



Skip-Generational and Multi-Generational Households

1. Introduction

Households are constantly made and remade in South Africa.¹ Traditionally, the extended family was relied upon to provide subsistence and care for older people here and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. However, colonization and apartheid impacted powerfully on the extended family and created diverse family structures. There is no typical South African household. The migrant labour system, the Group Areas Act, and the creation of the homelands made traditional family life very difficult. Able-bodied men left the rural areas to work in the gold, coal and platinum mines of the big cities and smaller mining towns, while women, children and the elderly were confined to the largely rural homelands to survive on subsistence farming and money sent home from the mines.

However, 13% of the country's arable land was not enough to sustain the families at home. In terms of racial legislation African women were given a 'pass' to seek work as domestic labourers while their own children remained with their grandparents in the rural areas. These were effectively skip-generational households: the middle generation, which would have been tasked with care for the elderly and the upbringing of the young were absent, earning low wages working underground or engaged in domestic labour.

Resistance to the pass laws during the 1980s challenged this inhuman system and attempted to claim back family life. Sprawling informal settlements sprang to life, and new family formations became possible. However, new challenges to family such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the tragic loss of life it wrought prompted the development of different familial

arrangements. Moreover, apartheid spatial planning has persisted as has grinding poverty. Service delivery to these large informal settlements has been consistently poor, unemployment is high, and violent crime is a constant reality.

2. Household Structures

According to the United Nations,

“a household is a group of persons who make common provision for food, shelter and other essentials for living. Households are at the centre of many demographic, social and economic processes, since decisions about childbearing, living arrangements, education and health care, labour force participation, migration and savings are often made at the household level.”²

The characteristics of households, including their size and composition, are closely associated with sustainable development, poverty and well-being in general.³

The social upheaval described above has resulted in the development of diverse family structures including skip-generational and multi-generational households, as well as child-headed and youth-headed households, many of them heavily dependent on social grants for a livelihood.⁴

There is an effort to utilize the various social grants available to different family members as widely as possible within the family. For example, one household may pool an old age grant, a

number of child support grants, and maybe a disability or foster-care grant. However, child-headed households, youth-headed households, skip-generation households and multi-generational households remain vulnerable and experience little financial security. Such households exist in both urban and rural areas and family decisions, including those involving migration, are made regarding the structure of the household.

“Migration is not arbitrary: it uses resources and is the outcome of decisions made at individual and household levels. This suggests that what might be termed family fragmentation can be a household strategy, the product of child-care choices made in the context of external forces and structural constraints.”⁵

Many families are geographically ‘stretched’, with members moving between households that span urban and rural areas. It is not unusual for children to be raised by grandparents or other family members, as kinship networks have historically played an important role in the care of children. The apartheid migrant labour system relied on this, and contemporary society continues to do so.⁶ A study carried out in 2010 shows that rural-urban migration of women in South Africa in search of employment is made possible due to the availability of grandmothers in the rural community, as these grandmothers are able to provide financial support to the grandchildren from their old age pension and the child support grant.⁷

3. The Impact of HIV/AIDS

Demographic and health surveys in sub-Saharan Africa have been examined to determine whether household composition indicators for older adults involving offspring and grandchildren, correlate with national levels of AIDS mortality.

“One in four was living with a grandchild whose own parents were absent. Absence was a result of residence elsewhere or of parents being deceased. Older adults in countries with a high accumulation of AIDS mortality were more likely to live in a skip-generation household and with a double-orphaned grandchild, and less likely to live in a three-generation household. Changes in living arrangements toward skip-generational and

double-orphaned households were experienced in countries with high accumulation of AIDS mortality.”⁸

Statistics SA’s general household survey for 2011 found that almost 5% of the country’s children had lost both parents. The survey also found that 11% of children had lost their fathers and 3.3% their mothers. Of the country’s population of children, which accounted for 40% of the 53 million people, about 8% lived in skip-generational households with their grandparents.⁹

Research concludes that, as a result of the death of a parent or parents through HIV/AIDS,

“like in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the extended family in South Africa will continue to be the primary social safety-net system with children who lose their parents being absorbed into their relatives’ families.”¹⁰

Helen Lieberman, founder of the NGO *Ikamva Labantu*,¹¹ points out that

“the old-age grant is the primary source of income for the majority of the elderly in South Africa. Many older persons stretch this money (R1 600 per month) to support their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren – often feeding their families before themselves.”¹²

These conditions make it more challenging for children to have adequate access to healthcare services, social security, and sufficient food, water and education.¹³ Furthermore, the elderly experience many hardships including abuse, food and financial insecurity, lack of access to health care and growing infirmity.

According to Stats SA, 32.2% of South African households are multi-generational. Economic necessity, security issues, cultural norms, and the need for care-giving (as well as so-called care-sharing) underlie this trend.¹⁴ The number of multi-generational households is increasing across the board, forcing poorer households, especially, to pool their resources together in order to survive.

4. Challenges Encountered

A grandparent with the primary care of grandchildren faces significant challenges, and the

burden felt by grandparents in the process of raising children is stressful. They might not be as physically able as parents and often experience health challenges and growing infirmity which impacts on their emotional well-being. Grandparents might have a lack of skills to understand social media and other new trends and events. Many grandparents experience financial hardship in that the pension they receive as an individual older person is stretched to support their grandchildren. Parental roles such as helping with homework, attending school functions, and providing health guidance can be a strain.¹⁵ Furthermore, "children living with grandparents are vulnerable since the grandparents themselves have lost one of their key support mechanisms, namely their sons and daughters."¹⁶

Moreover, there is often the assumption that, because of their advanced age, life experience and previous family duties, grandparents are the best substitute parents. More research needs to be done into the effects on children of extended family parenting. How equipped are grandparents actually, when it comes to providing for the socio-economic and psycho-social support of children?

Over seven million children live in households where the household head is defined as their grandparent or great-grandparent, and in nearly half of these cases (46%) the grandparent is under 60 years old. Almost two thirds of these children also have one or both parents living in the same house, so that caregiving can be shared between parents, grandparents and other kin if present. Around 2.7 million children live with grandparents in the absence of their parents.¹⁷

In spite of the decline in the death rate due to HIV/AIDS as a consequence of the successful rollout and efficacy of ARVs, these skip-generational households persist. Grandmothers are most commonly reported as being responsible for the day-to-day care of children, although many of the children they care for have their school fees paid by their mothers or fathers should either or both parents be employed.

5. Conclusion

The underlying political, social and epidemiological causes of skip-generational and multi-generational households will be with us for decades to come. In many ways, these households represent a flexible, creative and caring approach to family crises, and they deserve strong support, particularly from the faith community, which places such high value on family life and the bonds of kinship.

As far as the public sector is concerned, the focus of social development policy should be to support these diverse family structures so as to enable them to best carry out their function and promote the well-being of both the young and the old. Households are constantly made and remade in South Africa.

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¹ <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/research-news/2019/2019-07/the-shape-of-the-south-african-family.html>

² https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/popfacts/PopFacts_2017-2.pdf

³ United Nations Database on Household Size and Composition 2017.

⁴ Child headed households of orphaned vulnerable children have declined and been absorbed in extended family configurations.

⁵ https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Hall_Fragmenting%20the%20family_0.pdf

⁶ <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/research-news/2019/2019-07/the-shape-of-the-south-african-family.html>

⁷ <http://univendspace.univen.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11602/716/Dissertation-%20Damian%2C%20j.%20u.-.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=n>

⁸ https://www.jstor.org/stable/27752520?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁹ https://www.parent24.com/Child_7-12/Development/grandparents-who-raise-grandchildren-20151112

¹⁰ https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J031v19n01_06

¹¹ *Ikamva Labantu* is an NGO working amongst the elderly in the townships and informal settlements in the greater Cape Town area.

¹² <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/spotlight-on-plight-of-sas-elderly-17279293>

¹³ <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=4279>

¹⁴ <https://www.fin24.com/Money/Retirement/retirement-three-generations-under-one-roof-20160415>

¹⁵ https://www.parent24.com/Child_7-12/Development/grandparents-who-raise-grandchildren-201
<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/1265/2008HosegoodDemographicEvidenceoffamilyandhouseholdchangesinresponsetotheeffectsofHIVandAIDSLG1Strength51112>

¹⁶ <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/1265/2008HosegoodDemographicEvidenceoffamilyandhouseholdchangesinresponsetotheeffectsofHIVandAIDSLG1Strength>

¹⁷ http://www.ci.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/367/Child_Gauge/South_African_Child_Gauge_2018/Chapters/the_shape_of_childrens_families_and_household

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