

Interview with Tawanda Makusha

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Interview by **Marlize Rabe** for *Gender Questions* based on the publication by Wessel Van den Berg and Tawanda Makusha, eds., *State of South Africa's Fathers 2018* (Cape Town: Sonke Gender Justice and Human Sciences Research Council, 2018)¹

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TAWANDA MAKUSHA is a senior research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council. He holds a PhD and a master's degree, with his research focusing on men, masculinities, fatherhood and male involvement in maternal and child health in the first 1000 days, and the impact of poverty and HIV/AIDS on children and families. Tawanda has published peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters on fatherhood, child wellbeing, men and masculinities and how they are impacted on by poverty, and HIV and AIDS in South Africa.

MARLIZE RABE: Thank you for agreeing to discuss the first report on the *State of South Africa's Fathers* (SASOF). Why is such a report necessary?

TAWANDA MAKUSHA: The two roles of the report are:

- To facilitate a broader narrative on fatherhood in SA.
- To provide an advocacy document to improve policies and programmes that support fathers' involvement.

MR: The absence of biological fathers in family households is well established in nationally representative surveys and in the census reports. Firstly, what exactly is meant by the concept father absence?

¹ See <http://genderjustice.org.za/publication/state-of-south-africas-fathers-2018/>

TM: The concept of father absence is misunderstood in many circles. It is usually used interchangeably with biological father non-residency. However, it is important to note that one can be a non-resident biological father, yet present by being involved financially, emotionally and practically. On the other hand, a father can be resident in the same house as his child/children but be very absent in terms of financial, emotional and practical support. Non-residency does not always equate to absence; likewise, co-residence does not always equate to presence.

Secondly, why are so many men not living with their families in South Africa?

Many reasons lead to the high father non-residency in the country. Some are:

- There is diversity of family arrangements and household forms.
- There are high rates of internal migration and mobility (including amongst children).
- There are unusually low marriage rates.
- There are high rates of informal kinship care.
- There are high rates of poverty, inequality and violence.
- There are particularly low rates of parental cohabitation with children.

All these factors impact father-child co-residency, and on a smaller scale also impact mother-child co-residency. We have about 24 per cent of children in SA living in households without both biological parents and this makes SA an outlier in terms of international trends. Father-child co-residency has to also be considered in terms of race and income. These statistics will show that father-child non-residency is highest among black people and those in the lowest income quintile. This might then mean that income has more impact than race on father-child co-residency.

MR: Are there other important male figures in the lives of South African children apart from biological fathers?

TM: In South Africa, the spirit of communalism (botho/ubuntu) is characterised by the connectedness of people and their commitment to the common good, including one's descendants and one's ancestors. In this regard, men may take on childrearing roles, activities, duties and responsibilities that fathers are expected to perform and fulfil regardless of their biological connection to the child. These social fathers may be connected through family—including patrilineal and matrilineal uncles, grandfathers, brothers and, if the parents are separated or divorced, the mother's partner; or they may be extra-familial, and encompass friends, religious leaders, teachers and community leaders. Unfortunately,

despite the strong justification for collecting data about social fathers in South Africa—to provide a more complete account of children’s experience of fathering and protection—this information is hardly ever collected in surveys or population cohorts, and social fathers can seldom be distinguished from biological fathers even when details about fathers are collected.

MR: What can we learn about fathers and care towards their children from the report?

TM: What we know from the report is that little attention has been paid thus far to promoting paternal caregiving. We know that there are a number of barriers and facilitators to promoting father involvement in caregiving for their children. We also know that with supportive policies—such as the NCOP-approved parental leave, and more advocacy work on the importance of father involvement throughout the life course, more men will get involved in childcare.

MR: The notion that men should be breadwinners for their families seems to be an entrenched view of many South Africans and yet there seems to be a rise in women being sole financial providers to family households. What patterns or obstacles to financial care did you identify in this regard?

TM: Providing financially is a deeply entrenched part of masculine identity and being unable to command financial and material resources undermines men’s involvement in families, both practically and psychologically. Poor men may try to avoid criticism by distancing themselves from their children and families. In these circumstances, women, who are usually older and may even be grandmothers, assume the role of financial providers for their older, unemployed children and grandchildren in female-headed households.

MR: In media reports we are bombarded with horrific cases of interpersonal violence where men are the perpetrators. What insight does the report have on this issue?

TM: The report acknowledges that there is unacceptably high interpersonal violence in the country. Yet the belief that men are inherently violent or set in their ways has been disproved and their ability to care for others is undeniable. In order to move towards a gender-equal society one requires men and boys to think and act in new ways, to reconsider traditional images of manhood, and to reshape their relationships with women and girls. In their roles as fathers, men should thus be supported to become involved in care and fulfil various other forms of engagement with children.

MR: Are there positive trends in fathers’ involvement with children?

TM: There are many positive trends in fathers’ involvement with their children. Men’s presence and involvement in large part determine the social resources of the household. Involved, engaged, and caring fathers are important in the lives of children. A growing

body of research across North America, Europe, China and some studies from South Africa indicate that accessible, supportive, engaged and responsible fathers give girls self-confidence and help boys develop healthy masculinity. One of the biggest impacts of an involved father is that he gives credibility and encouragement for educational achievement. Children stay longer in school and achieve more if their fathers support them in education; they have higher self-esteem and girls are more secure in their relationships with partners of the opposite sex. By contrast, lack of father involvement has been linked to a wide range of detrimental effects, such as risk of problem behaviour and conduct disorders, stigmatisation, risky sexual behaviour—including early sexual début and substance abuse. Moreover, children and women in households with one or more men may be more secure with respect to the potential predatory behaviour of men from outside the household.

MR: What would you like to see in future research on fatherhood in South Africa?

TM: Future research on fatherhood in SA should be:

- Multidisciplinary—including sociology, psychology, economics, epidemiology, health etc.;
- Open to the use of mixed methods;
- Inclusive of all races and income groups;
- Targeted at policy and programmatic drives at a national level.