



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **Gender inequality - Men's involvement in care: Contemplating the glass escalator** *By Dr Nicole Daniels, Dr Jodi Wishnia and Daryl Swanepoel*

Often, conversations about gender inequality only focus on women. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, **the gendered power dynamics and patriarchal system we live in does not serve men either**. The pressure on men is immense: to fulfil old gender roles they must earn, but in today's economy, jobs are scarce. The pressure to act in a certain way is also unbearable: being 'masculine' is associated with power, strength, and dominance, leaving little wiggle room for those who want to be perceived as masculine but don't subscribe to traditional versions of what it means to 'be a man'. Even those who want to maintain 'old school' (traditional) masculinity are finding it tough with the rising costs of living pitted against the contracting labour market making it hard to be sole breadwinners.

**Rates of marriage have seen a significant decline in South Africa.** Many cultures require the payment of 'lobola' (or a 'bride price') for the recognition of marriage. The practice entails the giving of gifts (usually money or livestock) by the groom's family to the parents of a bride-to-be. Lobola has been thought of as a way to ensure patrilineal (fatherly) ties and allow formal recognition and provision of intergenerational care and support. The reality of South Africa's unemployment rate, coupled with the financial implications of lobola (where it is more recently being commercialised resulting in higher associated costs) has, in part, contributed to the sharp decline in marriage. Although marriage is certainly not the only way to build a home, research finds that without the formal process of marriage and/or lobola, the responsibility for caregiving and providing for children often falls to women (who become de facto single parents). This has contributed to the high number of women-headed households (WHH) in South Africa. It has also destabilised the notion of men as 'breadwinners' in the home.

Traditionally, men have been primarily responsible for bringing income into their households; but this breadwinner role is being eroded. From the first quarter of 2008 to the first quarter of 2012, female unemployment rates were, on average, 24% higher than male unemployment rates, in the period starting 2017 Q1 and ending 2022 Q2, female unemployment rates were only 13.5% higher than male on average. Over the same comparison period, male unemployment rates increased from, on average, 22% to 28%. Overall, this means that the shape of unemployment has changed and the **gender gap in unemployment is narrowing**, with more men unemployed now than in the past.

Where men's contribution to care is through the provision of wage labour, their role and breadwinner status becomes at risk. Plummeting employment opportunities, particularly in the industrial economy, have made it increasingly difficult for men to fulfil this gender-normative role. The erosion of this status has important socio-economic and political consequences, and could potentially allow for renegotiation of male gender norms.

A survey conducted as part of the State of South African fathers reported on whether men believed that to be a good father, they must be employed. Thirty-seven percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 42% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This shows a shift in the belief that being the breadwinner is the only way to care for your family or 'show up' for your children.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, income support in the form of both the Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRDG) and the Unemployment Insurance Fund - Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme (UIF-TERS) went primarily to men. The SRD Grant was implemented in response to the loss of jobs and income for millions of South Africans during lockdown. To be eligible, one needed to be unemployed and not in receipt of other social grants. This meant that women (who are the principal receivers of the child support grant (CSG) on behalf of their children) were denied this type of state support.

This allowed unemployed men (even those who had been unemployed prior to the pandemic) to financially contribute to their households: and they did. A rapid assessment of the Covid-19 SRD Grant found that almost all male survey respondents used the grant to purchase food, which was unsurprising given that many households ran out of food. 53% stated that whatever was bought went toward household consumption. However, given that 39% of men were not living with children during Covid-19, the potential reach of this grant was limited by the role men are currently playing in families.

**As the labour market shrinks, might we see more men enter the caring professions?** The gendering of care work means that where men participate in paid care work, they experience significant advantage over their female counterparts. International literature shows that in cases where men work in the care professions (nursing, counsellors, social workers etc.), they earn more than women, are promoted at a faster rate and more frequently placed in senior and managerial roles - a phenomenon known as the 'glass escalator'.

The glass escalator is a juxtaposition of the term 'glass ceiling'. The 'glass ceiling' describes how women are blocked from upward job mobility due to gender discrimination. The glass escalator, experienced by men in the caring professions, is the opposite phenomenon where men employed in fields traditionally dominated by women experience greater advantage (better job roles or pay) as a result of being men.

It is the unequal basis of the gender order that promotes men at a faster rate than women. Thus, while increasing the number of men in industries and professions traditionally dominated by women should, in theory, be a tool to reduce inequality, it actually increases it. What this means is that the patriarchal dividend remains intact. To equalise gender relations we must dismantle the system of patriarchy to ensure the gender order is not merely replaced but shattered.

***This is the second of a three-part series that details some key aspects of gender inequality in South Africa. The authors are Dr Nicole Daniels, a qualitative sociologist and Dr Jodi Wishnia, a public health specialist from Percept, a transdisciplinary collective. Daryl Swanepoel is the CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute.***