

“SO WE ARE ATM FATHERS”:

A study of absent fathers in Johannesburg



The Centre for Social Development in Africa and Sonke Gender Justice undertook a project in 2011 that sought to explore absent fathers’ conceptions of fatherhood, the causes and consequences of their absence, as well as possible intervention recommendations.* Focus group discussions were held with 34 absent fathers in Gauteng. The study found that the participants’ conceptions of fatherhood centred predominantly on the idea of the father as a financial provider, and that the difficulties associated with fulfilling this role in present-day South Africa contribute greatly to father absence. The study participants described the pain of being estranged from their children as well as feelings of failure and helplessness. The groups also suggested a number of recommendations in terms of addressing the issue of absent fathers.

*The views expressed in this document reflect the attitudes and opinions of the participants, as expressed during the focus group discussions. They do not necessarily reflect the official views and positions of the CSDA or Sonke Gender Justice. This document is a summary of the study’s preliminary findings. Further findings and analysis will be available within the research report, which will be launched in August 2013.

Background and Rationale for the Study

It is crucial that social science research contribute towards a broader understanding of the widespread and problematic phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa. Data from 2009, as reported by the South African Institute of Race Relations, indicates that 48 per cent of children in South Africa have living but absent fathers. This figure had increased from 42 per cent in 1996 (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

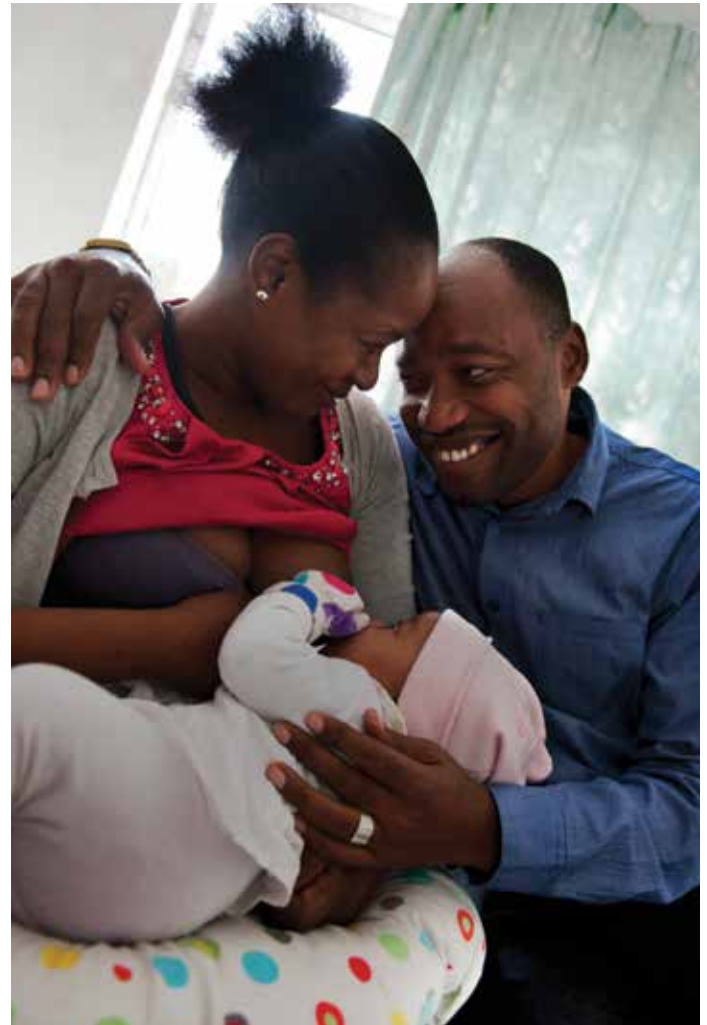
This absence has detrimental consequences for families and for society as a whole. Responsible fatherhood is beneficial to the development of children and to building families and societies that better reflect gender equity and protect child rights. Around the world, work related to care giving is predominantly carried out by women and girls and thus efforts for increased involvement of fathers in the lives and care of children constitute a significant contribution to the advancement of gender equality. Caring fatherhood is also beneficial to fathers themselves, as Richter puts it: "increasing men's exposure to children, and encouraging their involvement in the care of children, may facilitate their own growth, bring them happiness and gratification, and foster a more nurturing orientation in general" (Richter & Morrell, 2006: 74).

A father's physical presence alone however, is not necessarily a desirable outcome in itself. Fatherhood goes beyond a father's mere physical presence because "a father might well be physically present, but emotionally absent, or physically absent but emotionally supportive" (Richter & Morrell, 2006: 18). Father presence can also be negative in some

cases, as when it is characterised by abusive conduct (Richter & Morrell, 2006: 18). The presence of responsible, caring and supportive fathers however, can have hugely positive effects on children, families and society and thus the high numbers of physically absent fathers is an obstacle to the achievement of broader father involvement.

Consistent with this critical conceptual analysis and taking into account the complexities associated with any attempt to measure the quality of the involvement of physically present or absent fathers, this research targeted fathers that are physically absent, in that they are not living with their children. The research acknowledges that many physically present fathers may actually be emotionally absent or involved in abusive relationships in the household. These latter categories of fathers did not fall within the scope of this research. Fathers who are physically absent from the household but emotionally present within their children's lives were also not primary subjects of this enquiry. Though cognisant of the potential value of father's presence in the household and in a child's life, this research acknowledges that a multiplicity of forms of family exist in contemporary South Africa. To date, there have been few empirical explanatory studies focused on this phenomenon of absent fathers. Hence, our knowledge of the key drivers of father absence is still speculative. Thus, this research project does not seek to promote a particular form of family but rather seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the perspectives of absent fathers. It is noted however, that the research is deliberately exploratory, using a very small sample of men, and intends to influence the formulation of further research.





Methods

This project sought to explore the participants':

- conceptions of fatherhood;
- perspectives on what causes fathers to become absent;
- opinions on the consequences of father absence, for fathers and children; and
- views on what interventions, including policy changes, would be most successful in addressing the phenomenon of absent fathers in urban contexts in present day South Africa.

The study adopted a qualitative approach with focus group discussions (FGDs) as the main method of data collection. The focus group discussions drew absent fathers from four semi-urban locations, Alexandra (North Johannesburg), Tembisa (Johannesburg East Rand), Doornkop (Soweto) and Devland (Soweto). A total of 34 absent fathers participated in the research; they did so voluntarily and their identity is protected. The majority of participants were under the age of 35 years and were unemployed. It must therefore be noted that the findings of this study relate heavily to absent fathers who are struggling financially, as opposed to financially stable absent fathers. Almost half of the participants reported that they have children who live in another province.

Findings

Conceptions of fatherhood

Fathers conceptualised primarily as providers

Participants saw themselves, and felt as if they are perceived by their female partners and their families, primarily as providers. For this group of men, the term "provider" referred to a father's obligation to supply one's child or family with material goods or financial means. Masculinity and fatherhood were primarily understood in terms of one's ability to provide. One father referred to the social pressure generated by the primacy of the provider role as follows: *"whether you are unemployed or employed, you must provide"*. Across all the FGDs the perception that a father should be a financial provider was the predominant theme.

Care-giving presented as the preserve of women

Given the emphasis placed upon the idea that a father's most important responsibility is to provide financial support, it was not surprising that many of the participants rejected the idea that a father should be involved in care-giving activities. The day-to-day care of children was seen as the responsibility of the female partner, and this care work they considered to be "naturally" suited to women: *"The woman is somebody who is supposed to take care of the child. They are born to do that"*. Another father commented that *"you can't take care of the child the way a mother takes care of the child."*



As a father you can love your child [but] a mother's love and a father's love are different".

Some fathers however, acknowledged that the skills required to care for children can be acquired: *"Starting from I wake up in the morning checking nappies, I know where the nappies are. There is no documented book which says as a man you don't have to change nappies".*

Fatherless fathers and the risk of a vicious cycle

It was notable that a number of participants stated that they did not know how else a father should behave towards his children, as they themselves had not had an involved or caring father figure in their own life: *"You are a grown man and your father had never given you a bath or put nappies on you and dressed you. It is highly rare. If you grow up with that stereotype, it becomes difficult to change and accept that in*

your adulthood you are going to do these things". This pattern of absence and the difficulty in identifying positive fathering role-models points to the possibility of a vicious cycle of absence being perpetuated and highlights the urgent need for this cycle to be addressed.

A father as a key to one's identity and prosperity, one's link to the ancestors and to sources of success and good fortune

Fathers highlighted the crucial role a present father can play in making sure that his child knows where he/she comes from, particularly for sons who would also be introduced to their culture through initiation ceremonies. The father is also required to attend to family rituals and functions. A child's connection or disconnection to his/her father was seen as a source of success or failure, good fortune or misfortune. Participants whose own fathers were absent from their lives tended to explain failure and misfortune as a result of not having an involved and present father.

***Causes of father absence+**

Unemployment and poverty

The participants articulated that an unemployed father who is unable to provide for his family sees himself as emasculated and unable to fully assume the role of being a father: *"I don't have the financial capacity to provide. That's why I lose the title to be a father. And by that I also feel like I am failing myself because at the moment I want to be with my family. I want to enjoy the kind of life with the family that I know is mine. I have started myself but since I am not working I am failing that and it's painful to be honest."*

Unfortunately, unemployment is rife in South Africa. Young people living in townships are heavily affected by the lack of jobs in the economy. Unemployment and poverty are not in themselves factors that should cause fathers to become absent. The study found that it is rather the interplay of these socio-economic conditions with dominant expectations that a father ought to provide financially for his child and partner regardless of his economic means that create conditions under which fathers retreat or are excluded.

Predominant constructions of fathers as material providers

Participants referred to financial constraints, specifically unemployment, being the cause of father absence 14 times, and financial constraints related to ilobola and damages a total of 31 times, most often in the Thembisa focus group. Across all the FGDs father absence being caused by financial constraints was the second most referred to topic, after the conception that fathers should primarily be providers. A number of participants reported that they either withdrew from their child's life or had been barred from seeing their child, against their will, by the child's mother, or her family, as a result of being unable to conform to material provider expectations specifically due to being unemployed. One father expressed that: *"you have a boy*

* It is acknowledged that there are a number of reasons why the participants may have been restricted from spending time with their children, other than the reasons they provided.

of six years and you were working by the time that boy was born. Now you lose your job. You start feeling the distance, you start making the distance. You think in yourself, all the time I go to visit my child, I don't have anything. I must stop going there, how is my child going to look at me, what will my child say?" Another participant explained that: "Even now, I am unable to see her because I don't have money and because I don't have money for the child...the mother of the child when I try to talk to her, she makes me to talk to her mother and I am not allowed to talk to her". Some of the participants voiced their objections to this construction of fatherhood by stating that "the mother should value more that the man can come, the presence of the person coming. Even if he brings something, if he brings money, but what they should value more is the human being coming". One participant expressed his happiness that "the mother of my child ended up telling me, no, you must come and see your child with or without money".

“If you have not paid any damages towards your child, you don't have a right...”

Thus the study showed that an overemphasis on the material nature of the provider role makes it difficult for alternative father roles, beyond being a provider, to develop and be promoted. The fact that alternative means of caring for children are not expected of fathers, and often rejected by fathers themselves, can cause fathers to feel that they have nothing to offer if they are unable to provide financially. This can result in the opportunity of engaging responsible fathers, whose presence and care would have benefited the lives of their children, being missed.

Cultural factors (ilobola and damages)

African culture has traditionally preconditioned a father's access to a child and exercise of fatherhood on a variety of monetary payments linked to the institution of marriage, such as ilobola (similar to dowry practices). In order to claim the right to access one's child born out of wedlock, certain African practices require the father to pay "damages" (fines) as reparation for having offended or disrespected the female partner's family by impregnating her out of wedlock. In such cases, if the father fails to honour this, he is technically not recognised as the child's father. More recently, such amounts have grown substantially and given the challenges of unemployment and

poverty mentioned above, it is not surprising that many men are unable or unwilling to conform to these cultural prescriptions, and as a consequence either retreat or are restricted from seeing their children. One participant stated that: "If you have not paid any damages towards your child, you don't have a right... Such things are the ones that prevent us from communicating with our kids".

Dysfunctional and conflict-ridden relationships

Participants reported that father absence is often closely related to the quality of the relationship between the child's parents, especially after a divorce or a break up. Conflict-ridden relationships, desire for vengeance after a relationship collapse, resentment, and a lack of effective communication were cited as contributing to fathers being restricted, or barred, from spending time with their children. This was also a predominant theme. One participant explained: "There is conflict between the mother of the child and I ...and her mother as well, you know. So it sort of becomes a problem for me when I want to go and visit my child".

Challenges of moving to new relationships

The participants reported experiencing difficulties negotiating opportunities to spend time with their children because of a new relationship that their former partner had entered into. Participants also reported that the mothers of their children had sometimes left the child in the care of the grandmother upon starting a new relationship. Participants felt discouraged having to negotiate time with their child with a person other than the mother, such as a grandmother or new partner. One participant described the situation when his child's new stepfather lay down strict boundaries: "I want his father ten feet away from my yard"... 'I don't even want to see his contact number on your phone'. They tell you that they never want to see you holding your child's hand. Even if you can see your child passing here, you cannot even greet him, you can't do anything".

Migrant labour

The participants also described the challenges associated with the need to move around the country, province or city in search of work. This migrant and unsettled way of life was described as often resulting in the formation of new relationships, or partners moving into new relationships, making it difficult to maintain contact with children. Participants also cited physical distances and challenges associated with travel as contributing to their estrangement with their children.

Perceived consequences of father absence

For children

Participants identified a number of consequences for children that they perceived as being caused by father absence. The participants expressed worry that their children were growing up without sufficient guidance, and thus may exhibit a lack of manners and respect for their elders. Participants were concerned that their children were more likely to become involved in crime, alcohol abuse or drugs due to their absence.

They worried that their children would be disconnected from their ancestors and could therefore suffer from misfortune and a lack of cultural identity; and that due to having an absent father they may experience cultural and social isolation, as well as feelings of vulnerability. This was reflected by the participants' own experiences of fatherlessness: *"when you are in a situation you see that this one ...if my father was here, it was going to be sorted out... He was going to tell you what to do"*. Fathers were also concerned that when parents clash, it is the child who suffers. One participant described the pain of seeing his child upset: *"When the child sees me on the street he cries and my heart becomes sore. He cries. When his mother drags him and warns him not to come to me, he cries. My greatest pain is why they do this to the child and what have I done?"*

For fathers

The participants noted a number of consequences for themselves of being absent. The most predominant of these was a feeling of failure, especially due to being unable to provide financially. One participant described the pain caused by his child thinking of him as a failure: *"Maybe you see him ... and he says "They say that you are useless and you don't have anything, you don't do anything for me"*. One participant described how his failure to provide had undermined his identity as a man: *"Hey it will be hurting all the time when I think that I am a man and then my children are called by this man's surname you see, it's hurting all the time when you think about it... I was not a real man to give my children my surname"*. One participant reported that he had turned to alcohol due to the pain of being estranged from his children, while others expressed feelings of helplessness in that they wished for their situation with their children to be different but felt unable to change the situation.

Notably, few fathers focused on the consequences their

absence had on the mothers of their children. It is a limitation of the study that this was not emphasised in the interview schedule.

Interventions proposed by participants to address father absence

When asked what measures could be taken to enable fathers to spend more time with their children, participants suggested that: fathers create forums where they can discuss their experiences and learn from one another; men be encouraged to enter caring professions, such as social work; men be mentored on positive fatherhood; fathers be educated on the rights and responsibilities of parents; and communities and families support men to be involved in their children's lives.

Conclusion

A key finding from this research is that conceptions of fatherhood can encourage or discourage paternal involvement. In looking for reasons why fathers are disengaged from their child's life, it has emerged that the high numbers of absent fathers in South Africa is intricately connected to the broader historical, social, economic and cultural setting. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, widespread father absence is produced by ideological factors such as materialist constructions of fatherhood and masculinity, by socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment of fathers, by cultural factors such as the high cost of *ilobola* and *damages*, by relationship failures of various kinds and the dynamics between men and women, especially those related to communication. This conclusion is reinforced by the consideration of absent fathers' acute awareness of the detrimental consequences of their absence, their anguish over their estrangement from their child(ren); their readiness to participate in the restoration of the broken ties and prevention of similar negative



parental experiences. It follows that the phenomenon of absent fathers cannot be entirely ascribed to pathological, negligent, or disinterested dispositions of the disengaged fathers. This conclusion does not intend to diminish the extent of absent fathers' personal responsibility, but seeks to recognise the broader context which shapes their actions. Programmes seeking to increase caring and gender equal involvement of fathers need to consider ways in which to challenge dominant conceptions of fatherhood, which heavily influence fathers' behaviour, along with harmful norms of masculinity.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed on the basis of the study findings and the suggestions provided by the participants:

- It is important to deconstruct dominant constructions of fathers as merely financial or material providers and promote alternative father roles. Fathers should be supported to explore other ways of being present and supportive, rather than feeling that they have failed if they are unable to provide.
- Concerted action is needed to raise awareness amongst men of the benefits of gender equality and the transformation of gender norms.
- Alternative means of providing maintenance should be explored for those fathers who are genuinely unable to contribute financially to their children but who are willing to contribute in other ways. Fathers who are able to provide maintenance and fail to do so must be held accountable.
- Forums and support groups should be established to provide fathers with a safe space to express their feelings, fears and vulnerabilities, as well as support one another. These forums should be promoted in a manner that prioritises gender equality as the main focus of intervention.
- Fathers should be allowed to be present in the delivery room when their children are born, with the mother's consent, and need to be encouraged to attend ante-natal classes.
- Media campaigns should be employed to educate men and boys on childcare skills and to deconstruct social norms that imply that men are not suited to such work. Such media campaigns should also highlight the child care work that women do every day, which is often taken for granted. Such campaigns will contribute towards creating a suitable environment for paternity leave to be considered as a viable possibility. The current message from a policy perspective is that parenting is women's work only, and paternity leave could demonstrate that men should shoulder some of the care burden. The promotion of paternity leave as an opportunity for parenting should always be accompanied by the message of parenting responsibility that holds fathers accountable,

through encouraging compliance with child maintenance, for example.

- Single fathers who are the primary caregivers should not be discriminated against, for example when attempting to access a Child Support Grant.
- Men should be encouraged and supported to become more involved in caring professions, such as nursing and social work.
- Counselling services should be available to all parents, whether they are in a relationship or not, in order to assist with effective communication and ensure the promotion of the emotional well-being of children and parents.
- Playing a caring role should be promoted for all men, including non-biological fathers.
- Communities should be encouraged to meet and discuss the practice of traditional customs in order to address the ways in which they impact on parent-child and gender relations. Such dialogue should ensure that the views of women are heard and considered equally, rather than being disregarded by men.
- Further research should be conducted into the conceptions of fatherhood and its effects on social and gender relations, including interviews with mothers and children in order to further understand the dynamics of absent fathers.

The complete report of this study will be launched by the CSDA and Sonke during August 2013. For any questions, please contact Eddy Mavungu: memavungu@uj.ac.za.

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