

THE MANDELA INITIATIVE

Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality

A summary of research undertaken for the Mandela Initiative, May 2017
Supported by the Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation

Families and inequality

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1. What is the project about and why is it important?

The broad objective of this project is to better understand the nature and implications of family formation and functioning in South Africa and, in so doing, to show how family dynamics can perpetuate or reproduce poverty and inequality.

Context: There are a plurality of family types in South Africa, with large differences in rates of union formation, and household living arrangements by gender and race. Marriage rates are far lower among Africans; rates of non-marital childbirth are higher; and African children are much more likely than other children to live in households without their father, or with neither parent. In the absence of marriage or the cohabitation of parents, children typically live in households with their mother. Consequently, African women tend to live in larger households, which include more children, than African men.

Four parts of the project have been undertaken (listed below), all of which analysed national micro-data collected in the National Income Dynamics Study or the 2010 Time Use Survey.

2. What are the main research findings to date, and what are their significance?

1) The gender division of labour in the care of children

- i) The very large majority of children in South Africa receive primary physical care (they are fed, bathed, taken to school, helped with homework, taken care of when ill etc.) from women.
- ii) When children live with their mother, then the mother is almost always the primary physical caregiver.
- iii) African children are far less likely than other children to live with their mother, and they are therefore more likely to receive primary care from other women, and mostly from their grandmother.
- iv) The responsibility for the financial support of children, at least in terms of schooling



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expenses, is not borne disproportionately by men. Among African children, mothers are three times more likely than fathers to provide financial support for a child's schooling.

- v) When children do not live with a parent, then that parent is far more likely to not be part of the household, than to be a non-resident household member (as in the case of a labour migrant). The majority of parents who are non-resident household members see their children and contribute financially towards their upkeep. However, the contribution of absent parents is far lower. Among African children, there are also clear differences in contact and support from absent mothers and absent fathers: absent mothers are significantly more likely than absent fathers to see their children regularly and to provide financial support.
- vi) Rather than a gender division of labour in the provision of care particularly to African children, both the primary physical care and the financial support of children are most often provided by women.

Significance: Women's responsibility for the care of children has significant implications for the economic wellbeing of women and the children they support – for women continue to earn considerably less than men, and this is at least partly because women's childcare responsibilities limit the nature and extent of their labour force participation.

2) The gender division of labour among the elderly

- i) There is clear evidence of a gender division of labour even among adults who have reached retirement age: elderly women spend far more time on housework, while elderly men spend more time on production work.
- ii) There is no evidence in the time diaries of elderly women that dedicated childcare activities (playing with, reading to, or bathing children, helping with homework etc.) form an important part of their day. However, elderly women who live with children are significantly more likely than other women to spend much of their day on housework (cooking, cleaning, washing etc.).

Significance: Grandmothers are the primary physical carers of many African children who do not live with their mother, yet the amount of time that elderly women devote to dedicated childcare activities is very small. This suggests that the kind of childcare that elderly women



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provide may be associated more with activities related to housework than with specific childcare activities.

3) The time allocations of children

- i) Racial variation in the time allocations of children (10 – 17 years) mirrors well-documented findings of racially differentiated schooling outcomes: African children spend significantly less time on learning activities than other children, particularly outside school hours.
- ii) African children spend significantly more time than other children on household and production work and on school-related travel.
- iii) However, African children do not spend less time on leisure than other children. An analysis of their real time trajectories shows also that, after school and over the weekend, the share of African children who engaged in leisure activities far exceeded the share who spent time on learning or work-related activities.
- iv) Among all children who completed the time diaries, most evaluated their use of time during the day as comfortable. However, African children were more likely than other children to view their day as insufficiently active.

Significance: We cannot establish causal inference from the analysis of children's time allocations. But the overall findings suggest that time constraints may not be the reason (or the only reason) for the lower time allocations of African children to learning, particularly outside school hours, and that inputs from home and school are also important. African children, who live in poorer households and who are less likely to live with both parents, are also likely to face a less conducive environment for learning outside school, to attend schools of lower quality, and to receive less input from teachers and caregivers.

4) Measuring inequality

- i) Inequality is typically measured by converting total household income into per capita household income. This may underestimate resources in larger households which include more children, because per capita measures are not sensitive to economies of scale in household consumption or to the lower consumption requirements of children.
- ii) The application of equivalence scales significantly lowers measures of inequality: using relatively conservative equivalence scales, the Gini coefficient would fall by more than



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three percentage points. This is because scale adjustments increase the income of larger households and households with more children by relatively more than other households; and larger households with more children are also far more likely to low-income households.

Significance: Because Africans and women live in significantly larger households with more children than non-Africans and men, the application of equivalence scales also has implications for measures of race and gender inequality specifically.

3. What are the wider policy implications?

The findings from these studies highlight the importance of measures designed to increase the contributions of fathers to the care of their children (such as maintenance laws); measures to make it easier for women to combine childcare responsibilities with labour force participation (such as the provision of crèches and affordable family accommodation for migrant mothers); and measures that encourage or facilitate the acquisition of human capital particularly in the home environment.

For more on the Mandela Initiative research projects, see:

www.mandelainitiative.org.za/research/research-areas-themes.html

