



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **UNDERSTANDING GENDER INEQUALITY IN CAREGIVING AND FAMILIES**

**By Nicole Daniels and Daryl Swanepoel**

Families remain the primary providers of care in society, with family care patterns having profound effects on the education, health, and economic participation of their members. When it comes to care, we need to ask who is doing the care and for whom? Whether care is for children, young adults without work, the sick or elderly, the forms of care available, the resources and the wherewithal to care are deeply gendered.

South Africa is the most unequal country on Earth, and its inequality is profoundly gendered. Women represent slightly more than half (51%) of the South African population, and more than 40% of the country's homes are headed by women. Still, their share in household income and expenditure is significantly lower than that of men. The gender pay gap is estimated to have widened from 29% before March 2020 to 43% in June 2020. This is exacerbated by the concentration of women in informal, precarious labour, which presents limited opportunities for social and economic mobility.

South African women spend eight times the amount of time on unpaid domestic and care work than men. Because of women's disproportionate caregiving role in families, and their impact on safeguarding household wellbeing, women's poorer labour market outcomes have extraordinary ripple effects for individuals, communities and the nation.

One of the core intuitions of feminist theory has been to argue that what happens in the private sphere of the home has public and political implications, and vice versa. Care ethics provides us with a lens to analyse gender inequality and ignite moral and political action towards its reduction. In the transdisciplinary report authored by Percept consultants and the Inclusive Society Institute, we explore the roots and effects of South Africa's gender inequality, with a particular focus on care and families.

Our analysis shows that underlying gender inequality are complex dynamics around family formation, educational prospects and labour markets that are interlinked with participation in care work. Complex arrangements of gender and care show up the gendered norms and behaviours that are determining of who cares for whom, and in what ways. For example, the undervaluing of care work – often understood as 'women's work' – pervades both private domestic spaces and the public care economy. Women represent most of the workforce in only two industries: private households and community and social services, which concentrate women in low-skilled and less secure positions. Gender norms link ideas of womanhood to caregiving and hence, women are disproportionately represented in caring professions in the labour market, which continues to be poorly paid. Our report shows that it is not only women, but other racial and gender minorities who are most closely associated with care, who find their social positioning and status reflecting the undervaluing of care generally.

Care is central to social and economic development and yet the cost of caregiving is largely invisible to policymakers and planners, and unaccounted for in measures of GDP. Care work (whether paid or unpaid) has been shown to improve wellbeing and contribute to economic growth in a country. Democratising care and who it is that is primarily responsible for care is a way of equalising gender relations.

The role of caregiving and care receiving for men and women is different, yet it is precisely that difference, which indicates gendered inequalities in *paid* care work and the undervaluing and lack of recognition of *unpaid* care work. In some South African families, grandmothers have replaced wage-earning men as economic lynchpins. Nearly 5% of homes are skip-generation homes, where grandparents (and mostly grandmothers) care for grandchildren. These 'granny-focal' domestic arrangements are further necessitated by a frequently missing middle generation, some of whom have been lost to AIDS and others to the perpetual search for work in cities and neighbouring countries. This urges us to ask, who cares for Granny?

Changes in South African household structure over time, including declining marriage rates, and rising numbers of women-headed households have increased the number of impoverished homes in South Africa and forced women to juggle their unpaid care work with paid work to make ends meet – reducing their ability to give freely and fully to both. We need to ensure more equitable care arrangements.

The family is the primary level of socialisation where children learn the norms and standards of society. As such they are key to ensuring and promoting human rights, equality and dignity. An ordinary thing: 'Equal families in South Africa' is a locally produced film that showcases feminist families that have creatively adapted, expanded and re-written expectations of care and normative constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Recognition of the importance of intervening in and reducing gender inequality can be identified at a policy level in South Africa's National Strategic Plan (NSP) on Gender-Based Violence & Femicide, which mentions a long list of national policies that are all related to gender equality in some way. There is also global recognition and action motivated to change gender relations in the Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 5 calls for the elimination of all forms of discrimination, violence, harmful practices, and to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work. Doing so will require more family-friendly policies that allow parents to care through flexible work arrangements, subsidised childcare and family leave packages.

***Dr Nicole Daniels is a postdoctoral fellow at the DSI-NRF CoE in Human Development at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town. She is a maternal health specialist, qualitative sociologist and consultant at Percept. Daryl Swanepoel is CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the Inclusive Society Institute report on youth inequality which has recently been published under the title 'Understanding Gender Inequality'.***