



LONE MOTHERS, SOCIAL SECURITY AND DIGNITY

Comprehensive social security could play a critical role in helping to protect and respect people's dignity. **Gemma Wright** and **Andrea Royeppen** report on a colloquium presented at the HSRC on lone mothers, hosted by PAN: Children.

There is a Setswana phrase that goes, 'Mma ngwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng'. Translated directly into English it means 'a mother holds a knife by the blade (sharpest part of the knife)', and is interpreted as meaning that a mother will do anything in her power to protect her child from danger.

In many respects, this phrase encapsulates the findings of a recently completed study titled *Lone mothers in South Africa – the role of social security in respecting and protecting dignity*. The three-year project, which involved collaboration between researchers at the University of Oxford, the HSRC and the University of the Western Cape, was funded by the UK Department for International Development and the Economic and Social Research Council.

Link between dignity and grants

Although dignity and social security are of relevance to people regardless of their age and gender, this project focused particularly on lone mothers because, as a diverse group, they throw into sharp relief the challenge of being both breadwinner and caregiver in the context of high levels of poverty and unemployment. Lone mothers were

broadly defined as women who did not live with a spouse or partner and who were the main caregivers of one or more children under the age of 18. The main focus of the study was on lone mothers of working age.

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Dignity and social security are both mentioned within the South African constitution, but the connection between them is relatively under-explored. The South African Bill of rights stipulates, 'Everyone has inherent dignity and the Right to have their dignity respected and protected' and that the state must take 'reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation [of providing] access to social

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security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance’.

Notwithstanding these commitments, working-age adults, including caregivers of children, are not yet entitled to social assistance in their own right unless they are disabled, although many caregivers intersect with the social security system in relation to the child support grant (CSG), which is social assistance for children living with low-income caregivers.

Poverty was described by lone mothers as erosive of their dignity.



Poverty erodes dignity

A total of 36 focus groups and 16 in-depth interviews were undertaken in the Eastern and Western Cape with low-income lone mothers who received the CSG for one or more children. Almost 200 lone mothers took part in the focus groups.

The study explored how lone mothers interpreted the meaning of dignity in the context of their own lives, and the impact of poverty and inequality on dignity. Their experiences of interacting with the social security system were explored in three ways: as applicants of the CSG; as users, custodians and consumers of the CSG for a beneficiary child; and in their status as CSG recipients, in the eyes of others.

The participants were also asked what they thought of a grant intended for their own material needs (rather than those of their children), and the extent to which they regarded the CSG as a manifestation of social solidarity or ubuntu.

Interviews were also held with senior policy makers in government about dignity and social security policy design and implementation, and social attitudes were explored more broadly about dignity, poverty and social security using data from the HSRC’s South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS).

The study found that dignity was understood and experienced as being a very important and relational value, or the extent to which one feels valued by important others.

The main reason lone mother respondents said their dignity should be protected and respected was because of their roles as caregivers: they took this role extremely seriously. Poverty was described by lone mothers as erosive of their dignity partly, but not exclusively, because of how it impeded their ability to fulfil their roles as caregivers. Accounts were given of how poverty negatively impacted on their sense of self-esteem, worthiness, autonomy and self-respect. Many of the methods and strategies of surviving poverty were also described by lone mothers as being detrimental to their sense of dignity, particularly begging, demeaning work for family and neighbours, tolerating precarious employment, and transactional sex.

The CSG plays a vital role in helping lone mothers provide for their children, yet was perceived by many as being so small an amount as to have little impact on the protection of their dignity as caregivers. The process of applying for the CSG was described by many as being detrimental to dignity, as was the opprobrium often associated with their status as CSG recipients. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the in-depth interviews in particular, the use of the CSG as an income stream contributed positively and in dignity-enhancing ways to the lives of many of the informants.

Decent work route to dignity

Decent paid work, however, was regarded by lone mothers as the main route to attaining dignity. In the absence of sufficient employment opportunities, there was strong support for the introduction of a form of social security for lone mothers, both among the participants in the focus groups and more broadly within the social attitudes survey.

This study comes at an important time when the status of child poverty in South Africa is under the spotlight. It has been noted that child poverty is inextricably linked to the poverty level of the caregiver, as child poverty cannot be addressed if the caregiver and household cannot meet their material needs.

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Widening the debate on social grants

The study calls for the CSG debate to be redirected to one that focuses on its adequacy rather than just the defence of its existence and impact, and for the debate to be widened to the constitutional commitment to the progressive realisation of comprehensive social security.

Comprehensive social security, if implemented in a way that promotes social solidarity and is sensitive to the dignity of applicants, could play an important role in helping to protect and respect people’s dignity. Until such time as these issues are addressed the phrase, ‘Mma ngwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng’ will continue to epitomise the daily challenges faced by many caregivers across South Africa as they struggle to meet their own needs and those of their children in the context of high levels of poverty and unemployment. ■

Authors: Prof. Gemma Wright, professor extraordinaire, Archie Mafeje Research Institute, UNISA, and research director, Southern African Social Policy Research Institute; Andrea Royeppen, PhD intern, Pan: Children (<http://children.pan.org.za/>) a web-based platform managed by the HSRC and UNICEF.

The Role of Social Security in Respecting and Protecting the Dignity of Lone Mothers in South Africa: Final Report, by Gemma Wright et al is available on <http://bit.ly/1sUPPIm>.



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REVIEW

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