



GENDER (IN)EQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN FAMILIES: A CALL FOR POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TO PROMOTE EGALITARIAN GENDER RELATIONS IN THE HOME

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BACKGROUND

Extremely high levels of violence and HIV/Aids have been documented in South Africa. Research has also demonstrated the ways in which particular notions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined with practices of violence and sexual risk. In particular, men and boys' adherence to versions of masculinity that privilege dominance, physical strength and high sexual activity and girls' and womens' enactment of submissive and soft versions of femininity have been linked to these social epidemics (Bhana, Nzimakwe & Nzimakwe, 2011; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Pattman, 2005). The family has been identified as an important site in which normative notions of gender are enacted; and therefore, through which children learn about gender. In light of this, a study was conducted to examine the ways in which problematic notions of gender are being (re)produced within families, as well as the ways in which these notions are being challenged. Emerging from this study, this policy brief draws key insights and recommendations on promoting gender equality in families.

METHODS

Eighteen families, from a range of different cultural and material backgrounds were interviewed in Cape Town. In order to be included in the study families needed to have at least one child between the ages of 6 and 17 living in the house. Families were recruited for participation in the study via two feminist social media platforms, a community-based organisation in a working-class suburb and church congregations in a middle-class suburb and an informal settlement. Parents (and in some instances grandparents and other family members) and children were interviewed about the practices and meanings of gender within the context of their families.

RESULTS

Problematic notions of masculinity and femininity

In a number of families, both parents and children constructed men and women as essentially different from one another and as occupying different positions within the family. Women were

constructed as primary care givers, while men were constructed as providers, disciplinarians and authority figures within the household. This common theme is illustrated by the quotes from two of the mothers in the study:

Esther¹ (divorced mother, middle-class suburb): You are the primary caretakers I don't care what anybody says [...] if you make the decision to have children you must realise that ultimately [...] that child is ill, they don't want daddy. They want mommy.

Charmaine (single mother, Cape Flats): Sometimes I feel like joh if his daddy was here now he would have listened [...] I would have my ways and he don't listen to my ways sometimes.

Women were therefore made responsible for caring for children and other household 'feminine' labour while men were exempt from this kind of work as well as being afforded control over their female partners and children. These notions of masculinity and femininity thus created clear and unequal divisions between men and women within the family.

Although in some families both parents and children drew on problematic notions of masculinity and femininity which serve to fix men and women in unequal ways within the family, there were also instances in which they drew on more egalitarian notions of gender and attempted to disrupt the binary between masculinity and femininity.

Notions of gender equality

While some families drew on problematic notions of masculinity and femininity, in other families both parents and children challenged the notion that men and women are different from one another and should be treated differently or occupy different positions within the family. Through challenging problematic notions of gender men and women were positioned in more equal ways within the family. For example, both women and men were

positioned as capable of and responsible for child care and other household labour and women were constructed as having an important role to play in family decision-making. This is illustrated by quotes from members of two different families:

Interviewer: Do you think parents should treat boys and girls differently?

Nomhle (8 years old girl, middle-class suburb): They can treat them the same [...] boys and girls can do the same thing [...] Boys can play with Barbie, girls can play with Batman.

Noluthando (mother, multigenerational family, informal settlement): If it's a boy he can do everything [...] My husband he can do everything. He can clean the house, he can cook, he can make the bread.

However, alongside these more egalitarian constructions of gender, parents and children also drew on problematic constructions of masculinity and femininity.

KEY INSIGHTS

Families are key spaces in which notions of gender are developed and; therefore, exist as a potential sites for transforming problematic notions of gender. Especially problematic are children and parents' constructions of gender which position men as socially dominant and physically strong and women as lacking authority and as natural caregivers. These constructions reproduce unequal relationships between women and men, not only within the context of the family, but also within society more broadly. Notions that support authoritarian gender relations are particularly concerning in light of the high rates of violence and HIV/Aids in South Africa, given that these social and health epidemics have been shown to be shaped by unequal gender power relations.

The study also revealed that notions of gender within the context of families are complex and contradictory. Authoritarian and

egalitarian notions are drawn on simultaneously. This can be understood in light of the fact that despite constitutional promises of equality, social structures and attitudes continue to promote gender inequality in various spheres of life. Within this context it becomes even more vital to promote gender equality in the home in order to disrupt harmful practices of violence and sexual risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Families need to be recognised as key sites in and through which gender equality can be promoted. Policies and programmes which focus on engaging both parents and other caregivers as well as children in transforming problematic notions of masculinity and femininity are necessary in order to promote more egalitarian relations between genders. While a number of parenting programmes have been rolled out by the Department of Social Development in recent years, these programmes do not address gender equality as a central component. There is therefore a need to integrate this aspect into these, and other, family interventions.
2. The conscious programming and policy-making for the promotion of gender equality within families is essential in order to disrupt harmful gender relations. This is particularly important in view of high levels of gender violence and sexual risk. In order for policies and programmes on families to promote egalitarian gender relations these policies and programmes need to make clear the link between gender inequality and practices of violence and sexual risk.

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- 1 Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of participants