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## The Challenges of Fatherhood in Contemporary South Africa

*"There is a need for policy and legislation that creates an environment where fathers could care for, engage with and support their children"*

*The White Paper on the Family<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

There is a tendency to characterize South African fathers as being largely absent from the lives of their children, with a minority of children living in the same household as both their biological parents. The term 'absent fathers' is common parlance but, given due consideration, it is largely a pejorative term which does not sufficiently take into account the impact of historical socio-economic and psycho-social factors on family life, and particularly on the role of the father. This is compounded by the harsh realities of our present situation, which is characterized by extreme violence perpetrated against women and children. However, further examination of this narrative indicates that many men play important and loving roles in the lives of children. As one article puts it,

*"the meaning of fatherhood is continually redefined as society changes. This is an important point, as it often gets neglected in discussions of family, which tend to focus on the changing roles of women. As we make these changes, it is important that our new definitions of fatherhood reflect the important role that fathers can play in their children's development".<sup>1</sup>*

### 2. Systemic Factors

The legacy of colonialism and the migrant labour policy undermined family life. This was further

refined by the introduction of apartheid legislation, particularly the pass laws and the Group Areas Act. Family life for most black South African families was virtually impossible. The escalation of the struggle against apartheid resulted in many going into exile and in others spending long periods in detention and imprisonment. Later, the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic took the lives of many parents, and escalating unemployment, the persistence of apartheid spatial planning, and the high rate of imprisonment further undermined family life. Patriarchy, which is prefaced on the belief of male "superiority and entitlement, the inherent power of men over women and children, and [the use of] that power for their own advancement and protection," persists.<sup>2</sup>

Globally, one in three women experiences violence at the hands of a male partner in her lifetime — a statistic so staggering that the World Health Organization deems it an epidemic.<sup>3</sup> The South African experience certainly mirrors this. Societal censure of gender-based violence is important, but it needs to be addressed in such a way that men can feel challenged, rather than condemned, and open to engaging in transforming gender relations and positive parenting. It must also be noted that in a patriarchal society women often contribute toward the perpetuation of male superiority and in so doing shape the gender roles of their children.

Research conducted with biological fathers indicates that many

“stated that they did not know how a father should behave vis-a-vis his children as they did not have a father figure in their life. The fact that some of these absent fathers did not themselves have an involved father points to the possibility of a vicious intergeneration cycle of violence. This view was encapsulated in the quote: ‘We did not know our father and he never did anything for us. We do not have any father idea’. Many fathers had similar explanations for their poor fatherhood practices. Another father spoke of the intergenerational transmission of negative fatherhood models.”<sup>4</sup>

Socio-economic contextualisation is important. In a context of high unemployment it may be very difficult for men to fulfil their role as providers, and they are often under great pressure to do so. It is not uncommon for fathers to be refused access to their children due to their failure to pay maintenance for their children. Furthermore, a father may be refused access to his children due to his inability to pay *lobola* in terms of African custom.<sup>5</sup> It is incumbent on fathers to pay maintenance if they are able to do so, and in recent years the courts have rightly become increasingly intolerant of maintenance defaulters. Fathers who choose not to pay maintenance put the well-being of their children at risk, but failure to pay maintenance cannot be used as a reason to deny a father access to his children. There are also fathers who are largely or entirely absent from their children’s lives physically, but who support them financially – the so called ‘ATM fathers’. This a very complicated area and it is apposite to be reminded that the guiding principle for all those involved is what is in the ‘best interests of the child’.

### 3. What about Fathers?

The first *‘State of the World’s Fathers’* report was published by the global ‘MenCare’ advocacy programme.<sup>6</sup> According to the report,

“Approximately 80 percent of men will become biological fathers at some point in their lives, and virtually all men have some connection to children – as relatives, as teachers, as coaches, or simply as community members. Whether they are biological fathers, stepfathers, adoptive or foster fathers, or legal guardians; whether they are brothers, uncles, or grandfathers; whether they are in same-sex

or opposite-sex relationships; and whether they live with their children or not, men’s participation in the daily care of others has a lasting influence on the lives of children, women, and men, and an enduring impact on the world around them.”<sup>7</sup>

The *‘State of South African Fathers’* report was published in 2018.<sup>8</sup> It considers the significance of a father’s involvement with his children across a range of marital statuses and whether or not he lives with the family. The report is important as it is based on evidence-based research which demonstrates the importance of father involvement irrespective of marital or residence status, and in so doing moves away from the “deficit model of absent fatherhood and focuses on the involvement of non-resident biological and social fathers in parenting and caregiving.”<sup>9</sup> The report adopts a more nuanced approach, focusing on the benefits to children, mothers and fathers of men’s involvement in the first thousand days of a child’s life. (This has significant legislative implications in terms of paternity leave, and the progress that has been made in this regard is set out later in this paper.)

While some fathers’ involvement in the lives of their children unfortunately has negative outcomes, positive, responsible and caring father involvement, which contributes to a sharing of child-care duties, benefits the mother, child, and father, and advances the cause of gender equality.<sup>10</sup>

### 4. Where Do Children Live?

Statistics regarding family composition and care of children can be confusing. According to Statistics SA and the most recent Household Survey, 20% of children live with a ‘childed’ couple – as in the nuclear family – while 60% live in extended family households; 7% live with a single parent; and 2% live in composite households where at least one person is not related to the head of the household.<sup>11</sup>

The research set out in the *‘State of South African Fathers’* report, which was done with in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), found that:

- Most children in South Africa are cared for by women as their primary caregivers.

These women are usually their biological mothers or maternal grandmothers.

- 36% of children in South Africa live in the same household as their biological father.
- 35% of children in South Africa live in a household with a man who is not their biological father.
- 29% of children in South Africa live in households where there is no adult male.
- 71% of children in South Africa live in a household with an adult male.
- Biological fathers' non-residency does not necessarily equate to fathers being uninvolved. When non-resident fathers are involved, it is usually financially – by paying for school fees and groceries, for example.
- When fathers are the primary recipient of the Child Support Grant, they use it for the same child care expenses that mothers do.
- Despite high levels of father non-residency, and reported violence and neglect by men, the role of caring fathers in the lives of children and families is very important and undisputed.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. 'BoMalome' / Social Fathers

'Social fathers' is the term now commonly used to describe the fluid and changing ways in which men care for children.<sup>13</sup> It describes men who are not biological fathers, but who nevertheless play a positive role in the life of a child. They may be an uncle or a grandfather, stepfather, older sibling or family friend who acts as a guardian and plays a nurturing role in the life of the child, as well as providing links to a family lineage. The colloquial term is 'BoMalome',<sup>14</sup> but this is not a uniquely South African experience. It is clear that "a range of men across both family and wider societal networks are involved in fathering children for whom they are not the biological father".<sup>15</sup> It takes more than just biology to be a father.

## 6. What do Children Want?

Patric Solomons' roundtable presentation, reflecting discussion with a young men's forum, indicates that children and teenagers have various experiences of fatherhood.<sup>16</sup> Some may have little to no contact with a father who may live in the same location; others have been abandoned, and still others have completely unknown fathers;

some fathers are deceased. Some fathers are physically present in the same household as their children, but emotionally absent.

Some fathers were seen as unable to provide or as struggling to provide for their needs of their children. Many children were realistic about this and understood that poverty and unemployment exacerbated the situation; they still saw their fathers as supportive and caring and appreciated their efforts. However, other children's experiences were sadly different. They saw their fathers as too controlling; abusive; trouble makers and home-breakers who were a disappointment, as well as unreliable and untrustworthy. It is clear that the quality of the engagement between the father and his children is the most important factor in these assessments.

Children would like their fathers to be responsible and dependable; trustworthy and reliable; loving and caring; fun to be with; a provider, a protector and a comforter; and one who is able to be a nurturer, guide and supporter.<sup>17</sup>

## 7. Same-Sex Parenting

Concerns are often raised regarding the effects of same-sex parenting on a child's development. As same-sex households have become more common, with many couples adopting children and establishing families, concern over the differences between same-sex and heterosexual parenting have become a focus of interest. In his study on *'The Effects of Same-Sex Parenting on Child Development'* researcher Jacob Parker argues that "Studies have taken on the subjects of gender identity, behavioural development, and the negative impact of social stigma on children whose parents identify as homosexual. It is concluded that there exist no significant developmental issues due to parental sexual orientation. Positive development is a result of warmth and positive parenting, regardless of familial structure."<sup>18</sup>

While many faiths and Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church, are strongly opposed to same-sex marriages and adoption by such couples, it is a fact that such families exist; studying them enhances our understanding of their effects on children's development.

## 8. Paternity Leave

The importance of the presence of the father during the first 1000 days of a child's life has been highlighted above. This raises the issue of the rights of fathers to receive paid paternity leave. African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) MP Cheryllyn Dudley successfully piloted a Private Members Bill through Parliament which proposed that fathers should receive ten consecutive working days of paid paternity leave. The ACDP felt strongly that paternity leave would contribute to strengthening and empowering families:

“The Act, which allows fathers to be physically present in their children's lives from birth, aims to encourage greater participation and responsibility as men have the opportunity to bond with their new born babies. It also empowers women when men support them during child birth, and learn to share child care and other domestic responsibilities at this time. By encouraging a positive partnership and sharing of responsibilities between men and women, we believe this Act will help engender greater respect and care in gender relations.”<sup>19</sup>

The move was strongly supported by both Houses of Parliament and by the trade union movement in general. As the Preamble to the Children's Act points out,

“it is necessary to effect changes to existing laws relating to children in order to afford them the necessary protection and assistance so that they can fully assume their responsibilities within the community as well as that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”<sup>20</sup>

## 9. Support for Fathers

Fathers play a vital role in raising boys to be good men. Violence is less likely to take place in homes where fathers share the domestic responsibilities, and children model the behaviour they witness at home. Boys who witness domestic abuse are likely to mirror that behaviour in the relationships they

have with women when they are adult. Similarly, girls who have grown up in households where domestic violence is the norm will be more accepting of such behaviour in their adult relationships.

Patric Solomons emphasizes that “there is a need to accelerate interventions to challenge patriarchy, gender inequality, gender discrimination and sexism.”<sup>21</sup> Various initiatives have been established to encourage the participation of men in the lives of their children. Other initiatives focus on mentoring boys with absent fathers. One such initiative, the ‘Character Programme’, provides mentors for boys, focusing on raising them to be good men. The programme maintains that the challenge is not the ability to have a child but rather the courage to raise one.<sup>22</sup> Other organizations run mentorship programmes for fathers, but the reach of these, while important, is small. Nevertheless, the success of these programmes does show that it is possible to ‘nurture’ fatherhood, and their impact on the lives of children, both boys and girls, is immense.

## 10. Conclusion

Fathers face significant challenges in the performance of their parental roles. Men need to engage in initiatives that seek to reclaim their true masculinity and to explore what it means to be a good father to their sons and daughters, and to be respectful, caring husbands and partners. As Nelson Mandela said “There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.”<sup>23</sup>

In the same vein, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, addressing the United Nations on behalf of the Holy See, asserted that

“If respect for the human rights of children measures the health of a society, then the legal recognition of these rights is urgent. The first right of children is that of being born and educated in a welcoming and secure family environment where their physical, psychological and spiritual growth is guaranteed, their potential is developed, and where the awareness of personal dignity becomes the base for relating to others and for confronting the future.”<sup>24</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-29/june/absent-fathers-and-sexual-strategies>
- <sup>2</sup> Presentation by Patric Solomons at the CPLO Roundtable.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/7-global-trends-from-the-massive-state-of-the-worlds-fathers-report/>  
<https://www.uj.ac.za/faculties/humanities/csda/Documents/Absent-fathers-full-report%202013.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> It is no longer permissible to deny access due to the inability to pay 'lobola'
- <sup>6</sup> This report was produced by 'MenCare', a global campaign to promote mens' and boys' involvement as equitable, non-violent caregivers. With activities in more than 30 countries, 'MenCare' partners carry out joint advocacy initiatives, research and programming to engage men in positive parenting, equitable caregiving, violence prevention and in maternal, new-born, and child health. 'State of the World's Fathers' is the world's only report to provide a global view of the state of men's contributions to parenting and caregiving.
- <sup>7</sup> [https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/state-of-the-worlds-fathers\\_12-june-2015.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/state-of-the-worlds-fathers_12-june-2015.pdf)
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.wits.ac.za/coe-human/publications/2018-publications/state-of-south-african-fathers-2018/> The report coincides with the important moment in history when key amendments to South Africa's labour law will allow for better parental leave for fathers in the **Labour Laws Amendment Bill**.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.wits.ac.za/coe-human/publications/2018-publications/state-of-south-african-fathers-2018/>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.uj.ac.za/faculties/humanities/csda/Documents/Absent-fathers-full-report%202013.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Statistics SA (2017) and the General Household Survey (2016)
- <sup>12</sup> <https://genderjustice.org.za/news-item/first-state-of-sas-fathers-report-highlights-the-importance-of-father-involvement/>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2017/11/08/a-new-forum-for-social-fatherhood/>
- <sup>14</sup> Presentation by Wessel van den Berg at the CPLO Roundtable Discussion
- <sup>15</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2017/11/08/a-new-forum-for-social-fatherhood/>
- <sup>16</sup> Presentation by Patric Solomon at the CPLO Roundtable
- <sup>17</sup> See 18 above
- <sup>18</sup> <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/22204-Article%20Text-50317-1-10-20160621.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> Presentation by Cheryllyn Dudley MP at the CPLO Roundtable Discussion
- <sup>20</sup> The Children's Act No 38 of 2005
- <sup>21</sup> Presentation at Roundtable Discussion
- <sup>22</sup> Presentation by Jaco van Schalkwyk at 'Strengthening Families Through Parenting' Conference UWC, May 2017
- <sup>23</sup> Speech by President Nelson Mandela at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1995
- <sup>24</sup> Address by Archbishop Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2007.

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