choices that lead to maldevelopment and deaths. Negative consequences from such choices may be explained away as unintended effects. Indeed, the more that economic, political, or other forms of power are concentrated in a few people, the more deadly the effect of the choices or omissions of the powerful few can be.

For example, colonial governments may not have always intentionally murdered people. Nonetheless, the colonial ideology and structures were by design characterised by violence or the threat thereof. Those who opposed colonialism were harassed, tortured, jailed, banished, or murdered.

Another example: when a government does not provide adequate health services for children because their parents are poor, resulting in ill-health and death, the government may not be seen as having intentionally killed the children. However, it is the action or inaction of the government that allowed ill-health and death to occur and, hence, the government can be held responsible for the indirect violence hidden in the policy choices.

Another view of violence states that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations".<sup>8</sup> The example that is offered is that "if a person died from tuberculosis in the eighteenth century it would be hard to conceive of this as violence since it might have been quite unavoidable, but if he dies from it today, despite all the medical resources in the world, then violence is present according to our definition".<sup>9</sup>

With regards to fatherhood, an example related to this view of violence is that, if a father is unemployed because he did not receive a good education, and therefore cannot adequately provide for his children and family, such a

situation represents hidden violence against him, his children and family. Whereas direct violence is punishable by law, the hidden, institutionalised, and structural violence of unemployment or poor education is still all too often overlooked or minimised. This conception of violence, direct versus hidden, makes a distinction between "the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence as personal or direct, and to violence where there is no such actor as structural or indirect".<sup>10</sup>

Conceptualising violence in this way offers a different way of thinking more broadly about violence. Within this tradition, we are able to recognise both and distinguish between overt, direct, or bodily violence and secreted, indirect and systemic violence better. When attention is paid to, for instance, neglect or policy choices as forms of violence, we can address violence beyond merely counting and responding to murders, injuries, or damage to property; and such attention also suggests seeking to understand underlying causes in work on violence by and against fathers.

Case 11 on the next page provides an example of violence defined in the non-physical sense. This case describes the violence of financial abuse, where the lives of children, and in some cases parents (often mothers), are disrupted and their potential blocked from being realised through the deliberate withholding of resources by other parents (often fathers).

The way violence is defined is not a mere academic matter that is of interest only to researchers. It has real-life political, social, economic, and everyday implications. Different views of what constitutes violence will lead to different policy decisions and the allocation of state resources. For example, in one country, hitting children may be prohibited by law, while in another it is not. When a violent act (such as corporal punishment or emotional abuse against adults or children) is not legally prohibited, an obvious consequence is that the state does not have to put prevention measures in place or offer redress against the injured party. Another consequence is that children who were physically punished are likely to grow up without thinking of such punishment as violence.



# Mothers' difficulties in securing child maintenance: Financial abuse as a form of domestic violence

**Felicity An Guest, Child Maintenance Difficulties South Africa;  
Danya Marx and Wessel van den Berg, Sonke Gender Justice**

This case study draws on the comments and interactions from mothers and fathers who belong to the Child Maintenance Difficulties South Africa (CMDSA) Facebook group, where parents share about the difficulties that they face in managing custodial conflicts and challenges related to child maintenance.

Based on comments from CMDSA members, it is fair to say that mothers in the group often report experiencing financial abuse from fathers – and the state – when it comes to securing child maintenance and custody. Financial abuse, however, is not currently considered a severe form of domestic violence and is, therefore, not given the same attention as other better-known forms of abuse.

Financial abuse can be a silent, devastating, and normalised form of gender-based violence.

Discussions in the group have shown how traditional gender roles of men as providers and women as caregivers, and the economic exclusion of women, can perpetuate harmful implications for women and their children regarding financial provision.

In 2019, there were over 12,400,000 (64%) children who received the CSG in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Most children did not live with their biological fathers<sup>12</sup> (see p. 16 of this report), and 63% of fathers' names were missing from birth certificates<sup>13</sup>.

While there is no nationally representative data available yet, based on the discussions in the CMDSA group it seems that many children grow up without regular financial child support or maintenance from their biological fathers.<sup>14</sup> Despite some children receiving grants, the CSG amount seems insufficient to provide basic necessities for children to reach their full potential, as prescribed by the Constitution.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, the most vulnerable and marginalised are being pushed further into poverty. On the CMDSA group, some mothers in the lower- and middle-income groups report that they also are experiencing increased poverty and they battle to provide for their children on their own.

Mothers who are members of the group speak about their dependence on child maintenance payments from fathers as being used as opportunities for fathers to coerce, manipulate, and punish them. This sometimes has a direct impact on children, as they could be caught in the middle.

Due to the structural economic exclusion of many women in society, many men still benefit more from economic privilege, have higher-paid jobs, higher employment rates, and lower rates of unpaid labour.<sup>16</sup>

There is not enough research on this important aspect of financial abuse<sup>17</sup>, especially when it comes to parents who are no longer in a relationship or living together. There are many 'layers' to this issue, and CMDSA members report that some fathers intentionally do not support their children financially. This can be interpreted as a form of child neglect and abuse.

Researchers<sup>18</sup> have noted that: "one frequently hidden or 'invisible' form of abuse perpetuated within intimate partner relationships is economic or financial abuse. Practitioners and emerging qualitative research have for some time recognised that IPV [intimate partner violence] contributes to poverty, financial risk and financial insecurity for women, sometimes long after the relationship has ended."<sup>19</sup>

Enforcing child maintenance payments should therefore be prioritised by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJ & CD). If the South African government were to better enforce child maintenance payments, it would go some way in achieving their commitment of alleviating poverty by 2030, and also tackle a form of abuse.

The arrival of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 made matters even more dire and complicated, exposing the vulnerability of women and children and the flaws in the maintenance system to a much greater extent. Initially, civil society organisations (CSOs) took the lead in initiating food kitchens and securing food parcels. The Department of Social Development provided additional monetary relief, of R345 through the CSG (from 1 April 2020), and the Social Relief of Distress grant of R350 from June 2020 (renewed in 2021).<sup>20</sup>

For these, the onus is placed on the primary caregiver to apply for assistance, and not the parent who was meant to pay maintenance. Furthermore, although the family courts were functional from the onset of the lockdown, access was limited due to difficulty in managing virus outbreaks and adhering to the various lockdown regulations.

In addition to these challenges, co-parenting and paying maintenance were difficult to navigate due to restrictions<sup>21</sup> on movement. The discussions on the CMDSA group indicated that these lockdown regulations were intentionally used by some parents (most often the father) to prevent the other (primary) parent – most often the mother – from fulfilling their parental responsibilities. With many of the victimised parents not having access to the finances to approach the courts for relief, they had to wait for the lockdown regulations to be changed to less restrictive.

There is a critical need for more research, awareness and advocacy on financial abuse as a form of violence against women and children.



Many fathers apparently also used lockdown restrictions as an excuse not to attend court or to pay maintenance. According to members of the CMDSA group, the DoJ & CD itself did not seem to assist on the matter, perpetuating injustice and passively allowing the abuse to continue by not resolving unpaid maintenance garnished for up to seven months. Mothers who approached the department for assistance reported in the group that they were often told that the computer system was down and were offered no resolution. The DoJ & CD eventually released a press statement, after some pressure from CSOs and the press, stating that their system had crashed at the end of May 2020.<sup>22</sup> However, the delays in payment had started prior to the alleged “system crash”.

The above reports of child maintenance and custody difficulties, experienced mainly by mothers, point to the critical need for more research, awareness and advocacy on financial abuse as a form of violence against women and children and to contribute towards campaigns for greater gender equality. There is a need for understanding the use of money by fathers to manipulate, coerce and abuse mothers and children, and for the value of unpaid labour to be included in maintenance calculations.

Potential research areas may be a review of court proceedings and a sex-disaggregated analysis of DoJ & CD records on maintenance dependence and payment. In addition, the feasibility of state intervention in maintenance payments could be researched – in other words, once child maintenance requirements are confirmed by the courts, the state provides child maintenance payments to dependent custodial parents, and then receives payments from non-custodial parents responsible for paying maintenance. When these parents default, the onus then lies with the state, not the vulnerable parent, to pursue further actions.



## Understanding violence: two examples

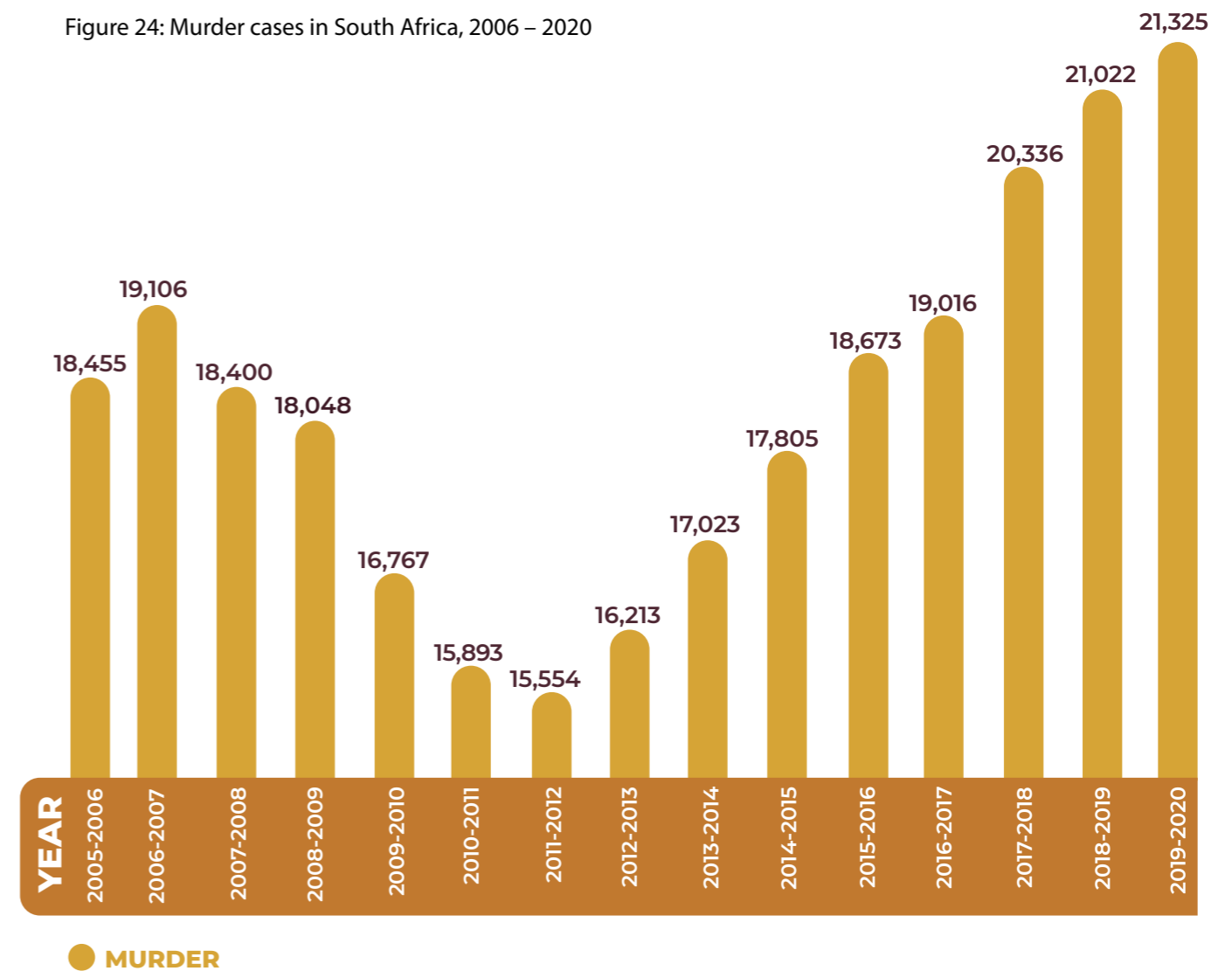
### Murder (intentional homicide)

Between 2007 and 2012, murders steadily went down, dropping from 19,106 in 2007 to 15,554 in 2012 (see figure 24). And then they began to rise. In 2020, the number of murders had risen to 21,325.

It is worth observing that, while violence is a problem for everyone (children, men, women, and other genders), when it comes to homicidal violence some men, who are usually poor, disconnected to others, homeless, and younger are more at risk than women, children and rich, propertied, and older men.

Even when murder was at its lowest (at 15,554) during the years under review, the pervasiveness of violent acts was high. United Nations data shows that the global rate of intentional homicide was approximately six per 100,000 in 2012 and in 2017.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the rate of such homicide in South Africa in 2012 was around 31 per 100,000 and nearly 36 per 100,000 in 2017 – over seven times the global rate. In comparison to our country, the rate of homicide or murder in 2012 in Burkina Faso, a much poorer country, was approximately 0.7 per 100,000, increasing in 2017 to around one per 100,000.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 24: Murder cases in South Africa, 2006 – 2020



The most vulnerable group to die violently are adult males. Though some studies prefer to highlight a narrow band (e.g., ages 20 – 24 or 20 – 29), men's elevated violence-related vulnerability to homicides extends from the 20s to the 40s.<sup>25</sup> Some of these men will be fathers. In particular, Black and Coloured adult men, in contrast to any other race and sex groups, are disproportionately at higher risk of dying from homicide. For example, younger Black men are approximately nine times more likely to die from violence than Black women in the same age group; and 17 times more likely to die from violence than White men in the same age group.<sup>26</sup>

## The vulnerability of males begins early – during boyhood.

It is probable that many of the men who die from violence leave children behind. It is, therefore, necessary to have a better understanding of the interface between Black and Coloured males' vulnerability to violence and the high absence of biological fathers in Black and Coloured children's lives.

Any properly functioning, able and caring state cannot be unconcerned with such high murder rates as are witnessed in South Africa. If it is correct that the state is not as concerned as it ought to be about the high rates of murder, specifically the rates of murder among men, it would not be unreasonable to think that the country is malfunctioning, or incapable of dealing with violence, or uncaring. The implication is that, to understand violence, we may need to understand how different organs of the state think of violence, and what the dominant views are of the high levels of murder and other forms of violence.

Insofar as it is the state's duty to protect its people and reduce violence, there may be another reason for the intractable level of violence in the country. Even when murder figures were declining there had been no sound explanation of why the number of people killed was dropping.<sup>27</sup> There was no convincing explanation from the government.

The lack of clear explanations of the patterns of violence is probably because there has been no comprehensive understanding of the social and structural pathways and dynamics of murder. While the government has adopted a national strategic plan in 2020 to tackle gender-based violence and femicide<sup>28</sup>, it does not have an effective plan to reduce all homicides (i.e., including male homicides) and other forms of violent crimes substantially. The official and preferred strategy against violence is to strengthen the criminal justice system by increasing the number of police officers, arming them, giving them faster cars, and imposing harsher and longer sentences on offenders.

So far, this strategy does not seem to be effective as it neglects or does not consider preventative measures – and does not respond to the questions of *why violence occurs in the first place* and *how violence may be prevented*.

Violence cannot be effectively reduced if there is no real understanding of the pathways and dynamics of homicide. The fact that there is not a well-articulated theory of murder, and no convincing explanation why it was going down or up, results in not knowing what to do when the murder rate drops, and what to change when it increases.

The state does not only appear not to fully understand visible violence, but also not other forms of indirect violence. The lack of understanding violence in its various forms can be witnessed in the annual crime statistics, which focus on visible, direct and bodily violent crime such as murder, assaults, robberies, rape, etc. What is rarely – if ever – brought into the picture is the massive iceberg of invisible violence.

One implication of this omission is that visible and direct forms of violence are related to invisible and indirect forms of structural violence, like hunger and the lack of sanitation that affect a significant portion of people in the country. Another implication is that murder needs to be seen in relation to other violence types, such as violence against children.

### Violence against children

Child injuries<sup>iii</sup> as a whole, and specifically violence against children (VAC), are significant causes of child death; disability; and mental, conduct and (later in life) reproductive health problems. Globally, between 875,000 and 950,000 children aged 0 – 17 years die from intentional (violence) and unintentional injuries (e.g., from fires), with millions more non-fatally injured and disabled.<sup>29</sup> A study based on the Israeli National Trauma Registry on patients aged 0 – 17 years who were hospitalised for trauma during 1998 – 2006, found that the majority of the victims of violence were older boys (15 – 17 years) and that most violence-related injury occurred in public areas.<sup>30</sup>

In South Africa, homicides were found to be the second leading cause of child death.<sup>31</sup> At a rate of 5.5 per 100,000, it was higher than the global rate (four per 100,000). Nearly half of the child homicides were associated with child abuse and neglect, and nearly three quarters of these deaths were among children under five years and happened in the home.<sup>32</sup> The Birth-to-Twenty study<sup>33</sup> showed that violence against children in the cohort was mostly perpetrated by carers (who are more likely to be women), one possible reason being that most of the children live in households with their mothers (and not their fathers).

A study on the cost of violence against South Africa's children to the social body and the

economy reported very interesting results.<sup>34</sup> The researchers calculated the potential reduction in costs if different forms of VAC were prevented. The forms of VAC that they focused on were physical violence, emotional violence, witnessing violence in the family, and child neglect. They also distinguished overall costs of fatal and non-fatal violence.

Overall, it was reported that VAC cost the economy US\$15.81 billion or nearly 5% of South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP). Their calculations estimated that non-fatal physical VAC annually cost the country US\$6.7 billion (2015 US dollars; approximately 85 billion rand in 2015)<sup>iv</sup>; sexual violence cost 26.8 billion rand; emotional violence cost 46 billion rand; and neglect cost 6.9 billion rand.

The cost of fatal forms of violence to the country were estimated to be 6.2 billion rand. The study also estimated that loss in earnings due to physical violence cost the country 25.5 billion rand and emotional violence 9.6 billion rand.

Child welfare costs, which the researchers defined as expenditure on childcare and protection services, were calculated to cost 1.6 billion rand, which was said to be an underestimate as the complete picture of services could not be established.

The researchers estimated a series of reductions if different types of violence were prevented. For example, if physical VAC were prevented:

- Serious mental illness could decline by 10% in the entire population.
- Anxiety and alcohol abuse could decline by 13% in the entire population.
- Drug abuse could decline by 11% in the entire population.

<sup>iii</sup> Child injuries refer to intentionally inflicted injuries, for example violence, and what are referred to as unintentional injuries or accidents such as drowning and transport-related injuries.

<sup>iv</sup> The average exchange rate in 2015 was approximately 12.77 ZAR to 1 USD; 2015 rand equivalent values are used from hereon. See <https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-ZAR-spot-exchange-rates-history-2015.html>

- HIV could decline by 22% in women.
- Interpersonal violence could decline by 4% in the entire population (and 8% in men and 12% in women).
- Self-harm could decline by 23% in the entire population.

Witnessing violence in the family has been shown to be a significant predictor of negative outcomes for children and adults. Of particular interest is the child witnessing violence against the father, as well as violence by the father. While the study does not indicate the estimated cost of children witnessing violence against or by fathers, the researchers estimated potential savings if witnessing violence in the family was prevented:

- Anxiety would be reduced by 13% in the entire population.
- Interpersonal violence would be reduced by 16% in both men and women.

Child neglect has been shown to result in negative psychosocial consequences for children during childhood and as adults. The researchers calculated that, if children did not experience neglect:

- Depression could decline by 16% in men and 9% in women.
- Anxiety could decline by 8% in the entire population.
- Alcohol abuse could decline by 14% in women.
- Drug abuse could decline by 4% in men.
- Sexually transmitted diseases could decline by 6% in women.

While not particular to violence by and against fathers, the studies described here, and in particular the costing study, suggest important areas for further research on fathers, fatherhood, and violence. One of the most important points that the costing study makes is that investing in violence prevention can yield significant social and economic returns in reducing adverse health outcomes.

## Fathers, fatherhood, and violence

While violence is a major social problem, studies and reports have shown that the likelihood of dying from violence is much higher amongst males; in other words, among those who will be or are fathers. The vulnerability of males begins early – during boyhood. A prevalence study<sup>35</sup> of adolescent homicides (among 10 – 17-year-olds), for instance, found a pattern of higher homicide rates among adolescent males; that is boys compared to females (girls), and that the differential rates increased with age. In discussing their results, the researchers stated:

“This pattern suggests that adolescent male deaths are possibly related to engagement in anti-social behaviour with some evidence pointing to exposure and experience of violence during childhood as contributing factors. In addition, data from elsewhere shows that persistent structural inequalities continue to limit young men’s opportunities and can lead to them participating in crime and violence. In certain contexts, it has been found that gang involvement can provide young men with the recognition and respect they do not receive elsewhere. The dominant constructions of masculinity in South Africa have been shown to emphasise competition between men, ready use of violence to defend honour and heavy use of alcohol which often fuels violent behaviour.<sup>37</sup>”

Another study on violence among adolescents (aged 15 – 19 years), in Johannesburg, found that:

“Males comprised 81% of the victims. Most (90%) victims were killed by male offenders, 3% by female offenders, and in 8% of the cases the offender’s sex was unknown. Accordingly, the majority (80%) of adolescent homicides were

all male encounters. Almost four out of five homicides, for which records were available, involved a male killed by another male, and just less than one in five (18%) involved a female killed by a male.

The recognition of the vulnerability of boys to violence implies that a focus on fathers must take a broader perspective on violence in men’s lives. It means attention to violence must begin during boyhood. Work that engages men towards positive fatherhood must address the vulnerability of males before they reach

adulthood and have children of their own. For example, positive fatherhood advocates need to find innovative ways to engage school-going males in healthy masculinities with an eye toward potentially involved fatherhood later in their lives.

Another key site for the long-term development of new gender attitudes and norms aligned to egalitarian, caring fatherhood is the family – the earliest foundation for the kind of parents that children are likely to become (see the case on the next page).



# Attitudes on gender equality and inequality among parents in South Africa

**Kopano Ratele, Stellenbosch University; Rebecca Helman, University of Edinburgh; Pascal Richardson, University of South Africa & South African Medical Research Council**

We learn how to be boys and girls, men and women in our families of origin. The home space is the social and physical space where masculinity, femininity (and gender more broadly) are made, reproduced, adapted, or questioned. From the clothing that parents choose for their children, activities that they encourage or discourage their children's participation in, and talking in particular ways about behaviours and ideas – families shape children towards particular gendered ways of being.<sup>38</sup>

The family is therefore one of the prime social spaces where boys or girls learn to ask questions (or not) about their bodies, identities, the culture that allows or prohibits, and the world outside the home (e.g., what are seen on television or read in books). Armed with this home knowledge children then take what they have learnt from their kin on a 'road test' to school, mosque, church, temple, and their peers.

The family is thus a key site to study when we want to understand what people think of masculinities and femininities; and what experiences boys, girls, women, men, and other genders have at home.

But we also know from feminist research that many, if not most, homes are an inherently unequal space in which mothers are positioned as nurturers and carers responsible for housework and childcare, while fathers are positioned as providers, disciplinarians, and authority figures. As authorities, fathers can enact control in various forms, including through violence, over women and children within the household.

Yet while research has examined the ways in which men and women enact – or are expected to – enact, particular gender roles within the family<sup>39</sup>, there is a lack of studies which document the prevalence of gender equitable or inequitable practices and attitudes within the context of the family. A scarcity of research on the nuanced ways in which gender equality or inequality are enacted within families is also evident.

Understanding how equality is enacted is arguably an important area to focus on "because the dynamic consequences of participating in [egalitarian] families holds the potential [...] for children to grow up with a sense of gender equality".<sup>40</sup> Such work is imperative in the South African context because of the high rates of direct violence which appear to arise

from the unequal gender power relations between men and women as well as from the indirect violence of economic structures and government policies.

We conducted a study<sup>v</sup> to examine attitudes and practices related to gender equality, gender relations, and gender norms among a large sample of male and female parents, guardians, or caregivers in metropolitan areas in all nine provinces of South Africa.

This case reports on a selection of items from the survey that addressed attitudes and practices on gender equality, gender roles, and responsibilities in the household.

## Findings

A total of 1,748 respondents took part in the study. The age-range was 18 – 55, with 59% of the sample under 35. There were more female participants (55%) than male participants (45%). Overall, the self-identified racial breakdown of the group was in line with current South African demographics: Black (84%), Coloured (9%), White (5%), and Indian (2%).




An interesting finding of the study was that the majority (80%) of respondents agreed with the statement that "people should be treated the same whether they are male or female". An even larger majority (88%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I treat males and females with the same respect". The difference between males and females was small with respect to both questions (see figure on p. 136).

Although the majority of parents expressed support for gender equality, most respondents (67%) said that "a woman should obey her husband". Over 70% of male and over 63% of females agreed with the statement. This result appears to contradict the findings that most caregivers reported that people should be treated the same whether they are male or female, and that they treated males and females with the same respect. The fact that the majority of respondents said that a woman should obey her husband implies that there was low support for egalitarian or democratic attitudes and practices of gender relations in the home or between women and men.

The survey asked caregivers whether "female/girl children should do more housework than male/boy children". The majority of respondents disagreed with the statement (56% of males and 66% of females). Given that the majority of participants expressed high support for gender equality, the expectation would be a similarly high percentage of respondents to disagree with this statement. An interpretation of this finding is that, while most of the parents expressed support for gender equality in the abstract, there was no corresponding high support for treating female and male children equally when it came to housework. This suggests the need for increased effort to promote attitudes and practices towards boys and men doing housework.

<sup>v</sup>The research from which this case study is derived was conducted by Kopano Ratele and Rebecca Helman, while Pascal Richardson generated the tables.

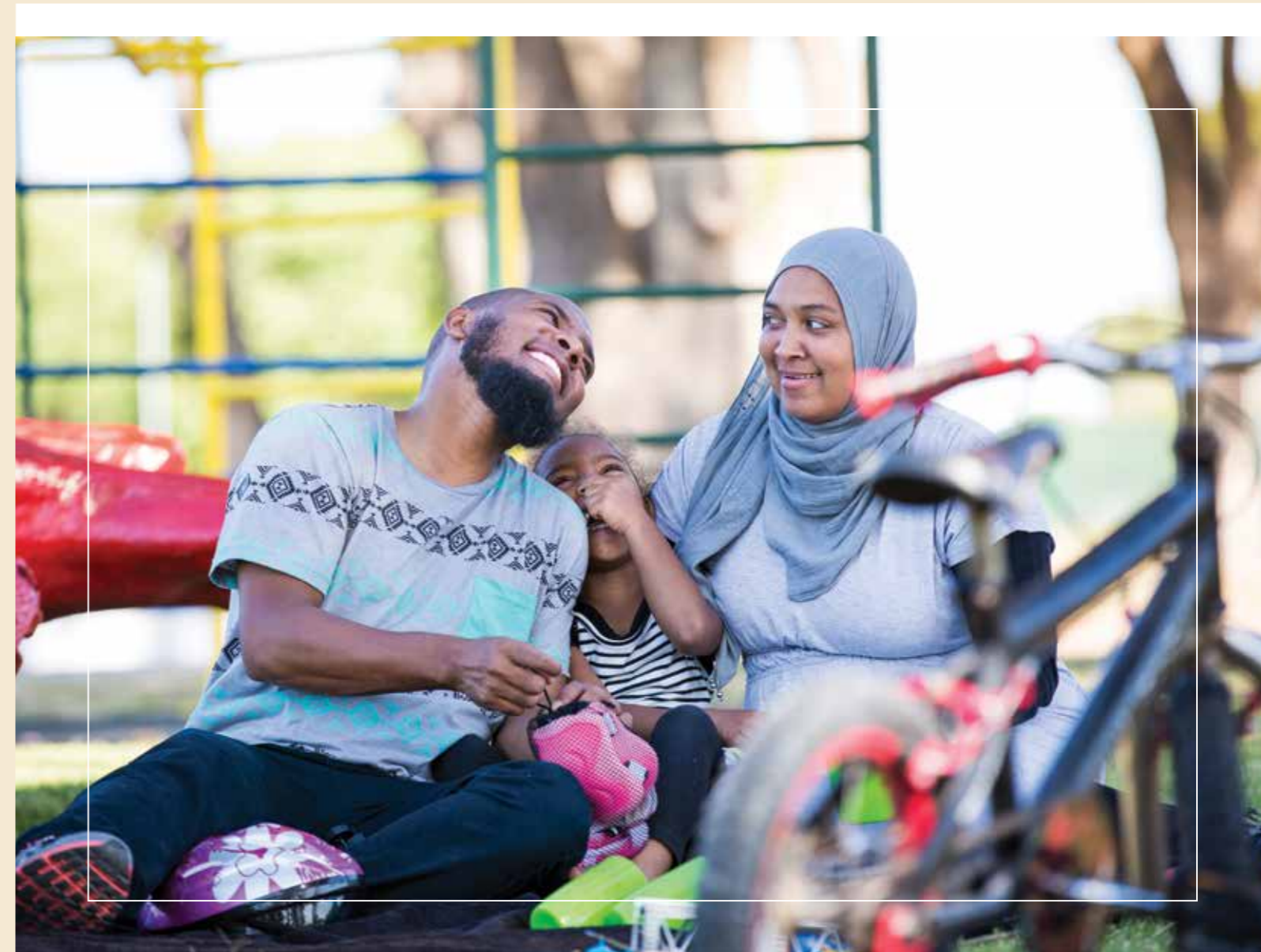
Figure 25: Respondents' attitudes and practices on gender equality, gender roles, and responsibilities in the household

				
People should be treated the same whether they are male or female	4%	15%	81%	♂
	14%	4%	82%	♀
	14%	4%	81%	TOTAL
I treat males and females with the same respect	7%	7%	86%	♂
	1%	4%	89%	♀
	6%	6%	88%	TOTAL
A man should make the final decision in the home	37%	24%	39%	♂
	26%	23%	51%	♀
	31%	23%	46%	TOTAL
A woman should obey her husband	72%	16%	17%	♂
	63%	22%	15%	♀
	67%	14%	19%	TOTAL
I discuss with my partner before making important decisions for both of us	7%	11%	82%	♂
	5%	10%	85%	♀
	6%	11%	84%	TOTAL
A woman's most important job is to take care of her home and her family	58%	17%	25%	♂
	62%	14%	24%	♀
	60%	16%	25%	TOTAL
It is OK if a woman is the main breadwinner in the family	33%	21%	47%	♂
	26%	21%	54%	♀
	29%	21%	51%	TOTAL
Female/Girl children should do more housework than male/boy children	27%	17%	56%	♂
	21%	13%	66%	♀
	24%	15%	61%	TOTAL
Boys can play with dolls	52%	22%	26%	♂
	44%	28%	28%	♀
	48%	25%	27%	TOTAL

The survey asked caregivers whether “boys can play with dolls”. This question assumes that doll play helps develop caring behaviour in children. Overall, a slight majority agreed with the statement that boys can play with dolls. Among males a slight majority (52%) disagreed with the statement. Given the percentage of male respondents who disagreed with the statement, these attitudes can be seen as likely barriers to the development of egalitarian, nurturing attitudes and practices among fathers as well as boys, many of whom will be fathers in future.

One possible interpretation can be advanced to explain the complex and apparent contradictions in the findings of the study. It is possible that there was wide acceptance among respondents of the discourse on gender equality that has circulated in the country over the past three decades or so. This may have led to many of them to support gender equality rhetorically.

However, the picture appears to be more complicated when it comes to more specific attitudes and practices towards gender equality, such as whether women should obey their husbands, whether girls should do more housework than boys, or whether boys can play with dolls. What may be inferred from such a complex picture is the need for increased and targeted efforts to making gender equality more practical instead of remaining abstract, for example by encouraging egalitarian views and practices between partners, gender-neutral toys and play, and by advocating for fathers and sons to do more housework.



Recognising vulnerability in boyhood also hints at the fact that preventing men's violence against women and children should be coupled with men's violence against other men. There seems to be less probabilities in preventing and reducing violence against women and children if violence against men is not prevented and reduced. Vice versa, there seems to be lower probabilities in preventing and reducing violence against men if violence against women and children is not prevented and reduced.

A comprehensive strategy against violence in different forms, inclusive of males and females, is therefore imperative. As far as men who are fathers are concerned, the vulnerability of men implies the need to consider both the violence that fathers commit against others and the violence they suffer from others.

While women and girls are the majority of victims of sexual offences, males are disproportionately represented in homicides in South Africa than in other countries. Whilst comparatively less research exists on perpetrators of violence than on victims of violence, available research suggests that one of the risks men face is other men's violence.

There is one study<sup>41</sup> that is among the few that reported on perpetrators as well as circumstances leading to death. Similar to women and children, men were most often killed by other men. Studies suggested that men were most likely to kill other men than kill women or children. Considering that men's violence against other men, women, and children "is shaped within a crucible of inequalities simultaneously gendered, racialised

and classed, intersecting with discrimination based on age and sexuality", it has been suggested that understanding men's violence against others demands a complex analysis of men's positioning in society.<sup>42</sup>

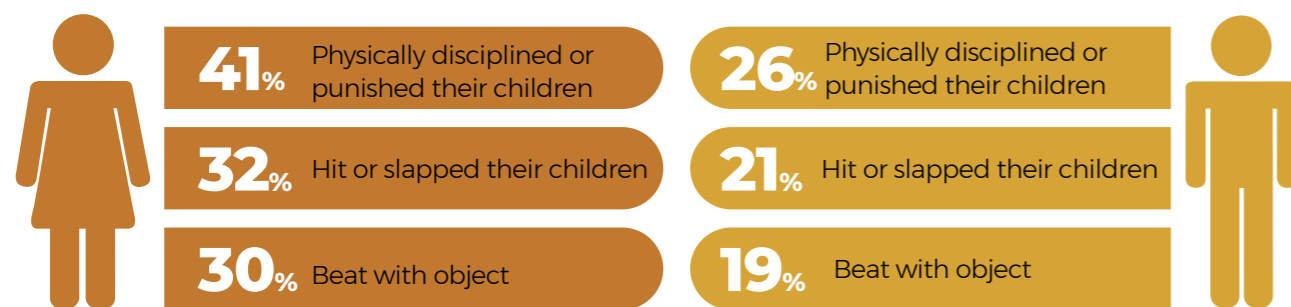
**Research on fatherhood and violence**

While there is research on circumstances associated with homicidal and sexual violence against and by males, not much research exists on violence perpetrated by fathers or against fathers. In other words, there is an evidence gap in research that examines the nexus between violence and fathers. This gap in studies of violence is not addressed in research on fathers and fatherhood, at least not yet. The problem facing South Africa is that, while global data and reports on fathers and fatherhood have grown, including reports on the State of the World's Fathers<sup>43</sup>, we are only at the beginning of researching fathers, let alone making fatherhood policy<sup>44</sup>.

The 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey asked parents or guardians one direct question about parenting and violence, namely "if they have done the following in the past 12 months to discipline or punish their children: hit or slapped them with a hand or hit or beat them using a belt, spoon, stick, shoe, or any other implement".<sup>45</sup>

Figure 26 illustrates the respondents' use of physical discipline or punishment, either with a hand or with another implement, as were reported by women and men (aged 15 – 49 years) who lived with one or more children.

Figure 26: Caregivers' use of physical discipline or punishment, by gender, 2016



Source: Department of Health, Statistics South Africa, South African Medical Research Council & ICF. (2019). *South African Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. Department of Health, Statistics South Africa, South African Medical Research Council & ICF.

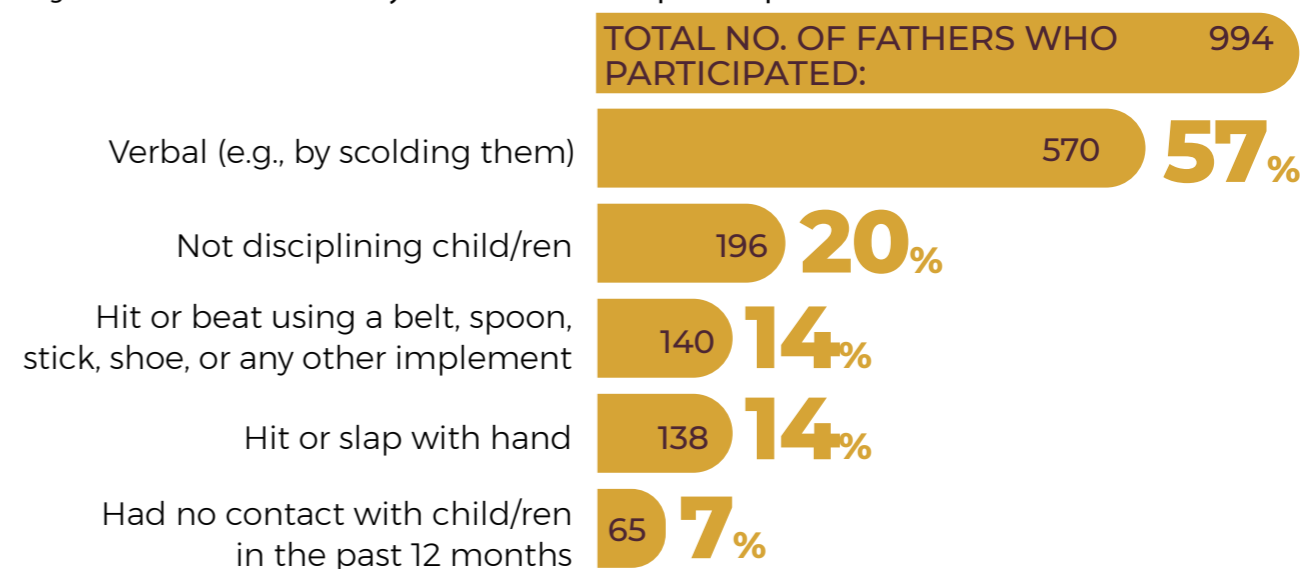
Forty-one percent of women and 26% of men aged 15 – 49 with one or more children less than age 18 living with them physically disciplined or punished their children, either with a hand or with another implement, during the 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>46</sup> Women and men were slightly more likely to hit or slap their children (32% and 21%, respectively) than to hit or beat them using a belt, spoon, stick, shoe, or other implement (30% and 19%, respectively).<sup>47</sup>

The SOSAF 2021 survey also asked fathers about disciplining their children. The survey asked, "Which of the following are true for you?" Respondents were offered five answers to choose as many as were applicable to them for the 12 months before the survey.

As illustrated in figure 27, verbal disciplining was used by the majority (57%) of fathers who participated in the survey, while one in five said they did not discipline their children at all.

The use of physical force to discipline children by different means was reported by a smaller percentage of participants, which is a concern because some of the fathers might not view such acts as violence given that corporal punishment is a persistent and minimised reality for children (even though it is legally outlawed in the home as well now).

Figure 27: SOSAF 2021 survey fathers' use of discipline or punishment



Vice versa, there seems to be lower probabilities in preventing and reducing violence against men if violence against women and children is not prevented and reduced.

The SOSAF 2021 survey was also interested in the participating fathers' experiences of violence when they were children, including sexual abuse. The survey asked, "Which of the following are true for you?" Respondents were given different responses to choose.

Figure 28 shows that 46% of the fathers reported being hit or beaten by hand; and 54% reported being disciplined by a belt, spoon, stick, shoe, or other implement. Verbal disciplining was reported by 41% of the respondents. Nine percent (9%) said they were not disciplined. Two percent (2%) reported sexual abuse.

The survey also measured experiences of violence by and against participants' current or previous partners by presenting them with possible responses to choose.

Most men (69%) said they have not inflicted violence against a current or previous partner or had violence inflicted on them. Verbal abuse by a partner was reported by 17% of the respondents and verbal abuse against a partner by 11% (see figure 29).

Figure 28: SOSAF 2021 survey respondents' experiences of violence as a child

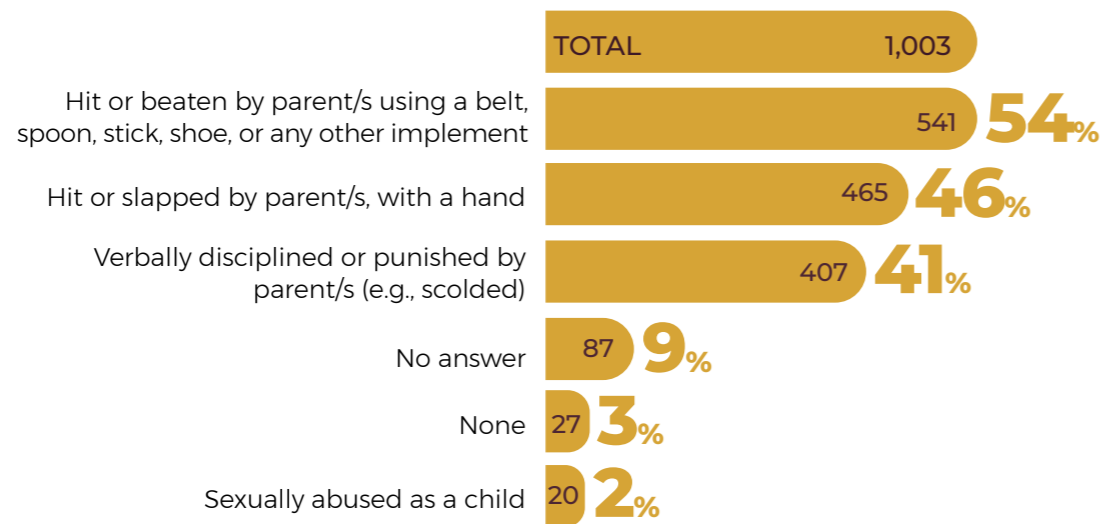
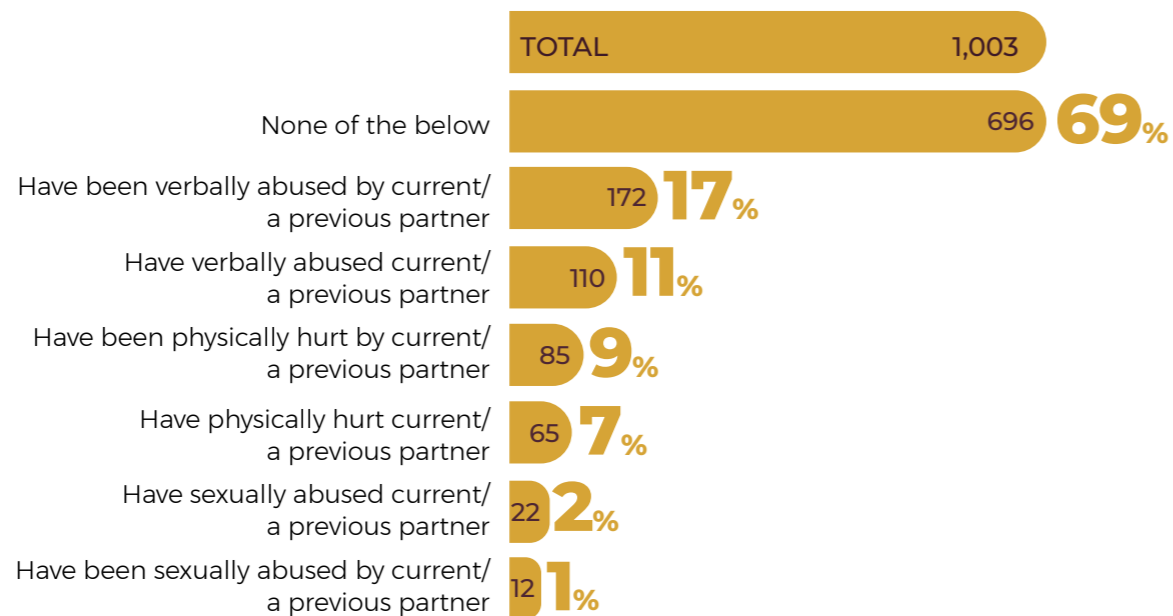


Figure 29: SOSAF 2021 respondents' experiences of intimate partner violence



## Conclusion and recommendations

The South African reality is of a country pervaded by violence in many forms. Some are visible (e.g., physical violence) while others are invisible (e.g., epistemological violence). Direct, visible homicidal forms of violence affect males more than females. Given that such violence predominantly kills men in their 20s – 40s, the victims of direct violence will include men who are fathers. As we do not have unambiguous evidence of fathers as victims or perpetrators of violence, such empirical studies are needed.

While there is a steadily growing literature on fathers and fatherhood<sup>48</sup>, more studies are required. Specifically, there is a need for quantitative and qualitative research on violence by and on fathers. Such studies also need to privilege theory and concepts from lived experience, meaning explanations and ideas situated in the social facts of fatherhood and men as fathers, along with experiences of children and women from their own perspectives.

Fathers as violence victims and perpetrators are

yet to be of concern to the state – thus, it does not seem if there is a plan to deal with violence in all its forms. Despite the new strategy against gender-based violence and femicide, the fact that some forms of (grave) violence in South Africa disproportionately affect men calls for both an evidence-based understanding to help inform a well-articulated, encompassing and effective strategy to drastically reduce violence in all its forms. Such a plan must address not just male homicide and femicide, but also sexual violence wherever it happens (including in intimate relationships and prisons), violence against children, violence against the elderly, violence on farms, xenophobic violence, and suicide.

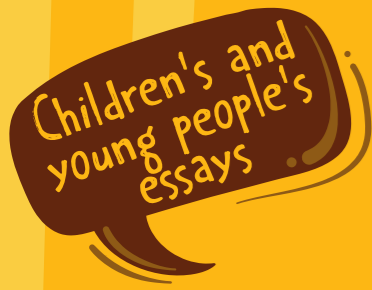
The lack of such a broad anti-violence strategy is revealed by the fact that violence is not abating, and in some cases are increasing. The inability of the state to deal with violence implies that there is a lack of understanding of the causes, pathways, and dynamics of violence – and not only direct but also indirect, and not only personal but also structural violence. In the absence of such a comprehensive understanding of violence, changes in the magnitude and distribution of violence rates cannot be adequately measured and explained.



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# The white king

**Author:** Karabo Nwamusi

Nor did the taboo of mixed marriages fade the love you had for me.

It was 1999 when you fell in love with mom, in the City of Gold. The “how can black and white blend together” didn’t make you back down but cemented your love for one another.

Five years later the power of your love prepared a foetus – soon to be called your princess – in the world of racial injustice.

Happiness was hard to reveal itself the minute your family knew that you were expecting a baby girl with a black woman. Mom was told to migrate to a new place, or blood would be shed.

The village of Qwa Qwa was the place of my birth. Even though you missed the moment, you made sure that you arrived to witness the growth of your princess.

Your young soul escaped home leaving many opportunities in the city, just to settle in the village with not so much knowledge of the environment. This is one of the reasons I admire you.

You worked so hard on the farm, be it rainy or sunny days. You always woke up before the rooster – just to see me go to school.

The little cents you had were enough to give mom a dignified funeral. Even though it was hard for you to move on. You always encouraged me to do more in life.

Your coughing at night worried my soul, but you told me that everything was fine. “It’s just a little bit of flu,” you stated.

You always made sure that no one messed with my crown. It was neat on each of my primary school days. All thanks to you. I still embrace it.

You were the best cook when it came to western food, even mom would get jealous sometimes, but she always knew that her throne was with indigenous food.

The cough that gave you problems took you away from me. But Dad, you said everything was fine. You said it was “just a little bit of flu”. But the “flu” swept your spirit away from me.

Now it’s time for your grown princess to introduce herself to your family as their blood. I will go there with courage and respect just the way you have taught me.

It will be up to them if they accept me – a combination of black and white. Courage and respect as I said is what I will go with.

If I could call heaven, I would tell you the good news.

*This was a winning essay in the 'My Father' competition by the FunDza Literacy Trust in collaboration with Heartlines. It was originally published on fundza.mobi*

# MENTAL HEALTH OF FATHERS

Tawanda Makusha & Kopano Ratele

## Chapter 7

# Mental health of fathers

Tawanda Makusha, Human Sciences Research Council; Kopano Ratele, Stellenbosch University

## KEY MESSAGES

- The mental health of fathers, with emphasis on mental healthcare services and access improvements, needs to be promoted.
- Fathers' mental health has been linked to adverse effects on maternal and child health and development, including negative socio-emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioural outcomes in children.
- Several factors lead to depression among fathers before and after a child's birth, including their partner's depression, relationship problems, lack of social support, economic anxiety, low level of education, low-income level, increased work-life conflict, and low self-esteem.
- Fathers' perinatal depression negatively affects baby care and bonding, as depressed men display fewer positive behaviours such as sensitivity, warmth, and responsiveness, and increased negative behaviours such as hostility and disengagement.
- To avoid or mitigate the effects of adverse events working their way from the father to the mother and the child, fathers need gender-specific mental healthcare and support for their own needs.

Becoming a father is a critical turning point in the lifecourse of men. On learning of the pregnancy or birth of their child, men make a choice to be involved or uninvolved in the child's life. For some men, adoptive fathers, and fathers who become parents via surrogacy, the choice comes at the moment when they decide to have a child.

Research on the determinants of father involvement in South Africa acknowledges that becoming a father can be a crossroad for most men – away from individualistic privileging of one's own needs towards an increasing sense of personal responsibility and even self-reflection that initiate positive behaviour changes.<sup>1</sup> This epiphanic moment to bear responsibility for others has a protective effect on men's health. If the couple live together, a father's testosterone – the sex hormone responsible for things like muscle mass, production of sperm, and sex drive – levels decline and synchronise with the hormonal levels of the mother, with the accompanying changes in behaviour. The hormonal changes are thought to underlie the father's dedication to the mother and the partnership during pregnancy as well as at birth, underpinning the formation of loving and caring father-child bonds during infancy.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside the decision that men must make at the 'responsibility crossroad', there is evidence that the transition to fatherhood can be complex and demanding. Pregnancy and the birth of a child can have a negative impact on men's mental health, causing distress, anxiety, depression, and withdrawal.<sup>3</sup> Fathers' mental health needs as a whole ought to be

<sup>1</sup> See the note (i) in the Introduction chapter, p. 20, about the use of the terms 'Black', 'White', and 'Coloured' in this report.

understood in the larger context within which social, interpersonal, and subjective factors intersect.

Men's gender ideas are only one of a set of key facts to be kept in mind in comprehending the mental health needs of fathers. Affordable, quality mental health services, however, are not widely available in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Black<sup>i</sup>, poor and low-income, and rural areas are particularly ill-provisioned. Hence, men's mental health as a social good and of potential benefit to their children – and possibly more so when it comes to men from the majority race group – is not regarded as a priority. Making the case for mental health in deprived areas to reach low-income and poor Black men may thus be difficult but essential.

A consideration of fathers' mental health needs and access to mental health services must acknowledge the diversity of men in terms of, among others, not only racial identity, socio-economic status, occupation, and geographic location, but also nationality, citizenship, cultural and ethnic belonging, disability, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, educational level. These group-level and individual factors independently and jointly shape the lives of fathers, specifically their mental health, in different ways.

We make a call here to promote the mental health of fathers, with emphasis on mental healthcare services and access improvements. As already noted, there is recognition that mental health provision is skewed when it is not altogether poor. The social structuring of gender adds another dimension to the picture of mental services provision and access, with global research indicating that Black, less educated, and poor men were less likely to access mental health services – if such services were available.<sup>5</sup> Psychotherapy, for instance, was considered a White middle-class indulgence, even though the people who can use therapeutic support are concentrated among the poor.<sup>6</sup>

**Expectant and new fathers, like pregnant women and new mothers, experience biological and ecological stressors, including changes to hormone concentrations and brain circuits, that can increase their risk of depressive symptoms.**

Colonialism and apartheid both were centrally defined by violent dispossession and oppression, but South Africa is very neglectful when it comes to healing the old and ongoing traumas of its people. The neglect of trauma from that past was left largely intact by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was intended to address historical human rights abuses.<sup>7</sup> And violence, inequality, unemployment, poverty, lack of adequate housing, and hunger remain serious problems in the post-apartheid era. As such, historical and contemporary social and economic problems have converged in contributing towards chronic trauma, one result of which is repetitive eruptions of violence.<sup>8</sup>

This reality calls for increased, appropriate, equitable access to mental healthcare services for men alongside services for women. This approach requires a shift away from common, erroneous assumptions of men's blanket privilege over women in terms of

access to healthcare services. As part of this call, we discuss fathers' mental health and its association to maternal and child outcomes; mental health and fatherhood; the South African story; and why it is important to promote fathers' mental health.

## The importance of fathers' mental health

Fathers' mental health has been linked to adverse effects on maternal and child health and development, including a variety of negative socio-emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioural outcomes in children.<sup>9</sup> Despite this knowledge, the importance of promoting fathers' mental health is not widely or fully acknowledged and is seldom researched in South Africa and other parts of Africa.

We are not aware of routine screening of fathers' mental health before or after the birth of the child in South Africa. Men's anxiety about becoming fathers is similarly neglected. The healthcare system has largely focused on maternal and child health, often completely overlooking men's health – and specifically mental health. Where mental health interventions for fathers are available, it is not always possible to tell how well they engage with these services. This situation makes psychiatric disorders – or simply emotional or mental health issues – among fathers difficult to detect and manage. And yet, detection of depression, stress, and anxiety – and receiving suitable support from the healthcare system in the prenatal period – is known to reduce fathers' risk of mental distress.

The valuable role of men in the lives of children and women has been and is increasingly acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> Men have a direct and indirect impact on family health and wellbeing. Father-child relationships, in all communities and at all stages of a child's life, have profound and wide-ranging impacts on children that last a lifetime, whether these relationships are based on father presence or not, and whether they are positive

or negative.<sup>11</sup> Men's participation as fathers, partners and as caregivers also has significant implications for women's satisfaction with motherhood and their health and wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, fatherhood positively affects the lives of men themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Expectant and new fathers, like pregnant women and new mothers, experience biological and ecological stressors, including changes to hormone concentrations and brain circuits, that can increase their risk of depressive symptoms.<sup>14</sup> Although paternal mental health does not expose children's pre-birth development to the same physiological risks as maternal depression during pregnancy, paternal genetic and psychological factors may act on the child directly during conception and after birth, and indirectly on maternal wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> To avoid or mitigate the effects of adverse events working their way from the father to the mother and the child, fathers need gender-specific mental healthcare and support for their own needs.

Maternal depression before and after birth has been recognised as a major public health problem globally, with prevalence rates between 10% and 20%. Maternal depression was associated with increased adverse maternal, infant or child, and family outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Given the high rates of maternal depression, nearly all research and interventions have largely focused on maternal health, with little attention on men's mental health and its impact on father involvement, maternal and child health and wellbeing.

However, there are some promising developments, with studies in high-income countries in the past two decades beginning to show the necessity of promoting men's mental health throughout the entire perinatal period.<sup>17</sup> Interesting research from around the world is now available. Globally, it is estimated that 2.3% to 12% of fathers experience perinatal depression<sup>18</sup> and approximately 5% to 15% experience perinatal anxiety.<sup>19</sup>

Several factors lead to depression among fathers before and after a child's birth, including their partner's depression, relationship problems, lack of social support, economic anxiety, low level of education, low-income level, increased work-life conflict, and low self-esteem.<sup>20</sup>

Fathers' perinatal depression has been linked independently to adverse effects on maternal and child health and development, including a variety of negative socio-emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioural outcomes in children.<sup>21</sup> Newborns of fathers with depression and anxiety are at greater risk of being born preterm and with low birth weight. Fathers' perinatal depression also negatively affects baby care and bonding, as depressed men display fewer positive behaviours such as sensitivity, warmth, and responsiveness, together with increased negative behaviours such as hostility and disengagement.<sup>22</sup> Research has also shown that the mental health of fathers and mothers was modestly correlated, and early paternal depressive symptoms predict worsening or continuing maternal depressive symptoms.<sup>23</sup>

## Mental health and fatherhood: The South African story

There are multiple factors that make South Africa unique compared to Western, English speaking contexts when focusing on mental health among fathers. Chief among these factors is the difficulty in measuring mental health problems such as depression due to issues associated with language and cultural differences in the country. Cultural variations in the nature and meaning of depressive experiences have critical implications for assessment, diagnosis or classification, and treatment. This is because cultural variations influence epistemology, personhood, self, body, health and illness, normality, and a spectrum of social and interactive behaviours.<sup>24</sup>

Stigma is also a major barrier in testing for and treating depression. While the statement should be critically regarded as it homogenises African culture, the South African Depression and Anxiety states that:

**“In Zulu, there is not even a word for ‘depression’ – it’s basically not deemed a real illness in the African culture. As a result, sufferers are afraid of being discriminated against, disowned by their families, or even fired from work, should they admit to having a problem. There is still the perception that someone with a mental illness is crazy, dangerous, or weak. Because there is often an absence of physical symptoms with mental illness, it is considered ‘not real’, a figment of the imagination.”<sup>25</sup>**

Mental health stigma therefore hinders a full comprehension of the magnitude and distribution of mental health problems and their potential prevention. Psychiatric and psychological health services and access to these are complicated by the intertwining or convergence of culture, language, and stigma.

As discussed in previous chapters, South Africa also has very high rates of biological fathers living separately from their children, with over two thirds of children living in households without their biological fathers.<sup>26</sup> Studies have shown that father absence during childhood increased the risk of paternal depression and anxiety among fathers.<sup>27</sup> However, co-residency on its own does not guarantee the mental wellbeing of fathers: men may have experienced violence and child abuse within their own parental home that was never addressed. A history of abuse in childhood, which is commonly associated with high rates of violence against women and children in the country, puts fathers at risk of paternal depression and anxiety.<sup>28</sup>

There is little local research thus far on the mental health of fathers specifically. The SOSAF 2021 survey is the first relatively large study to

probe paternal mental health. In the survey, fathers were asked about their mental health. One of the questions posed was, "Which of the following have you experienced in the last six months? Select all that apply".

Forty-eight percent of the fathers indicated feeling down, depressed, or hopeless in the six months before the survey. Lack of motivation was reported by 45% of the fathers. Having little interest or pleasure in doing things was reported by 40% of the respondents. Only 14% of the men reported not experiencing any of the mental health issues listed (see figure 30).

South Africa's high rates of poverty (56%)<sup>29</sup> and unemployment (33%)<sup>30</sup> undermine men's involvement in families, both materially and psychologically. Provision is a deeply entrenched

part of the masculine identity and being unable to provide financial and material resources has significant negative impacts on men's sense of identity, self-esteem, and confidence. South Africa also has very high rates of HIV prevalence: 13% among the whole population and 19% for adults aged 15 – 49 years.<sup>31</sup> These factors negatively affect men's mental health.

While paternal deaths are not recorded in the death registration data, fathers apparently face an increased risk of suicide in the perinatal period. In South Africa, an average of 18 men commit suicide each day – translating into 540 men per month, or 6,480 annually<sup>32</sup> – and these deaths are likely to be associated with mental illness. These levels highlight the importance of supporting men to break masculine gender stereotypes and encourage them to step out

of prescribed societal gender roles which teach them to 'stay strong as men do not cry'.

A recent South African study<sup>33</sup> provided evidence on the importance of mental health assessment and onward referral for partners of expecting parents who are accessing routine antenatal clinics. Specifically, the study focused on perinatal mental health services and planned new services that will target mental health difficulties related to the maternity experience, such as fear of childbirth, perinatal loss, traumatic birth, and childcare and support.

To guide evidence-based implementation of routine screening and referral for fathers' mental health in South Africa, it is important to use culturally, contextually and gender-sensitive tools for measuring mental health. Such an approach can ensure the correct identification of those with and without mental health disorders and avoid the likelihood of false positives (wrongly identifying those who do not need help for further referral) and false negatives (wrongly identifying those who need assistance as not needing further referral). Sensitisation on the importance of mental health screening and referral for fathers is critical for both policy and service implementers, and for fathers who would receive the interventions.

### Why is it important to promote fathers' mental health?

Promoting fathers' mental health is important not only for men's own health and wellbeing, but also the health and wellbeing of their partners and that of their children. Raising awareness about the mental health of fathers is critical because the cost of mental health disorders is likely to be substantial given that depression and anxiety in either parent may lead to couple conflict and poorer child outcomes, as well as poorer outcomes for both parents. Fathers who are mentally healthy

are more likely to be more involved with their children and supportive to their partners than fathers who are depressed and anxious.<sup>34</sup> In recent years, we have witnessed strong impetus for researchers and public health implementers to be more inclusive of and responsive to diversity among men, and in particular fathers.

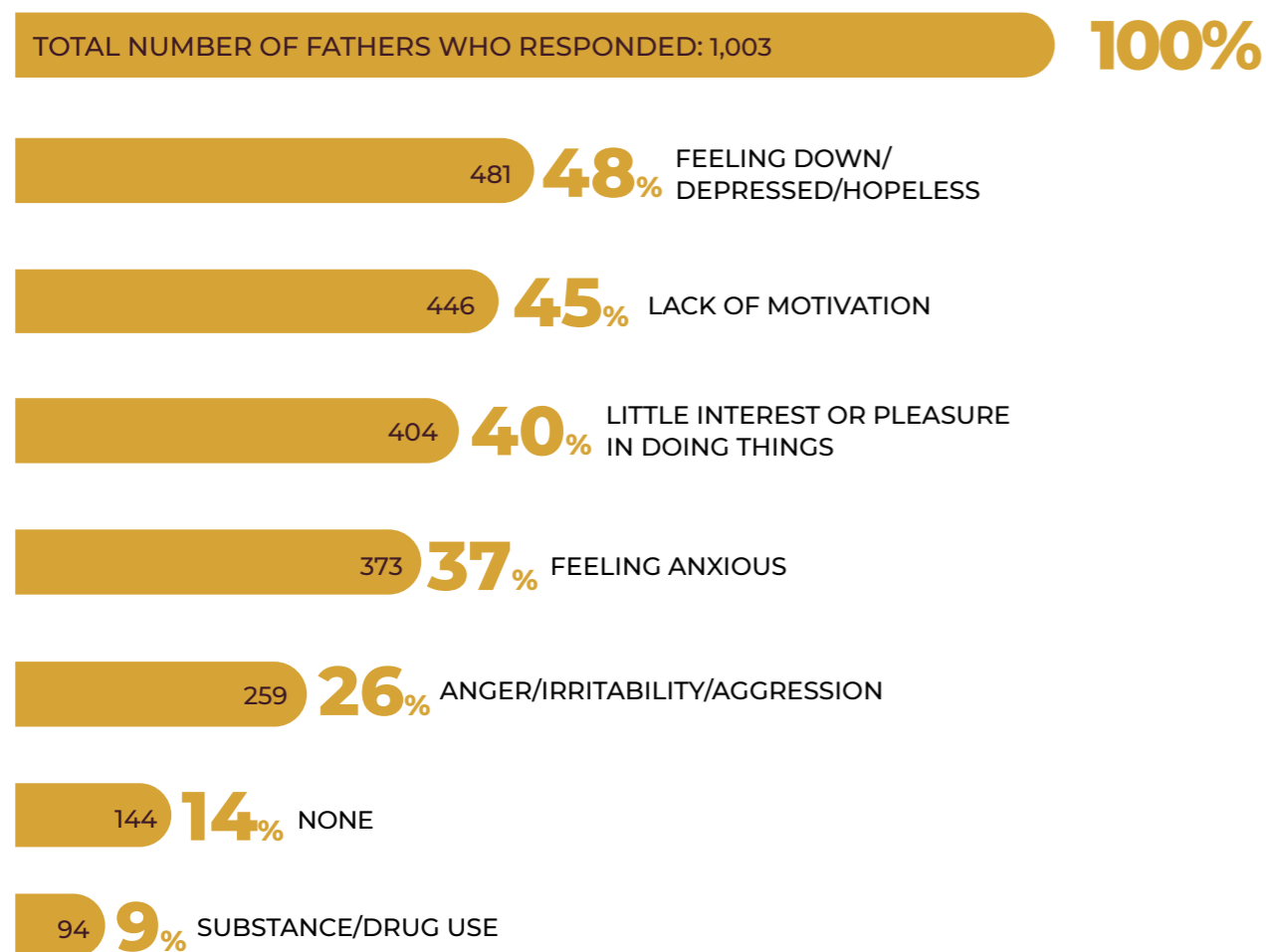
There is an important link between mental health and violence. A costing study<sup>35</sup> has pointed to some worthwhile results in this regard by showing the possible savings if different forms of violence against South Africa's children (VAC) were prevented (see also discussion in chapter 6). As far as estimated reductions related to mental health are concerned, for example if physical VAC was prevented, the researchers found that, in the entire population, serious mental illness could decline by 10%; anxiety and alcohol abuse could decline by 13%; and self-harm could decline by 23%.

Of special interest is that the study also focused on emotional violence (where a person frightens, controls, or isolates another to undermine their self-esteem) as a problem as serious as physical violence, but one that tends to receive less attention in local studies on violence and almost no attention in studies on fathers and fatherhood. A reason for this neglect is that incidents of physical or sexual violence are relatively easier to identify than experiences of emotional abuse. At the same time, the effects of emotional violence tend to be minimised.

In other words, emotional abuse tends to be more slippery, and its effects tend to be dismissed compared to those of sexual or physical abuse. The study estimated that the following reductions could be made for the entire population if emotional violence were prevented.

- Serious mental illness could be reduced by 5%.
- Anxiety could be reduced by 10%.

Figure 30: SOSAF 2021 survey fathers' psychosocial state over the preceding six months



- Alcohol abuse could be reduced by 4% (and by 3% among men).
- Drug abuse could be reduced by 5%.
- Interpersonal violence could be reduced by 3%.
- Self-harm could be reduced by 15%.

Taking fatherhood as simultaneously an individual, social, and relational experience and category, we advocate for the recognition of multidimensionality, dynamism, and diversity in designing mental health interventions for fathers.

A still-dominant view is that all men are the same (and therefore all fathers are all the same). This view not only essentialises fatherhood – particularly fatherhood among poor and working-class men – but also presents a stereotypical idea of men by creating notions that men who are fathers share certain natural characteristics or blueprints that make or ought to make them uniform.

The fact is that society is moving beyond the notion of one-size-fits-all fatherhood that presents fathers as a monolithic group that is dominant over women to a focus more inclusive of and responsive to diversity. Moving beyond the binary investigation of men and fatherhood, we need to explore the many intersections (and fragmentations) that exist within the human identity spectrum and present the complex nature of men's practices and health. We cannot study paternal mental health issues in South Africa in isolation of colonialism, racial subjugation, gender privilege, ethnicity and class which create multidimensional conceptions of fatherhood. These historical, social, and cultural processes of change rather than proximal factors are critical in the focus on the mental health of fathers in South Africa.

We acknowledge the significance of public health in influencing change at an individual level because changing people does shift social

structures. However, we also need to appreciate the social sciences making us aware of the importance of structural and social reforms that facilitate individual-level public health transformation. We need to acknowledge the differences among fathers and recognise fatherhood as a social construction that goes beyond conception and is shaped and in constant interaction with other determinants such as social contexts, culture, and structural factors that do not always provide an individual with 'free choice'.<sup>36</sup> Social and structural determinants of health often limit and constrain the choices available to individuals in respective circumstances.

For example, while working-class men may want to access healthcare facilities for mental health screening, they might not be able to do so due to the same working hours that coincide with the clinic service hours. In this instance, due to structural power issues outside of their own control, working-class men must make choices according to the immediate priorities. These conflicts usually take place and are reinforced by private healthcare models that promote neoliberal messages of self-care, independence, and self-blame.

In South Africa complex relationships between structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment, mental health, and father involvement are apparent. Poverty, inequality, and unemployment are clear drivers of poor mental health and substance misuse, including excessive alcohol consumption and depression. In turn, fathers with problematic alcohol use, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders are more likely to be perpetrators of physical intimate partner violence due to stress placed on the partnership because of the men's inability to assume the provider role in the household. Such intimate partner violence leads to negative maternal and child outcomes. Fathers in abusive relationships are most likely to not provide self-care, are more likely to be depressed, less likely to provide adequate

It is estimated that, globally, 2.3% to 12% of fathers experience perinatal depression and approximately 5% to 15% experience perinatal anxiety.

childcare for their children, and more likely to be violent to their children.<sup>37</sup>

It is widely accepted in critical studies on men and masculinity that there are differences among men (and therefore fathers) within and across class, age, nationality, bodily ability, ethnicity, sexualities, race, and other social categories.<sup>38</sup> An equally important insight from this body of work is that masculinity – and therefore fatherhood – is a social-psychological practice that is not the invention of the individual man but arises from historically dependent social relations.<sup>39</sup> As fatherhood is a practice constituted through the discursive categorisation such as those noted above, a man cannot understand themselves or be understood outside these social identities. Discourses available within society influence how people are perceived and perceive themselves – for instance what being a father means to them – what they practise, and how they look after themselves and provide care for others (see also chapter 6).

Given that the fatherhood identity is shaped in relation to other social-psychological identities, the mental health determinants within and across subgroups of fathers – for example, within and across young, or affluent, or Tsonga, or gay, or Northern Cape fathers – must not be carelessly generalised to all men.



In any society and subgroup within society, there exist multiple and dynamic material and discursive conditions that shape fatherhood and mental health. While they sometimes may run parallel to each other or be mutually supportive, these conditions may also run counter to and contradict one another, impacting fathers and their mental health in intricate and inconsistent ways.

Hence, in seeking to promote the mental health of fathers it is critical to appreciate that not all men are the same, are impacted by their conditions in different ways, and that fathers from different settings and backgrounds may require unique interventions to fight mental health disorders or promote psychosocial wellbeing. Furthermore, in enhancing the mental health of fathers there is also a need for awareness that discourses are always shifting and therefore require readiness to change on the part of those who are working with men.

The impact of structural factors such as group categories, power dynamics, resources and health and their association are well documented. Most fatherhood interventions in South Africa have focused on poor Black people, particularly in high unemployment and poorly resourced communities, because they disproportionately experience negative

**Studies have shown that father absence during childhood increased the risk of paternal depression and anxiety among fathers.**

health outcomes due to multilayered inequalities and their limited access to community health and material resources. This lack of material resources, influenced by contextual and structural factors, shapes men's mental health outcomes and in turn their 'identities' by restricting their agency and access to their healthcare. In this regard, social contexts, and local resources available, may determine how men experience public health – in particular, the processes of health inequity across the health services spectrum.

Social group membership must not be regarded as a proxy for mental health risk, as the risk is largely associated with individual behaviour and circumstances rather than group identity. Therefore, while targeting might be considered critical to promoting paternal mental health among the most vulnerable men, we risk cementing the oppositional notions that 'powerful men' who occupy positions of influence in structural and social hierarchies are privileged and not in jeopardy and therefore do not need to change or require mental health interventions. By failing to acknowledge the heterogeneity within groups, this assumption of privilege may be detrimental to some fathers who belong to this category.

While acknowledging that more needs to be done in addressing the individual, structural and social contexts, such as unemployment, income inequality and poverty, we need to be careful that the oversimplification of conceptualisations of mental health programmes for fathers in terms of socio-economic hierarchies might make it difficult to establish equitable solutions.

Finally, given the prevalence of the ethos of ubuntu/botho – being human, usually expressed in the axiom 'I am because we are' – across many ethnic/cultural groups in South Africa, it may be helpful to embed the promotion of fathers' mental health in the spirit of ubuntu.

Ubuntu/botho already conveys notion of being-for-others, care, solidarity, love and selflessness<sup>40</sup>; thus, locating the focus on fathers' mental health within the moral universe of ubuntu/botho may shift most men to practise more care toward others, including children and partners, and to themselves. That caring practice would include paying more attention to others' – and their own – mental health.

## Conclusion and recommendations

A clearer understanding of how fathers' mental health shapes the mental, physical, behavioural, and emotional development of their children may lead to new opportunities for paternal mental health interventions which promote equity in the healthcare system. Fatherhood and mental health are embedded in multilevel and overlapping social structures which play an important role in determining men's health practices – including promotion of maternal and child health.

Multiple factors, including individual characteristics and the environment, are always at play in determining people's lives and their mental health experiences. This consideration avoids essentialist notions that all men are the same. Anchoring on the political economy of health framework, our response is that mental health issues are not a result of biological make-up but because of historical, social, and structural factors. These drivers have shaped the direction, extent, and character of mental health issues in South Africa and have a huge impact in shaping an individual's healthcare priorities.

For disadvantaged groups of men (and fathers), mental health interventions and practice should focus on empowering them personally and financially to change the

conditions in which people live. This ensures that people generate and maintain better mental health outcomes in the long run. These interventions should not be 'a means to an end' but should provide actual solutions on how best to reach and assist the most vulnerable. There should be coherence in terms of interventions from an individual, community, service, and policy level.

Lastly, we cannot have discussions about mental health promotion for fathers in South Africa without focusing on gender and gender transformation. We need to understand the mental health processes and determinants in the struggle against poverty, inequality, unemployment, and the fight for social justice. Considering the diversity among fathers, it is important to press towards the creation of public health environments that promote gender transformative and equitable interventions. To be sociologically guided, unbiased, and more inclusive of men (and women) from all contexts, policymakers, researchers, the media, and implementers of mental health programmes should shift from narrow political, activist ideologies that are anti-male and which present men as inherently problematic in their framing.

In their heterogeneity, African men (fathers) require to be supported and validated for their lived experiences, which provide opportunities for them to explore multiple intersections of their fatherhood identities comfortably, including their mental health, sexuality, socio-economic status, age, and gender expressions.

# A battle with depression

Anonymous<sup>ii</sup>

I was 34 years old when, suddenly, things changed in me. I had a great job as an operational risk manager in an insurance company, newly married with a two-year-old son, living a good life in the suburbs. Suddenly I started not feeling like myself, which I noticed after a few weeks. I was feeling tired, slept a lot, lost interest in intimate moments with my wife, felt like being on my own all the time.

It felt like something had shifted emotionally in me and I felt a deep sadness that was not going away but got worse over time. I felt like I was losing control of myself, which was the worst feeling as a father and as a man as I could not explain to myself what was causing it. As a father and as a husband there was a lot of responsibility on my shoulders. I did not have the energy to play with my son whom I love so much, and he was an energetic toddler at the time. I felt guilty for not feeling like playing with him upon my arrival from work and felt like a bad father. Everything I did felt heavy and draining and accompanied by constant sadness.

I lived with a confusion of dreading going to work because of the energy required while I had so many bills to pay and a future to build for my son. As a father I was supposed to show my son how to be a man, but I was weak. I used to cry on my way to work, unable to shake off the sadness. I was physically not sick, except for constant tiredness. Silence became my place to hide while falling apart inside, which caused a lot of conflict in my family.

As time went on, I would feel like crying daily, with deepening sadness. That's when I started to struggle with going to work, but I kept going because I did not know what I would say was wrong with me. My world was caving in, and I had no control of it, closing my son and wife out. I used to spend my driving time, to and from work, crying. Sometimes I would stop on the roadside to cry out bouts of sadness that were heavy, mornings and evenings. Anything that needed to be fixed in the house, or find a solution to, was just too big to handle. For about five months I felt continuously helpless and useless but could not utter a word to anyone for fear of being judged and rejected. Sometimes the possibility of not living felt like a better option than feeling this way, but the thought of not being able to see my son grow stopped me.

It was by chance that my wife and I were chatting to a family friend who worked as a counsellor when my wife happened to mention how I had been over the past few months – without going into details. I was mortified. I wanted a hole in which to hide as these were things that had

<sup>ii</sup>The case was written by a 45-year-old PhD student who is a father of two children and who is conducting a study on fatherhood. He was asked to provide a case on his research, focusing on fatherhood and health, as a contribution to this report, but decided to share his personal story.

not seen the light of day in terms of being mentioned to anyone. The friend happened to be interested in knowing more and, reluctantly, without wanting to go into details, I mentioned some things I was feeling. She picked up on what could have been wrong. Suspecting it was depression, she suggested that I mention the signs to my doctor. She said the doctor might give me a tablet to take daily which is a lot better than continuously feeling like I had briefly explained.

I had heard of depression but did not have details about it. I consulted my doctor who took me through a questionnaire which I now understand covered the symptoms of depression. She gave me tablets that I needed to take daily in the morning. It took about four months going back and forth with the doctor in adjusting the dosage as earlier ones were not making a difference. It felt like I was constantly facing helplessness, sadness and tiredness. During the journey of back and forth with medication adjustments, I felt like giving up because living under this cloud of sadness continued, but I did not have any other options that would make me feel better. Getting better to be raising my son and looking after my wife was important to me. Those days it felt like I was living next to myself because I had not felt like myself in a long time.

After about three to four months of medication adjustments, I started feeling like myself. I started enjoying playing with my son and still felt the guilt of the time lost while I could not connect with him. During this whole time, none of my friends or siblings knew about my condition. I felt a lot of loneliness as I could not reveal this pain to anyone. How do you explain something that makes you feel like less of a man, weak, useless, a cry-baby and out of control of yourself? I was married with a child, which gives more status in terms of social standing, but I was suffering an internal loss that reduced me to nothing in trying to keep a strong face.

After about a year of feeling like myself again, I started feeling the sadness and the loss of control coming back again – except this time the caving in emotionally came faster, within a few days. My doctor referred me to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist went deeper in trying to find the cause, asking about my family history as well as doing blood tests. My family history revealed that my maternal grandmother had suffered a stress-induced stroke at the age of 19 years and my mother also suffered a worry-induced stroke at the age of 68 years old. As a father my heart sank on the thought that through bloodline, I could pass depression to my children. It is definitely not part of the inheritance I would have wanted to leave them with, which gave me a lot of guilt.

As a father I was supposed to show my son how to be a man, but I was weak. I used to cry on my way to work, unable to shake off the sadness. I was physically not sick, except for constant tiredness.

Another revelation was that the blood tests revealed that my feel-good hormone was way lower than that of a fully functioning person. All this information put me on a different course of medication and again I went deep into that internal pit of unexplainable sadness and feeling lost upon starting new medication. But this time the bouts of sadness disappeared sooner with constant medication. I was also encouraged to start counselling as there were childhood issues that I needed to work through, which over time freed me from emotional pains.

I developed a yearning to help other people who are going through what I had gone through, which is when I joined the South African and Depression and Anxiety Group as a volunteer telephone counsellor. This step became an enabler in understanding myself while helping others.

It has been many years of taking depression medication with adjustment of doses every time the deep sadness resurfaces and making the necessary lifestyle choices. I am now a fully functional father of a 14-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. I worry about the possibility of my children getting depression when they are older; however, I am confident in the coping mechanisms I have learnt, which I can teach them.

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# CONCLUSION: THE DIVERSE AND COMPLEX NATURE OF FATHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

Tawanda Makusha, Wessel van den Berg, & Kopano Ratele

## Chapter 8

## Conclusion: The diverse and complex nature of fatherhood in South Africa

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In this second SOSAF report, we have considered the far-reaching effects of men's engagement in the lives of children and families, as well as effects for men's own lives. We also have underscored the potential impact on society of positive male involvement in children's lives; for instance, in potential savings in future health-related costs.

In addition to the careful work that the authors of the chapters and cases have put in to produce this report, a major contribution of this publication towards understanding the state of fathers and fatherhood in South Africa is in disseminating the findings of the first national survey dedicated to the views and practices of fatherhood from the perspectives of fathers. The survey is a significant step towards developing a more comprehensive view of men as fathers and fatherhood in the country. Given that the survey was unable to generate a representative sample of fathers, it is our intention to have a representative sample in the next iteration of the national survey. We also envisage a greater focus on social fathers and mothers in such a survey or surveys, and to show a representative quantitative assessment of father involvement.

The importance of fathers' participation in childcare is well documented and this report is underpinned by a shared value of greater positive male involvement in children's lives.

To the extent that the economic, cultural, political, legal, and immediate family environments have the potential to encourage or discourage men to participate in the care of children, it is desirable that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers develop and promote measures and policies that enhance fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

The SOSAF 2021 chapters covered a wide range of issues that enable or inhibit the engagement of men in their children's lives. First, we have described father connections and disconnections in varying cultural contexts as well as the impact of connectedness and disconnectedness on father involvement. Second, we have paid attention to the role of social fathers, for example brothers and uncles, and the influence of social class on fathering practices. Third, we focused on economic provision and fatherhood, particularly the tensions of economic provision versus being engaged and nurturing fathers. Fourth, we have sought to disrupt stereotypical notions of fatherhood centred on the narrow focus on the heterosexual nuclear family by focusing on incarcerated, single, gay, and teenage fathers.

Fifth, in considering fatherhood and violence, we have sought to show the impact of the structural environment on how men act, look after themselves, and provide care for others. Finally, we gave an overview of the

mental health of fathers by acknowledging that benefits of father involvement go beyond maternal and child outcomes to benefit men themselves.

The stresses of fatherhood for some men in the context of South Africa is something we are keenly aware of. How these stresses are influenced by various and intersecting sociodemographic characteristics, cultural, and social dynamics, is described in nearly all the chapters of the report.

## Complexities in determining father connections and disconnections

It is critical to address the complexities that determine whether fathers are connected or disconnected in order to promote father involvement in every child's life in South Africa. Father connections and disconnections should not be regarded as determined by father-child residential status. While some fathers may live with their children, they might not have the connection in terms of accessibility, engagement, and availability. On the other hand, those fathers who do not co-reside with their children may be involved.

The determinants of father connections and disconnections also go beyond the parental alienation discourse. While some fathers may argue that the mothers of their children are denying them access – and this might be true – there are also fathers who are given opportunities to access and connect with their children but who may choose not to. We argue that, just as mothers approach the legal system to seek child maintenance from their children's fathers, fathers also have the right to approach the legal system for shared custody or access. The willpower and interests of individuals to fostering connections are important to parenting, and fatherhood, but circumstantial factors also play a significant role.

**It is critical to address the complexities that determine whether fathers are connected or disconnected in order to promote father involvement in every child's life in South Africa.**

## Moving beyond the narrow definition of biological fathers in South Africa

In a country where more than two thirds of children live without their biological father in the same household, we must re-examine the narrow expectation of biological fatherhood tied to a nuclear family. Research and statistics in South Africa continuously have shown that most children live in extended families with at least one adult male present. Different configurations of families, like extended families, need to be unpacked better in our fatherhood research, practical interventions, and policies.

Brothers, uncles, and grandfathers play important kinship-based fatherhood roles that go beyond biological fatherhood roles. We seriously need to start acknowledging the important roles that social fathers in South Africa play in families, even in households where biological fathers are co-resident. Social fathers are an important source of support for children in their families and households. Most of these father figures provide financial, practical, material, and emotional support to children, their mothers, and families.

**Violence perpetrated by fathers takes many forms – including child and partner neglect, emotional, economic, physical, and sexual abuse.**

Structural factors, such as social class, play an important role in determining social fathers' abilities to provide for children. A child who lives in a household with an adult man who is unemployed, and without any form of income, may be worse off in terms of financial support because the unemployed adult man in the household may also be depending on the same resources as the child. This increases the dependency ratio in the household. It is, therefore, imperative that intervention designers and policymakers devise parenting interventions specifically targeting social fathers to inspire the men who live close to children to get more involved in childcare.

## Addressing the competing pressures of fatherhood

Fathers in South Africa are expected by most in society to provide financially. This traditional gender-related social expectation of what being a father entails can be detrimental to men's involvement in their children's lives if they are unemployed or in precarious jobs and feel ashamed by the failure to provide economically.

For some men the shame of not financially providing arises because there recently has

been a push in South Africa, and globally, for fathers to become more engaged and nurturing. These two notions of fatherhood (provision and nurturing) may compete with most men's sense of identity and masculine ideals. The SOSAF 2021 chapters raised important questions in this regard. We know that provision and nurturing are assets in childcare; however, can these be reconciled? If so, how? What choices exist for men who cannot consistently and adequately provide economically? How do fathers show that they care and nurture?

Answers to these questions imply social norms about what is expected of fathers and how fathers believe they ought to behave as fathers. Addressing the competing pressures of fatherhood in South Africa at a societal level will require a total understanding of the widespread variations in geography, socio-economic structures, and culture. Understanding the complex fatherhood roles emanating from the need to provide financially and the need to nurture is critical in resolving the competing pressures of fatherhood at an individual level.

## Dismantling the stereotypical notions of fatherhood

South Africa is a very diverse country. The stereotypical notion of a middle-aged, co-resident, and married heterosexual father does not represent all fathers in the country. The SOSAF 2021 also reported on incarcerated, single, gay, and teenage fathers:

Incarcerated and teenage fathers are often marginalised socially and economically in their children's lives. External factors other than their willingness to be involved in their children's lives impact the quality of the father-child relationship.

Single fatherhood in South Africa has received very little attention from researchers,

implementers, and policymakers in terms of the challenges faced, the unique experiences, and the support needs, almost resulting in systemic neglect.

Social attitudes towards gay fathers have changed dramatically in recent years. Heterosexual identity is no longer viewed as a prerequisite for parenthood. However, gay fathers still face a lot of stigma. They are usually considered unstable, and unfit parents, with assumptions that children need a mother to thrive.

If the goal is to promote positive fatherhood in South Africa, then we should point out the exigency for increased research on incarcerated, single, gay, or teenage fathers. These groups of fathers are dynamic, complex, and have varying experiences that are proportional to the wide diversity in fatherhood in South Africa.

## Understanding fatherhood and violence

South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world. Violence is an individual, relational, and societal matter. Violence perpetrated by fathers takes many forms – including child and partner neglect, emotional, economic, physical, and sexual abuse. We know that gender-based violence and violence against children cause the country massive human and financial losses, but we still do not direct sufficient resources, attention, and efforts to prevent violence effectively in South Africa. This report calls for a more proactive rather than reactionary approach.

The reason for the ongoing high figures of violence against women and children (and men) is that we are still missing an important point – we need effective preventative interventions to end violence. The state needs to be concerned and held accountable. We need to address issues around intergenerational trauma and violence,

including direct and indirect forms of violence by the state, and how these impact on men's abilities to act, take responsibility, take care of themselves, and provide care for their children.

The long history of violence in South Africa during apartheid should no longer be an excuse to the current pandemic of violence. We need comprehensive prevention programmes that challenge men, specifically fathers, rather than condemning them, to engage in gender transformative relations and positive parenting. We also need a supportive state that addresses the current structural violence in place, which often trickles down into the direct forms of violence.

## Mental health of fathers: Dealing with the elephant in the room

The mental health of fathers in South Africa has received very little attention in general. While we have routine mental health screening for pregnant women at antenatal clinics, and for new mothers at postnatal clinics, these services are not extended to fathers (and other women and men). This is despite vast scientific evidence that fathers' perinatal mental health is linked independently to adverse effects on maternal and child health and development, including a variety of negative socio-emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioural outcomes among children.

This underscores the importance of early perinatal healthcare for fathers. While routine mental health screening for fathers attending antenatal and postnatal clinics is a step in the right direction, we also know of the difficulties in getting fathers (and men in general) to access primary healthcare services in South Africa. We need to be innovative and identify pathways that facilitate positive mental health help-seeking among fathers. Fathers' mental health holds inherent benefits for the individual men, while being instrumental to the wellness of their immediate family members. Fathers will

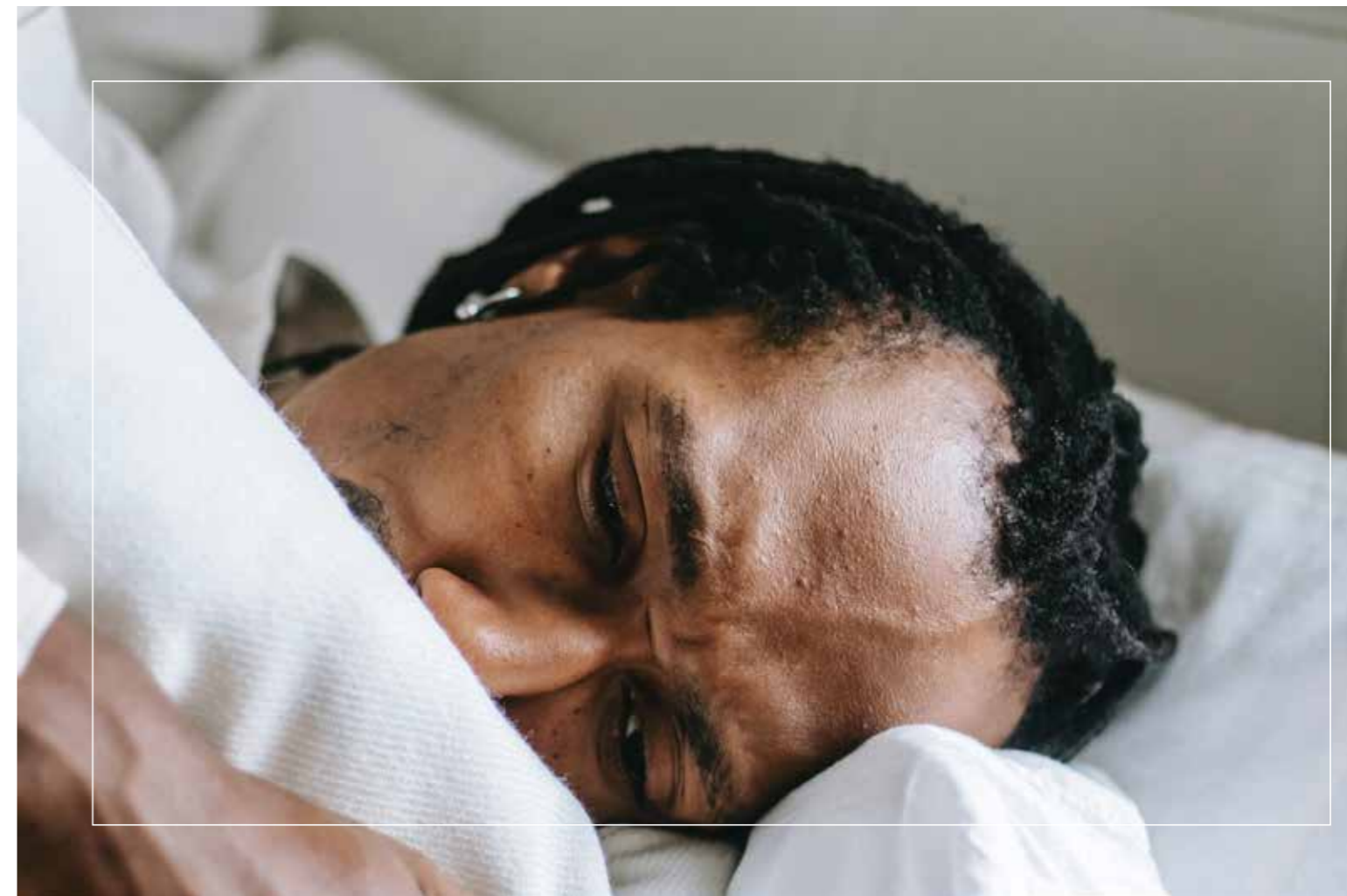
**Fathers' mental health holds inherent benefits for the individual men, while being instrumental to the wellness of their immediate family members.**

benefit from early strategies, support, and interventions on parenting and self-care in the perinatal and early childhood periods. These preventative support strategies and interventions for fathers should focus on the importance of self-care (they need to be well to be able to provide care and support to others); and emotion regulation to manage frustrations, anxiety, stress, and anger during interactions with partners and children.

## Concluding remarks

Fatherhood in South Africa is diverse and complex. Understanding and appreciating this nature of fatherhood in the country enable researchers, implementers, and policymakers to avoid a one-size-fits-all strategy in designing and implementing positive fatherhood programmes. Considering the growing diversity of life-course, relationship, and residency patterns for fathers and their children in South Africa, we emphasise the complexities in defining, understanding, and conceptualising fatherhood in this context.

We need to appreciate that fatherhood in South Africa is a social construction, which is always negotiated according to the dynamic social, structural, economic, and cultural systems in place at any given point. Guided by the status quo, we therefore need to develop context-specific and relevant concepts and measurement strategies that consider this rich diversity of fatherhood in South Africa.





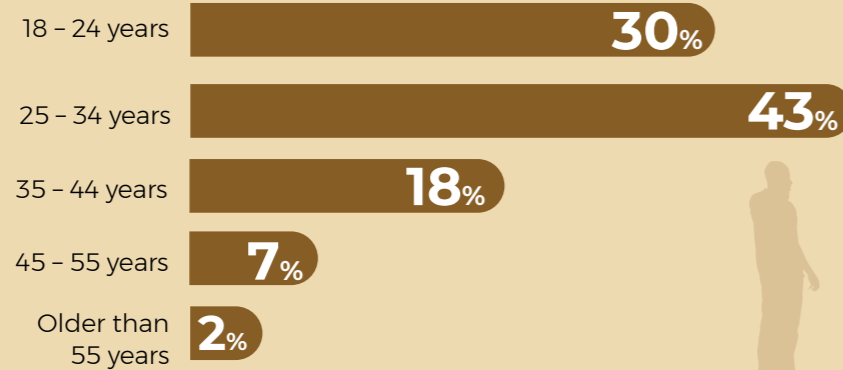
# SOSAF 2021 SURVEY: THE STATE OF FATHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

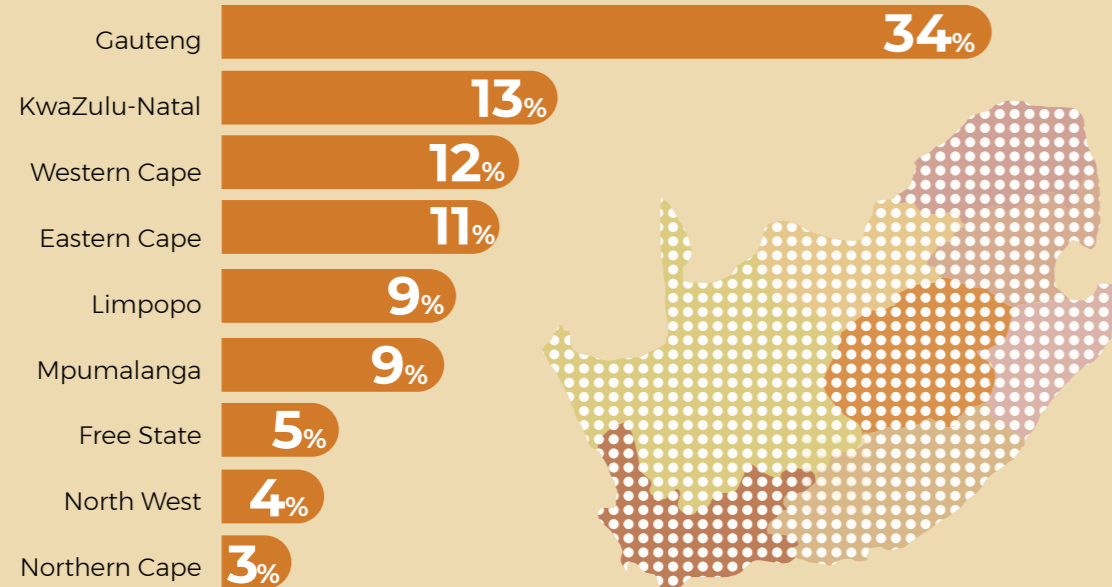
We spoke about fatherhood to 1,003 'connected' male respondents (18 years and older) who identified as a caregiver to a child.

It was a national survey that took place online, between 3 – 17 June 2021, and respondents had to have access to a device like a mobile phone or a tablet.

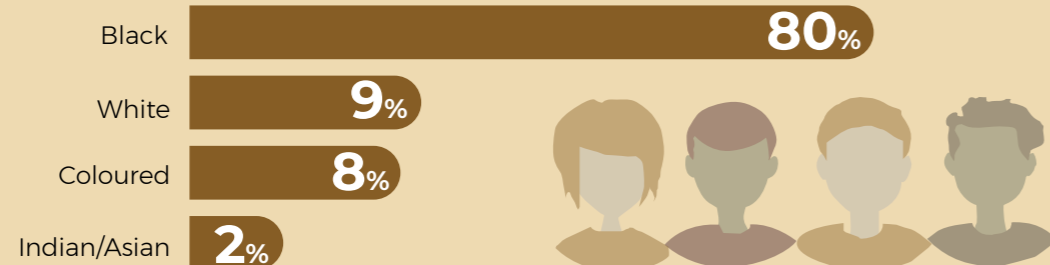
### AGE OF RESPONDENTS



### PROVINCES

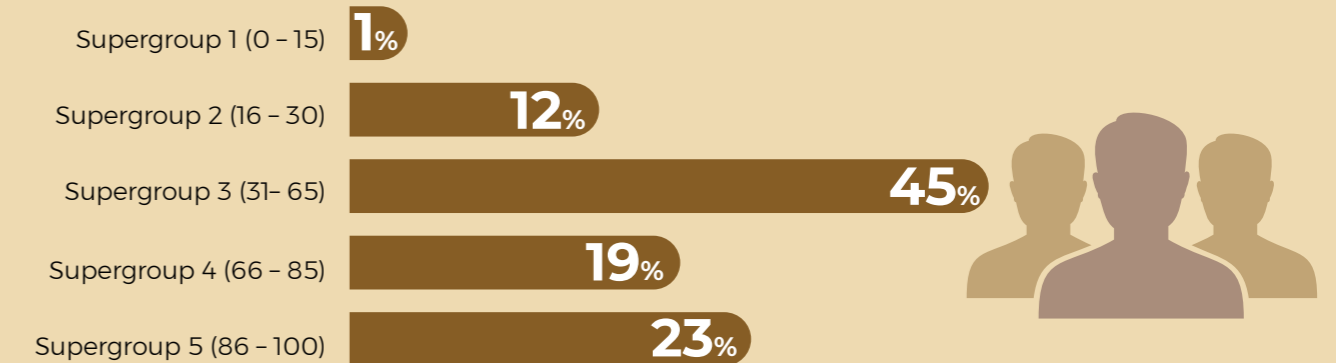


### RACE



### SOCIO-ECONOMIC MEASURE\* RANKING

\*Based on survey participants' reported household and community demographics, responses were divided into five supergroup formations made up by the low to medium socio-economic measure (SEM) brackets (1 - 3) and the two higher SEM brackets (4 - 5).

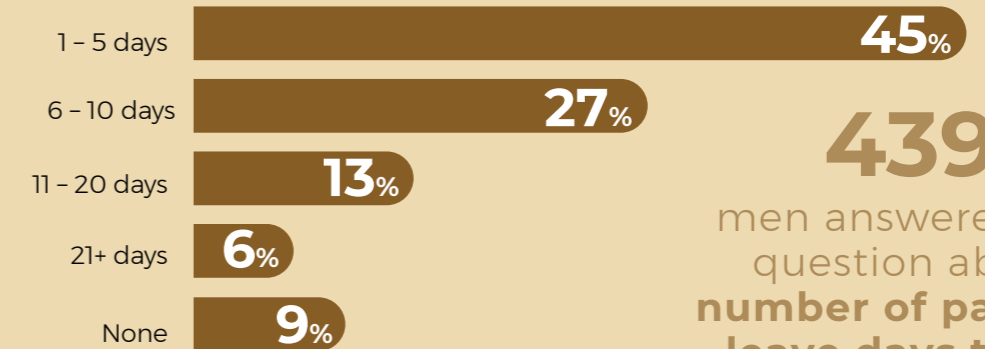


### PARENTAL LEAVE

758 men answered the question about access to paid parental leave

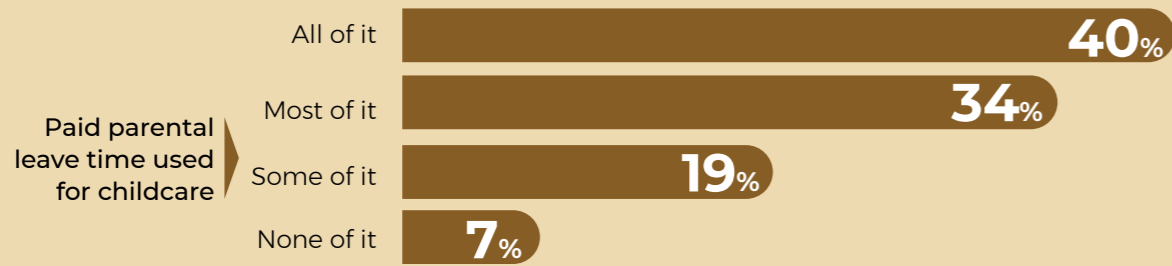


Number of days of paid parental leave that they took



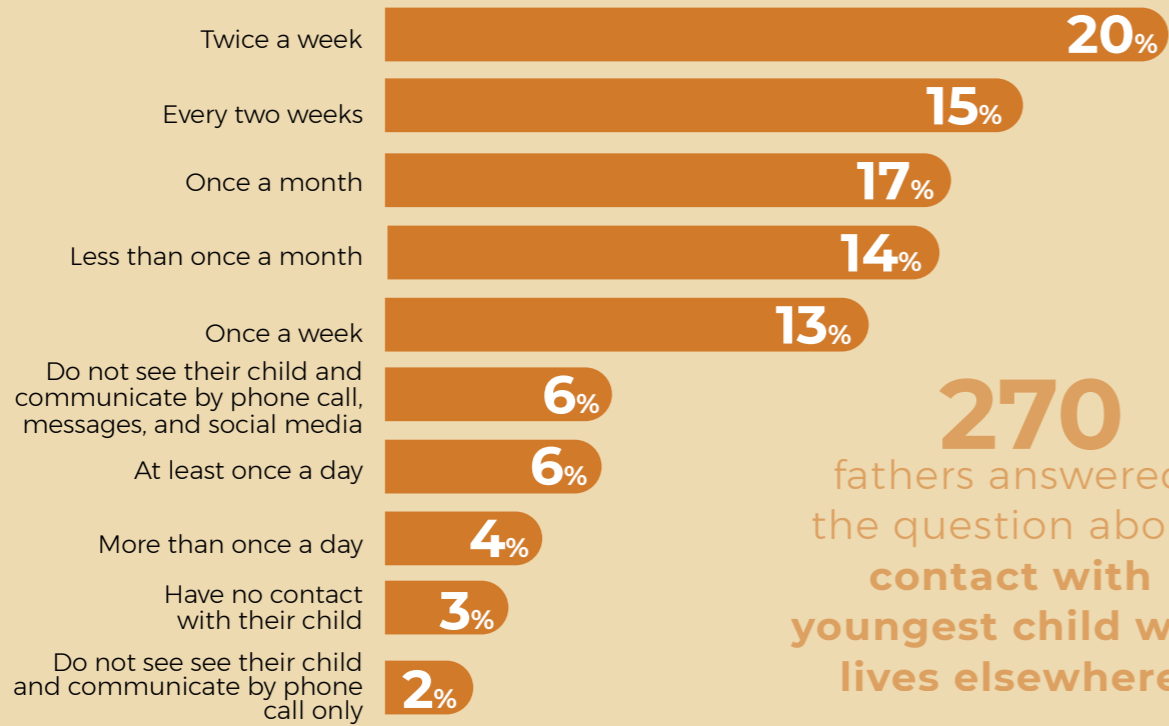
**439** men answered the question about number of parental leave days taken

400 men answered the question about the parental leave time used for childcare



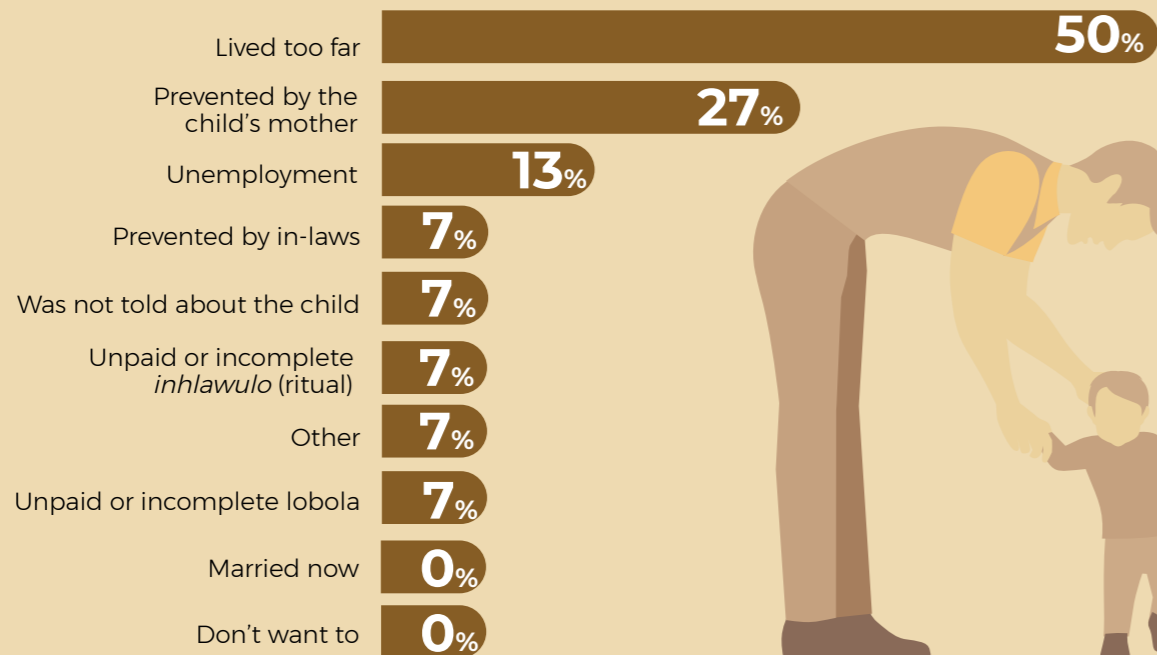
CONTACT WITH THEIR CHILDREN

Frequency of contact with youngest child who lives elsewhere



270 fathers answered the question about contact with youngest child who lives elsewhere

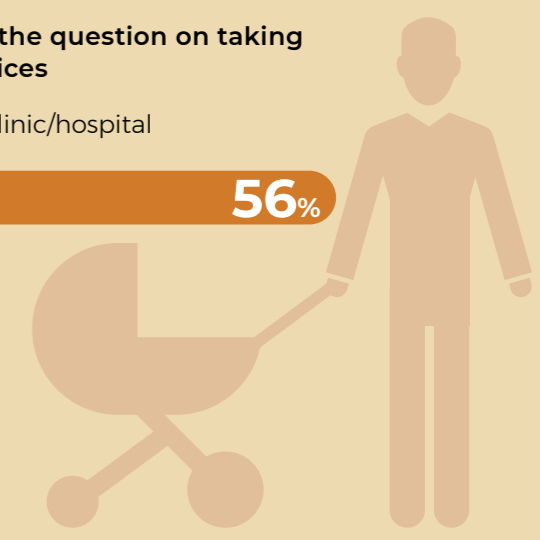
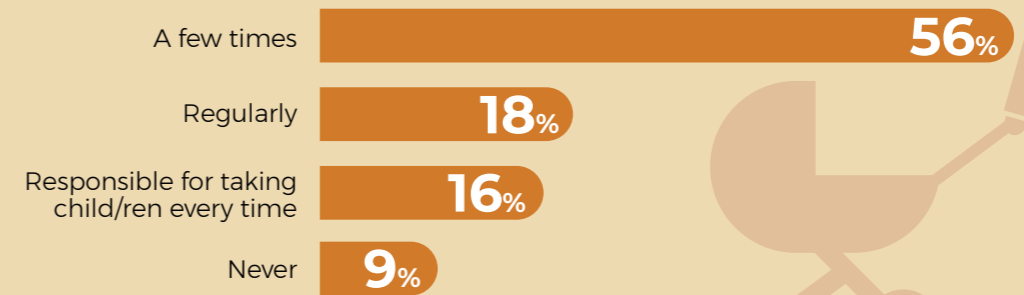
30 fathers answered the question on reason for not seeing their child in person



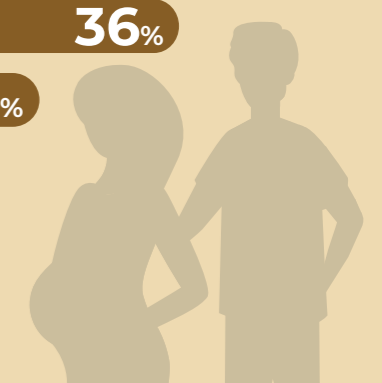
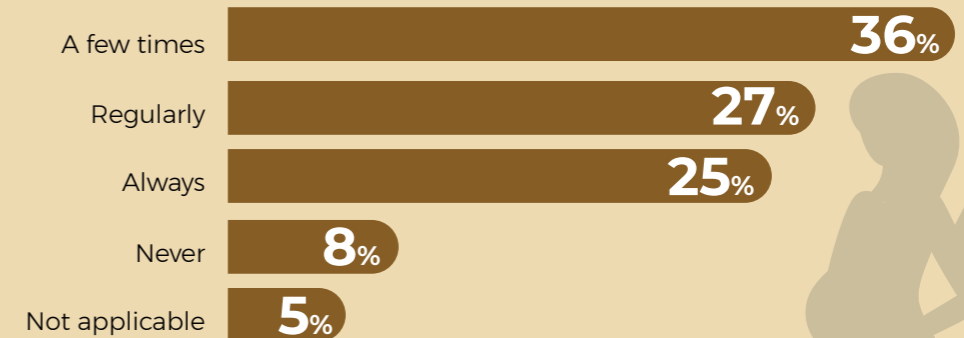
HEALTH

1,003 fathers responded to the question on taking children to healthcare services

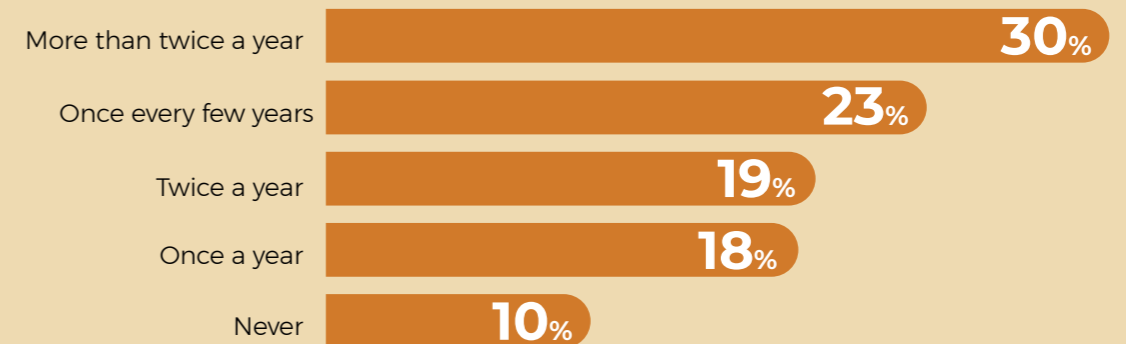
Frequency of taking child/ren to a doctor/clinic/hospital



Frequency of accompanying partner to a doctor/clinic/hospital for treatment/health check-ups during pregnancy



Frequency of fathers visiting a doctor/clinic/hospital for regular check-ups on their own health/treatment in the past five years



Survey respondents' perceptions on care and fatherhood.  
(Only the percentage of agreement is shown.)

A single man can be a good father **91%**

All children need a relationship with their fathers to grow up well **89%**

A man can be a good father even if he does not live with his child/ren **83%**

Men are as good caregivers as women **77%**

Fathers should be responsible for disciplining their children **57%**

A gay man can be a good father **56%**

Mothers are naturally better parents than fathers **55%**

For a man, being able to care for his child/ren would affect his well-being **48%**

A man should make the final decisions in the family **43%**

A man who is in prison can be a good father **43%**

To be a good father, you need to be employed **37%**

It is not appropriate for men to be pre-school teachers **27%**



# Glossary

## CARE

The word 'care' is used in several ways in this report: 'caring about' refers to paying attention to, or feelings of affection and concern about another; 'taking care of' refers to taking responsibility for the wellbeing of another; and 'caregiving' refers to the competent engagement in physical care work such as feeding or washing.<sup>1</sup>

## UNPAID CARE WORK

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights defined unpaid care work as including "domestic work (meal preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water, and fuel collection) and direct care of persons (including children, older persons, persons with disabilities, as well as able-bodied adults) carried out in homes and communities".<sup>2</sup>

## CHILD-REARING

The 'bringing up' of children by parents or caregivers. It includes the type of control over children, the extent of caregiving and the emotional tone of the home.

## RESIDENCY

Residency status of fathers refers to whether the child and father live in the same household or not.<sup>3</sup>

## CO-RESIDENCY

Co-residency is acknowledged in household surveys by Statistics South Africa when a person sleeps in the same household for four or more days per week as the person/s they co-reside with.

## NON-RESIDENT FATHERS

Non-residency is noted by Statistics South Africa when a parent is away from the home for four or more days per week. Non-resident fathers may still be involved in a child's life. Some authors distinguish between *non-resident* fathers by regarding them as active and contributing members to a household, but who do not live in the household, and *absent fathers* who are neither physically present nor emotionally or practically involved. In this report, we focus on residency and involvement of fathers as the two key aspects to consider, and we do not attach the status of 'household member' to non-resident fathers.

## FAMILIES

The definition of 'families', from the White Paper on Families 2012, refers in this report as: "a societal group that is related by blood (kinship), adoption, foster care or the ties of marriage (civil, customary or religious), civil union or cohabitation, and go beyond a particular physical residence".<sup>4</sup>

## FATHER AND FATHERHOOD

Generally, a man who is the biological parent and/or caregiver of a child. Globally, the definition of a father is very much contested on conceptual, pragmatic and cultural grounds. Some North American and European scholarship on fatherhood tends to focus on individual and biological determinants, asserting that a man becomes a father when he

has his first child. However, in South Africa, as in most African countries and some African-American communities, being a father and fatherhood go beyond conception and extends to a network of other close social relationships between adult males and children who may or may not be biologically their own.

## FATHERING

In this report, 'fathering' refers to the care given by fathers to children. It has been used elsewhere to mean procreating children, as in 'the man has fathered several children' meaning that the man has 'produced several children' but, in this report, the term is not used in this manner.<sup>5</sup>

## FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Refers to the practical, financial or emotional engagement of a father in the life of his children. Parents may be involved in positive ways such as providing care, or negative ways such as harsh parenting.

## ABSENT FATHERS

The term 'absent father' is used in this report to refer to a father that is neither physically living in the same household as his child, nor involved in the child's life. While it is often used in writings about fatherhood to refer to the absence of a biological father from the household where the child lives, it can also refer to a non-biological or social father being absent.

## LOBOLA

Lobola, sometimes referred to as 'bride price' or 'bride wealth', is property in cash or kind, which a prospective husband or head of his family undertakes to give the head of the prospective wife's family in consideration of a customary marriage.

## INHLOWULO

A cultural practice whereby payment, usually offered in the form of cattle or money, is tendered by the father to the girl's or woman's family for impregnating her outside of marriage. *Inhlawulo* is essentially about acknowledging paternity as much as granting permission to a man to be involved in his child's life. It is often referred to as payment of 'damages'.

## HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

We use the term in the way Ratele describes as "a shifting pattern of things men do as men that grants men dominance over women and some men over other men. Hegemonic masculinity is thus distinguished from other marginalized or subordinate masculinities in terms of cultural currency. As a ruling form of being a man or boy on a schoolyard, neighbourhood, workplace, or larger society, the culturally exalted masculinity will tend to silence, marginalize and oppress other ways of being a man or boy."<sup>6</sup>

## HETERONORMATIVITY

The expectation that all people and families are heterosexual in nature, and the enforcement of heterosexuality on non-conforming people and families.

## HOUSEHOLD

Statistics South Africa defines a household as a person or

persons that stay in one or more housing unit and they may or may not be related, characterised by shared resources. Time use surveys consider people that are physically present for most of the time as a resident of the household if they stay for four nights per week within a four-week cycle.<sup>7</sup>

## KINSHIP CARE

A form of alternative care that is family based, within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child. Kinship carers therefore may include relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child. Kinship care may be formal or informal in nature.<sup>8</sup>

## PARENTING

The promotion and support of the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. Parenting is an activity of raising a child rather than a biological relationship.<sup>9</sup>

## SOCIAL FATHERHOOD

A social father is a person that takes on the responsibility and role of being a father to a child, but who is not the biological male parent of the child. The status of fatherhood is therefore a social status rather than a biological one, and may be actively sought by and/or ascribed to the person by their family or community. One person could be a biological father to one child and a social father to another. These include maternal and paternal uncles, grandfathers, older brothers and mothers' partners who singly or

collectively provide for children's livelihood and education, and give them paternal love and guidance.<sup>10</sup>

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This is the second issue of an evolving report, planned for publication every three years. It can be used in the development of policy and legislation for families, labour market regulations, educational curricula, and other training materials. It can be referenced as a source of expert information for advocacy and community groups, individual families, and legislative committees. It contains specific recommendations for shifting norms towards gender-equitable parenting, and highlights men's caregiving as an institutional and social priority.

The report promotes a nuanced approach to fatherhood for improved support for families in South Africa.



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