"SO WE ARE ATM FATHERS":

A study of absent fathers in Johannesburg, South Africa

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by Mazembo Mavungu Eddy, Hayley Thomson-de Boor, and Karabo Mphaka

CSDA
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

MenCare

Sonke Gender Justice Network
HIV/AIDS, Gender Equality, Human Rights

Sonke's MenCare Team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Africa has an exceptionally high number of absent fathers with approximately half of the children in the country living without daily contact with their fathers. This situation presents social and developmental challenges.

Although a father's physical presence alone is not necessarily a positive outcome in itself, widespread father absence has detrimental consequences for families and for society as a whole. Responsible and engaged fathers, who do their share of parenting work, are beneficial to the development of children and to building families and societies that better reflect gender equity and protect child rights. While this problem is often raised as an issue of concern, little is known about the reasons why so many fathers disengage from their children's lives. Moreover, research in this field has largely failed to present the voices of absent fathers themselves in order to capture their perspectives on fathering. For these reasons the current research pursued the following objectives: (1) to ascertain absent fathers' understandings of the notion of fatherhood and the meanings associated with it; (2) to establish their perspectives on the phenomenon of absent fathers, particularly its causes, consequences and social dynamics; and (3) to obtain their views on what interventions would be most successful in order to address the phenomenon of absent fathers in urban contexts in present day South Africa. These aims were pursued using a qualitative approach with focus group discussions as the main method of data collection. Focus group discussions were held with absent fathers in four urban locations, namely, Alexandra, Tembisa, Doornkop and Devland.

Findings from the research suggest that widespread father absence in South Africa is intricately connected to historical, social, economic and cultural contexts. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, widespread father absence is often influenced by ideological factors such as materialist constructions of fatherhood and masculinity; socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment of fathers; cultural factors such as the cost of customary practices like *"ilobolo"* and ''damages''[1]; and relationship issues of various kinds. This conclusion is reinforced by the consideration of the absent fathers' acute awareness of the detrimental consequences of their absence, their concerns over their estrangement from their child/ren, as well as their readiness to participate in the restoration of broken ties and the prevention of the repetition of similar harmful parental behaviour by their children. It follows that the phenomenon of absent fathers may not necessarily be ascribed to pathological, negligent, or disinterested dispositions of disengaged fathers. This analysis does not intend to reduce the extent of the personal responsibility of absent fathers, but seeks to recognise the broader context which shapes their actions.

At a time when the South African government and several non-governmental organisations have identified this issue as a key developmental challenge in communities and a source of multiple social challenges, these findings are useful in informing programming. Any programme seeking to address the widespread absence of fathers will have to tackle both the predominant restrictive notions of masculinity and fatherhood, and the current problematic dynamics that exist between men and women.

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[1] In African cultures, the expression 'damages' refers to a fine imposed in reparation for an offense that has been committed within family or community relationships. For instance, this fine can be required in cases of theft, violence or when a man impregnates a woman out of wedlock. In the latter case, the fine has to be paid to the woman's family, in order to make reparations for having offended and disrespected them by impregnating her out of wedlock. In certain cases, a family may choose not to recognise the man as the father of the child if damages are not paid. Similarly, it may be decided that the child will not carry the man's surname if damages are not paid.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is the fruit of collaboration between the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) and Sonke Gender Justice Network. Both organisations identified the phenomenon of absent fathers as a critical issue to address for the promotion of gender equality and child welfare. Given the dearth of knowledge on this topic, it was important that the issue be researched further so that policy interventions, community actions and broader engagement with fathers can take into account real dynamics on the ground and the voices of absent fathers themselves. From its inception, this research was conceived as an exploratory study which would bring to the fore critical dynamics that characterise the experiences of absent fathers, as a way of influencing further research. It is expected that several other future research projects will follow up on the issues that could not be investigated further in this initial endeavour.

The views expressed in this report 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, Sonke Gender Justice Network or Sida.

ACRONYMS

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

CSDA: Centre for Social Development in Africa

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

ATM: Automatic Teller Machine

CSO: Civil Society Organisations

1 | INTRODUCTION

This research report stems from an exploratory study on the widespread and problematic phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa. While this trend is continually raised as an issue of concern and often identified as one of the key contributory factors to multiple societal ills, minimal research has thus far been devoted to understanding the reasons and social dynamics surrounding the disengagement of fathers. Moreover, absent fathers' perspectives have not been included sufficiently in publications on this matter. This research specifically provides a platform for the voices of absent fathers and aims to elicit from them new insights on their conceptions of fatherhood; the possible causes of widespread father absence; the perceived consequences of this absence; and possible remedies. The report is structured around these four themes. We, however, begin by outlining how the research was conceptualised and implemented.

2 | THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

South Africa has a high number of absent living fathers. While acknowledging the difficulty of formulating an operational definition of the concept *"absent father"*, for the purpose of this research, the term refers to fathers that do not live with their children, do not maintain communication and do not pay maintenance.

One father out of two is absent from his child's life in South Africa. This figure stems from estimates that around 54% of men aged 15-49 years are fathers, but nearly 50% of these fathers did not have daily contact with their children in 2004 (Richter & Morrell, 2006). The magnitude of the problem differs according to race groups as the proportion of children under 15 years living with a father is 30% for Africans, 53% for coloured children, 83% for whites and 85% for Indians. (See Tables 1 and 2) This phenomenon is also more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas "with 55% of African rural children under the age of 15 having absent living fathers compared to 43% of African children in urban areas" (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Desmond and Desmond (2006) cite research that found a strong relationship between household expenditure and father involvement irrespective of racial group with fathers present in only 38% of households spending less R 400 per month compared with 93% father presence in households with a monthly expenditure totaling over R 10,000.

Data on orphans' care underscore a common tendency of fathers to disengage with the child after the death of the child's mother. In 1995, it was estimated that only 41% of maternal orphans lived with their fathers in comparison to nearly 80% of paternal orphans living with their mother. In comparison to other countries in Southern Africa and East Africa, South Africa had the lowest percentage of maternal orphans living with their biological fathers (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

Recent data suggest that there has been an increase in the number of absent fathers from the end of apartheid to the present day. The proportion of African children under the age of 15 years with absent living fathers increased from 45% to 52% between 1996 and 2009. There has also been an increase for coloured children (from 34% to 41%), and for White children (from 13% to 15%). The proportion of children with absent living fathers decreased only among Indians (from 17% to 12%) (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

Data from Wave 1 (2008) and Wave 2 (2010) of the National Income Dynamic Study (NIDS) also highlight the percentages of fathers per population group who were living with their children. These figures are displayed in Table 2. The question on father's residence was based on the number of children whose fathers were alive at the time of the surveys. Table 2 shows that in 2008 and 2010 only 37% of African children whose fathers were alive, lived with the father in the household. In contrast, higher percentages of Indian and White fathers were living with their children. While most children (84%) had a father who was alive, on average, only 40.5% of these fathers supported their children. This confirms the public concern with a lack of the payment of maintenance by the fathers for their children.

"with 55% of African rural children under the age of 15 having absent living fathers compared to 43% of African children in urban areas"

Table 1: Percentages of fathers who were alive, resident with, and supporting their children
(Source: NIDS 2008; 2010 (Waves 1 and 2)

2008	Father is Alive (%)	Father is Resident (%)	Father supports the child (%)
African	82	37	39
Coloured	90	60	37
Indian	94	87	62
White	98	78	59
Total	84	43	40
N	9,408	4,967	4,966
2010			
African	82	37	41
Coloured	92	59	41
Indian	97	95	56
White	96	83	55
N	9,847	8,020	5,248

Table 2 indicates the frequency with which fathers were reported to see their children. The question how often the father saw the child was asked only if the father was not resident in the household.

Table 2: How often non-resident fathers saw their children
(Source: NIDS, 2008; 2010 (Waves 1 and 2)[2])

2008	Everyday	Several times a week	Several times a month	Several times a year	Never	N
African (%)	5	12	26	26	28	4337
Colored (%)	13	11	12	17	36	556
Indian (%)	2	2	3	63	29	12*
White (%)	14	6	22	29	24	53
Total (%)	5	12	25	26	29	4967
2010						
African (%)	7	13	27	22	28	4658
Colored (%)	21	14	15	13	35	553
Indian (%)	0	0	0	67	33	3*
White (%)	7	17	16	50	11	23*
Total (%)	8	13	26	22	28	5249

From our interpretation of the figures in Table 3, 50% to 55% of non-resident biological fathers had a low level of involvement

with their children in that they seldom or never saw their children. This trend was especially applicable for African children. Approximately a quarter (25% - 26%) of the children saw their fathers several times a month, while very few children saw their fathers daily (6% on average) or several times a week (13%). One of the reasons why fathers did not see the children might be due to migration and we were therefore interested in knowing if there were urban/rural differences that might explain this finding.

Inspection of Table 3 suggests that children living in urban areas who had non-resident fathers were more likely to see their children daily and weekly in comparison with children in rural areas. Children in rural areas were more likely to see their fathers several times a year. The differences between urban and rural children who never saw their fathers were not statistically significant (Chi2 =192.20). Approximately one-third i.e. 31% of children in urban areas who had a non-resident father never saw their children in comparison with 28% of rural children. This finding suggests that migration is not necessarily the only reason why fathers never saw their children and we need to look to other explanations for this phenomenon.

A very important finding that emerged from our

Table 3: Differences in frequency of visits between fathers in urban and rural areas

2008	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Everyday	3	9	5
Several times a week	10	14	11
Several times a month	28	20	25
Several times a year	27	23	26
Never	28	29	29
N	3,221	1,746	4,969

Chi2 = 149.9
Test is significant at the 95% level

[2] Caution needs to be exercised in interpreting data for Indian and White race groups due to small base sizes.

2010	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Everyday	5	12	8
Several times a week	11	15	13
Several times a month	30	22	26
Several times a year	26	18	22
Never	26	31	28
N	3,252	1,899	5,151

Chi2 = 192.2
Test is significant at the 95% level

interpretation of the NIDS data is evident in Table 4 which indicates that there was a very strong and statistically signicant relationship (p<0.05) between fathers seeing their children and supporting them financially. In short, fathers who had regular contact with their children either daily or several times a week or a month were more likely to contribute to the financial support of their children.

Table 4: Relationship between seeing and supporting a child

	Everyday (%)	Several times a week (%)	Several times a month (%)	Several times a year (%)	Never (%)	Total (%)
Supports the child	74	71	63	44	5	43
Does not support the child	26	29	37	56	95	57
N	365	617	1,319	1,219	1,459	4,979

Chi 2 =1471.9
Test is significant at the 95% confidence level
Source: NIDS wave 2

Although, the presence of a father in a child's life does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes, research has shown that generally father absence is associated with negative outcomes for children and women. Peacock *et al.* (2008) refer to studies in Central America and the United States that have found that paternal abandonment or neglect can result in poor educational performance and school dropout (including early entry into the labour market to help families financially), teen pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse. Children's psychological, social and cognitive development has also been found to be hampered by paternal abandonment and a lack of emotional and material support. They also refer to studies demonstrating that children with absent fathers in the US are more prone to suicides. In relation to local studies, Omar (2010) found that based on a small sample of children growing up in Johannesburg who were referred by the courts for psychological intervention at the Teddy Bear Clinic, father absence was particularly notable among children under 12 years of age.

Peacock *et al.* argue that *"the engagement or presence of a father or father figure in the life of a child positively affects the child's life prospects, academic achievement, physical and emotional health and linguistic, literary and cognitive development"* (Peacock *et al.,* 2008: 33).

International research and some studies from South Africa show that children whose fathers are present achieve better at school, have higher self-esteem and are more secure in their relationships with partners of the opposite sex (Carslon, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Richter *et al.,* 2011; Schacht *et al.,* 2009). While it is acknowledged that the presence of an abusive or neglectful father could have far worse effects than the absence of a father, it is important to note the potential positive effects for children of having a present, loving and responsible father.

Researchers on fatherhood in South Africa have argued that the presence of a father in the household is associated with positive outcomes such as children's improved access to resources in the community, increased protection, and higher levels of household expenditure (Redpath *et al.,* 2008; Richter & Morrel, 2006). Fathers are seen as bringing monetary resources into the household as shown by Desmond and Desmond's (2006) demonstration of a strong relationship between household expenditure and father

involvement, irrespective of racial group, as cited earlier. In households spending less than R400 per month on general household expenditure, fathers were present in only 38% of these cases. However, in households with a monthly total expenditure of over R10, 000, fathers were present in 93% of cases (Desmond & Desmond, 2006). These statistics suggest that poverty may be more prevalent in households without a father and that socioeconomic status might also linked to father involvement.

Men's participation as parents can also be positive for the health and well-being of women in many ways. One way is economically as research in Central America shows that *"women with children are more vulnerable to poverty if fathers neglect their financial responsibilities"* (Peacock *et al.*, 2008: 33). Around the world, work related to care giving of children 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. Women who are in equitable and healthy relationships with men who contribute to care work experience lower levels of family stress, are less likely to suffer mental health problems and derive greater satisfaction from their roles as mothers (Richter *et al.* 2011).

Positive father involvement is also beneficial to fathers themselves, as Richter (2006: 74) puts it: *"the concept needs to be fostered that 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"*. Men who assume fatherhood are also less likely to engage in high risk behaviour and are more likely to retain steady employment (Magruder, 2010).

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 is the case 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.

Though cognisant of the potential value of a 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.

Given the negative developmental outcomes associated with father absence and the beneficial consequences of a healthy and caring father presence, South Africa's phenomenon of absent fathers constitutes a huge challenge that needs to be tackled. For this reason, it was considered paramount that this problem be fully researched and understood. It was further envisaged that such research would yield important recommendations for policy, programmatic support and educational awareness.

A fathers' group for expectant or new fathers

3 | RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

4 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Aim:

This research sought to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa, particularly the reasons for their disengagement as well as related social dynamics. 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. Further, we also acknowledge that fathers might be physically absent but emotionally present in children's lives. However, a limitation of the present study is that the issue of emotional presence was not explored.

Objectives:

1. To explore absent fathers' understandings of the notion of fatherhood and the meanings associated with it.

2. To explore absent fathers' perspectives on the phenomenon of absent fathers, particularly its causes, consequences and social dynamics.

3. To obtain absent fathers' views on what interventions would be most successful in order to address the phenomenon of absent fathers in urban contexts in present day South Africa.

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in the study of masculinity, fatherhood and related social dynamics. Fatherhood is generally understood as *"the social role that men undertake to care for their children"* (Morrell & Richter 2006: 18). This concept refers to physical and emotional presence in a child's life. As mentioned previously, father involvement can have positive socio-psychological outcomes for children, but it can have negative outcomes as well. However, positive, responsible and caring father involvement, that contributes to child care work benefits the mother, child, and father and advances the cause of gender equality (Peacock *et al.* 2008b).

In conceptualising father involvement, Pleck (1997) distinguishes various modalities such as engagement, accessibility, responsibility and influence. Building on this early conceptualisation of father involvement, scholars have underscored the multiple and wide ranging parameters of the practice of fatherhood and have shown how it is related to diverse fatherhood arrangements (Marsiglio *et al.* 2000). According to Marsiglio *et al.* (2008), the practice of fatherhood can be captured in three dimensions: paternal motivation, paternal involvement and paternal influence. The first dimension, paternal motivation refers to reasons why men would want to participate in their children's lives. These reasons range from love for one's child, pressures to act as masculine adult males, and early family experiences, to perceptions about the extent children need their involvement or financial resources. The second dimension, paternal involvement, comprises aspects such as engagement, accessibility, responsibility and cognitive representations of involvement. Engagements are direct interactions with children. Accessibility involves activities regarding supervision and the potential for interaction. Responsibility refers to the father assuming a final sense of duty over the child's well-being. Cognitive representations of involvement refer to mind states such as anxiety, worry and contingency planning related to a child's well-being (ibid). The third dimension of the practice of fatherhood is the influence of fathers on children. The general features of paternal influence are nurturance and provision of care, moral and ethical guidance, emotional, practical, and psychosocial support of one's partner and economic provision (ibid). These features of paternal influence are important for children's well-being and development. It thus appears that the exercise of fatherhood needs to be conceptualised as multidimensional.

"Little is known about how men, particularly African men, relate to their role as fathers and how they make sense of the phenomenon of absent fatherhood"

Fatherhood is socially constructed and predominant conceptions of paternal involvement change over time. Lamb (2000) describes the different dominant paternal roles in American social history. Dominant father roles have shifted over time from being solely the moral teacher and guide, to include having responsibility for bread-winning, being a role model, especially for sons, and being a nurturing and active father. These changes have been influenced by processes like industrialization, economic disruption and dislocation, labour market change and demands for gender equality (ibid).

Historically, the two most dominant father roles have been providing and/or care-giving. Traditionally, fathers have been regarded mainly as providers. However, as a result of women's increasing entry into the labour market, a new fatherhood model has emerged which has emphasized the need for fathers to be involved in all aspects of parenting including care-giving activities (Morrell *et al.*, 2003). Research has shown that society and social policies do not always do justice to both equally important father roles, often emphasizing one at the expense of the other (Roy, 1999; Khunou, 2006). Fathers themselves have negotiated these roles in various ways depending on the socio-cultural and economic contexts.

Scholars have highlighted the link between provider expectations and father involvement (Roy, 2004). While noting that specific contexts may lead to different expectations for economic provision, Roy has pointed out that *"provider expectations can discourage as well as encourage men to become involved fathers"* (ibid: 4).

Father absence has two meanings. The first meaning has to do with only physical absence in the household in which the child is living, caused by factors such as *"situations of divorce, domestic instability, work, and social dislocations, including wars"* (Morrell & Richter, 2006: 18). However, fatherhood goes beyond mere father physical presence because *"a father might well be physically present, but emotionally absent, or physically absent but emotionally supportive"* (ibid, 18). In addition, a father's presence can be characterized by abusive conduct towards his child or his wife, and therefore not necessarily beneficial.

The second meaning of the concept *"absent father"* thus refers to a father's emotional disengagement from his child's life regardless of whether he is physically present or distant. Morrell notes two problems associated with the argument that father presence is beneficial by default. The first problem is that *"it is difficult to show that physical absence of the biological father is as serious for the child as is often argued"* (Morrell, 2006:18) as father presence can also be negative in some cases. The second problem stems from the fact that *"men have used the argument that children need their (biological) father to pursue anti-feminist campaigns designed to return women to their dependence on men or to reduce their autonomy"* (ibid, 18). Other scholars of family dynamics in South Africa have noted that the discourse on the phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa has focussed on co-residence and has thus failed to recognise the extent of father-child connections and paternal support that transcend co-residence (Madhaven *et al.*, 2008).

While acknowledging the difficulty of formulating an operational definition of the concept *"absent father"*, for the purpose of this research, the term refers to fathers that do not live with their children, do not maintain communication and do not pay maintenance.

Whilst the extent of physically absent fathers in South Africa may be well publicised, little is known about the extent of fathers who are emotionally absent. The latter includes many fathers that are physically present in households. Furthermore, little is known about how men, particularly African men, relate to their role as fathers and how they make sense of the phenomenon of absent fatherhood. Based on an awareness of some of these knowledge gaps, previous research on fatherhood and masculinity has called for *"more research on men's roles in the family"* as this research is considered to have the potential to *"inform the development of new programmatic approaches that might feasibly engage men's concerns and needs, and more effectively involve men as actors in community coping strategies"* (Morrell & Richter, 2006: 29). This research intended to address some of these gaps.

5 | METHODOLOGY

5.1. Research design

The study took the form of an exploratory- descriptive research design given the dearth of knowledge in this field, and was located within an interpretive qualitative paradigm. It was aimed at generating initial insights into the causes of fathers' absence from their children's lives in the hope that this knowledge would shape future research and interventions.

5.2. Sampling

Selection for the focus group discussions targeted fathers between the ages of 15-35, who were absent from the lives of at least one of their children. Selection of this young and fairly homogeneous age group was aimed at creating a favourable space where participants would feel free to express their experiences without fear of being judged or censored. Absence was defined in the following terms: the father sees his child/ren less than once every three months, sends money to them less than once a month and does not communicate telephonically with the child. It was acceptable if these terms did not apply to all of their children. A few men attended the FGDs who did not fall within the criterion of age, but they were not excluded as it would have been rude to ask them to leave.

5.3. The research sites

Alexandra, Doornkop, Thembisa and Devland were chosen as sites to mobilise interviewees due to the fact that the CSDA and Sonke had connections with these areas. Sonke staff members were working in the areas of Alexandra and Devland and were therefore familiar with the area. These members of staff were requested to mobilise around 15 participants, with the idea that at least between eight and 10 men would attend the focus group discussions (FGDs).

Alexandra

Alexandra is a township within Johannesburg. It is situated adjacent to the affluent suburb of Sandton, but is one of the poorest and most densely populated areas in the city. The City of Johannesburg estimates the population to be approximately 110 000 (Deprivation Map, Livelihood Indicators, Population, n.d). However, other sources estimate the population to be as large as 470 000 (Alexandra Township Turns 100, 2012). The City of Johannesburg (Alexandra, n.d.) describes Alexandra as a *"sprawling township...characterised by scarcity of land, homelessness and a high rate of unemployment"* but notes that the area is rich in history and is home to cultural icons, activists and sporting personalities. The City of Johannesburg (Deprivation Map, Livelihood Indicators, No. Unemployed, n.d) estimates Alexandra's unemployment levels to be between 20 000 - 60 000 people, the highest category used within their deprivation map system, and estimates the average income per person per month to be between R0 - R3500 (Deprivation Map, Livelihood Indicators, Avg. Income (per month). It is acknowledged that challenges facing the area include an uncontrolled influx of people, high unemployment, a land and housing shortage, as well as a housing backlog (Region E, City of Johannesburg, n.d.).

Devland

Both Devland and Doornkop are suburbs within Soweto, the largest township in greater Johannesburg. Devland falls under Region D within the City of Johannesburg's municipality. Region D is described as having various challenges, including poverty, high unemployment and low educational levels (Region D, City of Johannesburg, n.d.). Devland is estimated by the City of Johannesburg to have an average income of between R0-R3500 per person per month.

Devland is seen as one of three "formal" industrial parks within the greater Soweto area and is characterised by both formal industrial developments and more informal industrial use found throughout housing settlements (Industrial Node Profile, City of Johannesburg, n.d.). The City of Johannesburg estimates its population to be around 17 000 people, with approximately 10 000 unemployed (Livelihood Indicators, City of Johannesburg, n.d.). The City of Johannesburg notes that many of Region D's inhabitants live in informal settlements (Region D, City of Johannesburg, n.d.).

Doornkop

Doornkop is the poorest ward of Region C and the 10th most deprived ward in Johannesburg. It is located on the north-west side of Soweto in Johannesburg. Doornkop is a formal municipal area consisting of brick housing with backyard shacks and small pockets of informal housing. It has tarred streets, basic services (such as piped water and electricity), some social services (such as primary health care clinics, schools and non-governmental community services), and small businesses (Patel *et al.*, 2012). StatsSA estimated in 2004 that the population of Doornkop was 24,225 (ibid.). Doornkop has an average of 1.3 households per stand (de

Wet *et al.*, 2008). The City of Johannesburg estimates the average income in Doornkop to be R1697 per person per month (ibid.).

Tembisa

Tembisa is situated on the East Rand of Johannesburg, in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. It is the second largest township in Gauteng after Soweto. A recent study by TNS Research Surveys, one of the world's largest consumer knowledge and information specialists, states that Tembisa has a population of 442 054 and 105 257 households. The household monthly income is estimated at R3 68322 (Ndaba, 2011). Another source estimates the population to be 511 671 (Tembisa, n.d). While Tembisa is a large township with amenities such as large shopping malls, clinics and libraries, it is also characterised by a large amount of informal housing (Ndaba, 2011).

The four research sites are inhabited predominantly by black people, and have high levels of poverty, unemployment and housing shortages. Since the majority of participants 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.

5.4. Profile of the Participants

A total of thirty-four fathers took part in the focus group discussions across the four research sites. The ages of the fathers ranged from 22 to 54 with the majority of fathers (20 out of 32 or 68.7%) being under the age of 35 years. Eleven or 34.3% of the participants reported being employed, while 21 or 65.6% of the fathers reported being unemployed.

Table 5: Profile of participants

Total number of participants	34
Ages of participants	Between 22 and 54
Participants under the age of 35	68.7% (20 out of 32)
Employed participants	34.3% (11 out of 32)
Unemployed participants	65.6% (21 out of 32)
Participants currently residing in Johannesburg	100%
Race of participants	Black, 100%
Participants with children living in another province	40% (13 out of 32)

All of the participants were Black men, due to the fact that the research sites are inhabited mainly by Black people. Thirteen, or 40%, of the participants reported that they had a child, or children, who were living in a different province. As all the participants were currently living in Johannesburg, it is possible that some fathers had been separated from their children due to searching for work in Gauteng. The majority of participants reported having fewer than three children. Only one respondent reported having a large number of children, namely seven. Fathers did not mention the number of children with whom they were not in contact, which represents a limitation of the study.

5.5 The Research Tool

The focus group schedule was devised to cover the following five topics:

1. The meaning of fatherhood
2. The extent of absent fatherhood
3. The consequences of absent fatherhood
4. The causes of absent fatherhood
5. Policy and programmatic interventions/suggestions.

Questions were devised to explore the participants' understanding of fatherhood and the prevailing norms associated with fatherhood for them; including whether being absent or present was considered a norm; what the participants perceived to be the reasons why they were absent and whether they wished this situation was different; what they perceived to be the consequences of their absence for themselves, their children and their children's mothers; and whether they felt there were any changes that should be made at a policy level in order to support them to be involved with their children in more positive ways.

5.6 Data collection

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were chosen as the method of data collection in order to access a greater number of men in a short period of time and to utilise the group dynamics of men sharing their experiences with one another. It was also thought that group discussions might minimise the opportunity for men to exaggerate or misrepresent their responses, as their peers would be likely to pick up on any such attempts and challenge them.

Access to communities was arranged through Sonke Gender Justice Network, a gender, HIV and human rights organisation engaging with men for gender equality. They assisted with mobilising participants and facilitating the FGDs.

The FGDs lasted between 2 to 4 hours. Sonke Gender Justice Network staff facilitated the discussions due to their experience in working with groups of men. During most of the FGDs one person facilitated the discussion, one person took notes and another ensured that the discussion covered all the topics from the interview schedule, as the discussion naturally extended across topics.

5.7. Data analysis

The recordings of the FGDs were transcribed and the transcriptions were coded using qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti. The codes were developed collaboratively between Sonke Gender Justice Network and the CSDA over a number of sessions. The coded transcriptions were then used to develop themes and sub-themes. There was no attempt to quantify the responses. The team work and interactivity that characterised the coding process increased the level of reliability of the data analysis process. Direct quotes chosen from the transcripts are used to illustrate the findings and support the interpretation of the themes. Some quotes may be grammatically incorrect as the data were not 'cleaned up' during transcription and translation. The idea was to keep the expressions as close as possible to those of the participants (O' Connor & Gibson 2003).

5.8. Ethical considerations

All participants were asked to sign a consent form before participating in the FGD. The consent form confirmed that participation was voluntary; that any respondent could withdraw at any time; they could choose not to answer any question; and that all participants' identities would be kept confidential.

The participants were also asked to give their consent to being tape-recorded. The consent form they signed confirmed that they were giving their permission to be taped, but that the transcriptions would be used only for the purposes of the research; that the tapes would only be heard by the research team, and that no identifying information would be included in the report.

Counselling services were offered for any participants who felt they needed to debrief due to the topics that were raised during the discussion. Refreshments were provided and a R30 airtime voucher was offered to each participant as a gesture of appreciation for participation.

5.9. Limitations

Most participants were drawn from a single class and race group. These characteristics of the sample may have shaped the findings. Hence, future research should reach out to samples that reflect more diversity or target groups that have not yet been researched.

Having relied only on focus group discussions as the data collection method, the study did not have other parallel methods of collecting information on absent fathers. It is thus possible that other factors, contrary to those raised by the participants during the discussions, may have caused them to be absent from their child/ren's lives. Future research on this topic will benefit by employing multiple

methods of data collection. It is acknowledged that the fathers present in the FGDs may have been compelled to conceal the actual reasons for their absence, due to shame, embarrassment or the desire to project the perceived "correct" attitudes and behaviour. However, there were also few reasons why participants would have been motivated to fabricate their responses, as there was little to gain from such an approach.

As was discussed earlier, the choice to employ FGDs may have assisted to mitigate for such occurrences, as participants may have realised that exaggerations or misrepresentations would be quickly picked up by their peers. The facilitators chose not to openly challenge or question the participants responses, as this kind of confrontational approach might have been interpreted as being judgemental and could have resulted in the participants feeling reluctant to share further. It should also be noted that the discussions did not aim to influence the participants' attitudes towards women, gender equality, parenting or fatherhood, but rather to objectively record men's attitudes and opinions.

However, it is also possible that some absent fathers were unable to recognise the true reasons for their absence and might have found it easier to blame such behaviour on external forces rather than their own decisions and attitudes. These responses were highly important and useful nonetheless, as any intervention seeking to reach out to fathers would need to be aware of such perspectives, in order to be more effective. Thus while some may judge that certain motivations put forth by the participants could appear feeble or inadequate, it would be important for interventions to consider the ways in which such fathers were making sense of their environments and contexts, irrespective of whether such attitudes or opinions are considered valid or not. Any attempt to positively influence men's behaviour, would need to take into account their existing opinions and attitudes, which this research attempts to present.

The study did not speak to mothers and children and could therefore not capture their perspectives on absent fathers. Due to the exploratory nature of the project, only men who were deemed to be absent in their children's lives, partipated in the study. Research that seeks to inform interventions would benefit from speaking to men who have successfully negotiated challenging situations, such as unemployment and poverty and are present in their children's lives, in positive and constructive ways, in order to understand the means by which they overcame the challenges that were often cited by the participants of this study.

It is therefore recommended that future studies devise strategies to overcome these limitations.

6 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1. Conceptions of fatherhood

6.1.1. Fathers see their role primarily as providers

When enquiring about participants' conceptions of fatherhood, it emerged that fathers saw themselves primarily as providers. Though the term *"provider"* has a broader significance, by far most fathers expressed a materialistic interpretation of the concept. For this group of men, the provider role referred to the father's obligation to supply his child or family with material goods or financial means. Masculinity and fatherhood were primarily understood in terms of one's ability to provide for one's family's needs. In the course of the four focus group discussions, the primacy of the father's provider role emerged as a recurrent theme. A father in Doornkop stated: *"That is just that. As a father, you have to go and look for a job so that you can take care of your child"*. This theme was echoed by a similar statement from a father in Tembisa: *"We are the ones who must all the time come up with plans to ensure survival in the house."* While it is acknowledged that many women must experience similar feelings, especially if they are faced with raising children alone, it is possible that fathers experience this social pressure to ensure survival as an indicator of their manhood, and therefore possibly do not recognise that women would encounter similar challenges. Another father referred to the social pressure generated by the primacy of the provider role: *"Whether you are unemployed or employed, you must provide"*. This comment expresses the seemingly non-negotiable impression that fathers have towards the inseparability of fatherhood and being a provider. It was presented as if there is no leeway in terms of this relationship.

These voices of fathers point not only to the prevalent notion of the provider role, but also to the dominance of the social representation of fathers as people who work. The study's finding partly explains the traditional dichotomy between men's place in the public sphere and mothers' relegation to the care-giving activities in the private place of the household. However, for the majority of fathers who were unemployed, the primacy of the provider role was experienced as a huge constraint on their capacity to exercise fatherhood. The research cited by Desmond and Desmond (2006), whereby fathers were present in 93% of households with a monthly total expenditure of over R10, 000, could support the idea that men who are employed and earning a relatively high salary find it easier to assume a fatherhood role due to their capacity to provide. However, there could be a number of other contributing factors

6.1.2. Care-giving presented as the preserve of women

Emphasis on the provider role was expressed in a way that rejected care-giving activities as forming part of fatherhood. Such activities were rather perceived as being the preserve of the female partner. While a few fathers embraced involvement in care-giving activities, many fathers still dissociated themselves from this type of involvement which they considered to be more naturally suited to female partners. The following quote from a father in Tembisa illustrates how he distanced himself from care giving activities while insisting on the male provider role:

> **"The woman is somebody who is supposed to take care for the child. They are born to do that. She is responsible in any way for the child. When a child cries, he does not say "Papa". He says "Mama", from a young age. When he starts to talk he says "Mama". Women are responsible for the social well-being of the children. And we are responsible for financial well-being of the child. If we can change and say that I'm guarding the child. I nappy him, I bath him and I say that the woman must go and look for a job, it won't work. It will look like we are crazy, it will seem like the nation is going crazy".**

Fathers justified this separation of roles by appealing to nature and religion. They represented men as incapable of providing good care to children, particularly babies. In contrast, women were believed to possess an innate ability to look after children and establish natural bonds with their offspring. A woman's ability to care for children was

perceived by many of the participants as effortless and natural. This theme was articulated by a father in Tembisa as follows:

> "You see we are not caring, if we are to be honest. If you are left with the child for the day, you will find that the child is dirty. The child hasn't eaten for the whole day. Actually there is nothing that you do. You will go and spend time with the guys, drink beer or do whatever whereas the child will be suffering. But a woman, no matter whenever, whatever you can do, first thing when the child wakes up, she will ask where is my son. But for guys, it is difficult for us because with us this thing, we were not meant to possess it, you see?"

Belief in the natural difference between a mother's and father's ability to care for the child was again expressed with the emphasis on contrasting behaviour:

> "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. And be patient…But you can't have the same patience as the mother. A mother's love and a father's love are different. They will never be the same. Do you understand me, my brother?"

By ascribing women's care ability to nature, fathers did not look at the care-giving role as a set of skills that can be learned and perfected. Rather, fatherhood and motherhood were understood as deterministic and static phenomena. It is probable that the participants were socialised to believe that men and women have inherently different strengths, rather than being taught to believe that such strengths are learned. It is therefore not surprising that such opinions were expressed. As the participants believed that there were forces beyond their control dictating their incompetence for childcare, it is similarly unsurprising that few of them had engaged in childcare.

There were indications that many men lacked knowledge and skills around childcare. For example, the view was expressed that a man cannot care for a child because he is unable to breastfeed, but there was no acknowledgement of the possibility of using expressed breast milk or formula.

> "It's like this - some ladies breastfeed their babies you see…, it's like as a father, let's say the baby is used to being breastfed, as a father you see. Let's say you are left with the baby for a day. You know as a father the baby can cry for the whole day for that period when he wants to be breastfed".

The view was articulated that caring for a child is seen as hard work for a man and that this role comes more naturally to women. There was no acknowledgment that caring for children also involves much hard work for women. As one participant put it:

> "Staying with a child is difficult my brother, for a man. You like wish to eh, to stay with him. You stay with him or her in those…, eh maybe a week or two, you see? But as time goes on you see that eh this thing is difficult for me, you see?
> Okay fine you are unemployed, you see? But for me to stay with a child at home, I think it will be simple if maybe we can get someone, you see? To stay with him or he must go to crèche".

Again, this notion reinforced the idea that caring for children is something that comes naturally to women. Many of the participants did not acknowledge that parenting skills can be learned, but a few did, as well as recognising that caring activities strengthen the bond between parent and child:

> "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".

Contrary to the views shared by the majority, this participant insisted that bonds with the child are not natural or automatic, but created through daily activities with the child:

> ❝It's important for a father to play the caring role that you are able to be with your child in everyday activities. Eh, maybe you are able to wash your child if you are living together and you are able to assist him to play and that's what you need to do to create the bond.❞

It became clear that the participants conceived of fatherhood quite one-dimensionally, instead of recognising fatherhood to be a multi-faceted exercise. As was outlined in the literature review, fatherhood has historically been associated with providing, but more recently a new fatherhood model has emerged which has emphasized the

need for fathers to be involved in all aspects of parenting, including care-giving activities. It could be argued that this new fatherhood model has not yet been accepted by the participants who responded in this manner.

Similarly, the literature review outlined the idea that fatherhood can be conceptualised as involving various modalities, including direct engagement with the child, supervision, making decisions and planning for the child's wellbeing, nurturing the child both physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally, providing moral and ethical guidance, as well as providing for the child economically. While some of these modalities were raised, such as providing guidance, the most dominant notion of fatherhood presented by the participants was that of providing.

It can therefore be concluded that the participants who reflected these conceptions of fatherhood would have to change their thinking about fatherhood, in order to facilitate their increased participation in the variety of alternative fatherhood activities. It is also conceivable that a broader acceptance of men's abilities to take part in such activities by partners and communities would contribute to enabling men to become more responsible, caring and involved fathers.

6.1.3. Fatherless fathers and the risk of a vicious cycle

It was also notable that a number of fathers stated that they did not know how a father should behave vis-a-vis his children as they did not have a father figure in their life. The fact that some of these absent fathers did not themselves have an involved father points to the possibility of a vicious cycle. This view was encapsulated in the quote: "We did not know our father and he never did anything for us. We do not have any father idea". Many fathers had similar explanations for their poor fatherhood practices. Another father spoke of the generational transmission of negative fatherhood models

> "You are a grown man like this and I think your father has never given you a bath or put nappies on you and dressed you. It is highly rare. You see. 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".

In contrast, one respondent in Tembisa suggested that men cannot blame their fathers for their poor decisions, after another respondent said he felt that he "makes mischief here in the township" because he didn't have a father to guide him:

> "Before you do whatever you do, you think and then you decide and conclude...so I'm going to do this thing. Who makes those decisions? Is it your father? Do you blame him even then?"

This finding underscores the crucial role of a present and involved father in serving as a role-model for his offspring. Given the high number of children that grow up without regular contact with a father figure in post-apartheid South Africa, it is likely that a high number of fatherless fathers may be a contributing factor to the fathers themselves becoming uninvolved fathers, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle. The question of whether it will be necessary to provide current children with positive fatherhood experiences or training in order to prevent this kind of vicious cycle continuing should form part of the policy and advocacy debate and research. It is conceivable that for many young men, it would be extremely difficult to take on a fatherhood role which has not been demonstrated to them by anyone. Considering the high levels of absent fathers in South Africa, along with the assumed high levels of disconnected fathers, it is plausible that for some boys and young men, any form of positive role-model with regards to positive and involved fatherhood would be scarce in their communities. The importance of advocacy work which seeks to identify such role-models therefore becomes apparent. Similarly, the media has a potentially powerful role to play in demonstrating such fatherhood roles, particularly in popular television shows, as well as in raising awareness on parenting skills in order to demonstrate that such abilities can be learned, even without appropriate role-models. It is true that many men choose not to make irresponsible decisions despite having had challenging childhoods, as illustrated by the participant's preceding comment. The same cannot be said for all men however. It would therefore be beneficial to identify role-models able to positively influence those men and boys in need of guidance and inspiration.

6.1.4. A father as 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 present fathers could play in making sure that their children know where they come from, and familiarise themselves with their culture, particularly by taking boy children to initiation ceremonies when they reach the relevant age. The role of the father was also perceived to ensure that the child was fully integrated with other members of the extended family and attended family rituals and functions. A participant in the Doornkop focus group discussion described the process and significance of family and cultural integration as follows:

"Within the family there must be, eh maybe your uncle or your brother's father who knows the same values of the family. They will appoint someone maybe you have to go to the homeland in Pietersburg if you are here in Soweto. They will say no, your father is there and we have to teach you the culture. Now you are going to become a man. So they will take you, you'll sit there maybe in 'ndumba'".

It is through all these processes of cultural induction that participants believed a child's identity was formed.

According to prevailing cultural practices, the attribution of the father's surname to his children marks the integration of children into their father's family and places them in the family lineage in full relationship with other forefathers or ancestors (Mkhize, 2006). Many absent fathers expressed the pain of having children who did not bear their surnames as a consequence of their absence. They were concerned that these children would grow up without knowing and connecting to their roots. A participant in the Alexandra focus group discussion put it this way: *"A father plays an important part in a child's life because it gives that child a sense of belonging, an identity, a background and the child knows his roots"*.

A child's connection or disconnection from his 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. They also expressed the concern that their detached child would experience a similar predicament. These views clearly presented fathers as key to a child's identity and prosperity, his or her linkage to ancestors and sources of success and good fortune. These perceptions echoed sentiments that are prevalent in the SABC 1 reality show *"Kumbul'ekhaya"* which frequently documents the pain of people whose life has been turbulent until they reunite with their absent father or mother. Reporting on their research in Eastern Cape, Nduna and Jewkes (2012: 321) also note that *"paternal connection for the child is important in this setting for ancestral protection"*.

Findings on fathers' conceptions of fatherhood resonate with similar research conducted with fathers in low income African American communities in the US. In his study on the construction of roles for paternal providers in low income and working class families, Roy (1999; 2004) also noted the prevalence of the provider role in how fathers constructed their paternal involvement. Due to a lack of stable employment, many non-resident fathers failed to live up to provider expectations. Roy's comparative analysis of low income and working class groups also led to the conclusion that *"the importance that families assign to men's providing may play out differently in diverse social contexts. For example, men's providing is particularly salient for non-middle*
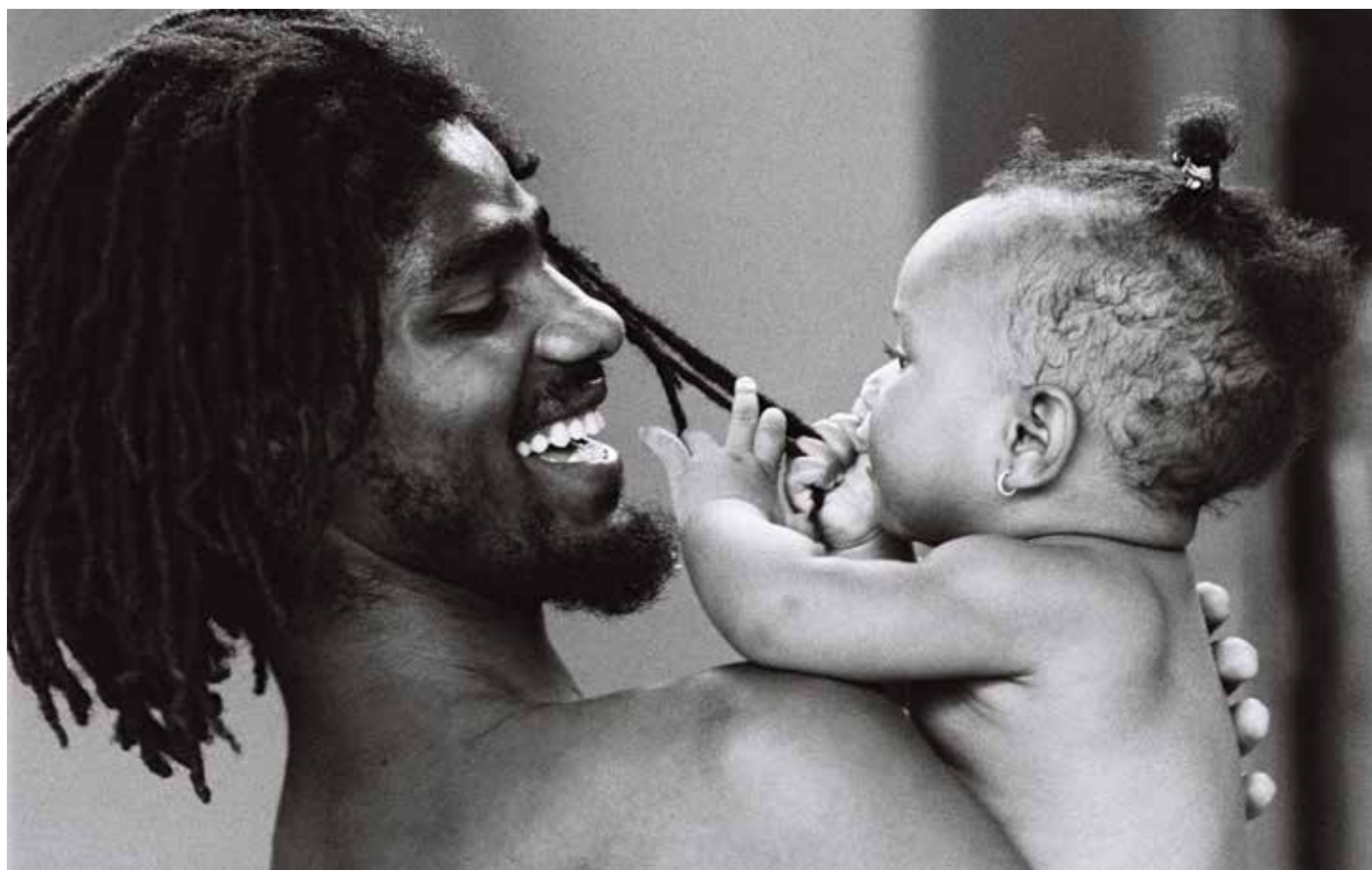
class families who urgently need resources" (Roy, 2004:2). This socio-economic contextualisation is indeed in line with the dynamics found in South African poor black communities where men are under huge pressure to fulfil their provider role as discussed previously.

Unlike in South Africa where unsuccessful providers often retreat or are excluded from being involved in their children's lives, Roy's research shows that fathers in the US who failed to provide financially provided a variety of in kind contributions and displayed alternative paternal roles (Roy, 1999; 2004). This allowance for fathers to assume alternative roles contrasted with US family welfare policies which prioritise finances over care. In this regard, the US child maintenance system shows similar characteristics as the South African one, particularly in their emphasis on fathers' financial contribution and non-recognition of alternative father roles.

Findings from this study are also consistent with Roy and Morrell's conclusions on a similar subject. Roy (2004:4) argues that *"provider role expectations can discourage as well as encourage men to become involved fathers"*. The South African case discussed earlier has shown that predominant constructions of fathers as providers tend to curtail their paternal involvement. This study also illustrates with new empirical findings drawn specifically from a previously under-researched social group how in a South African context where fathers are primarily represented as providers, men who are unable to provide for their families are more likely to deny or abandon their fatherhood roles (Morrell, 2006).

The fact that fatherhood is socially constructed also means that current and predominant fatherhood ideas should be viewed as dynamic rather than static or deterministic. This study has shown that a significant number of fathers continue to hold traditional views about paternal roles. They tend to naturalise gender roles and perpetuate stereotypes regarding differences between male and female roles. The rigidity that comes with such dualist and dichotomist views of gender roles constrains adaptation to changing circumstances and wide adoption of the new fatherhood model. The cultural importance of a father viewed as a key player in a child's identity and a link to ancestors, as well as sources of success and good fortune, is a useful foundation for actions that promote positive father involvement.

6.2. Reasons for being an absent father

The participants cited several reasons they perceived as causing their estrangement from their children's lives. Participants mentioned multiple factors, most of which can be subsumed under five categories namely: unemployment and poverty of fathers, dominant constructions of men and fathers as providers, cultural factors such as the high cost of

"ilobolo" and damages in African communities, dysfunctional relationships between parents, and challenges relating to the move towards a new relationship after divorce or break up. Without being exhaustive, this list sums up the various explanations provided by absent fathers in their accounts for why they were absent from their child's life. The following sections will endeavour to unpack each of these factors.

6.2.1. Unemployment and poverty

For the participants, fatherhood was associated with employment. It became clear that an unemployed father who is unable to provide for his family tends to feel emasculated and unable to fully assume the role of father. Unfortunately, unemployment is rife in South Africa. Statistics South Africa has estimated the unemployment rate in the first quarter of the year 2013 at 25.2% (Quarterly Labour Force Survey, 2013). Young, black township dwellers are disproportionately affected by the lack of jobs in the economy. Unemployment and poverty are closely associated in South Africa to the extent that employment is a key factor in avoiding poverty. Hence, it is likely that many unemployed fathers live in poverty.

Most absent fathers that participated in this research were unemployed and lived in poor townships, a social environment that is marginalized from modern mainstream economic activities. As a result, they claimed that they experienced conditions of poverty and precariousness that constrained their exercise of fatherhood. They complained about their socio-economic conditions and used these factors to explain their disengagement from the lives of their children.

Unemployment and poverty of men are not in themselves factors that should cause fathers to become absent. 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 may retreat or feel excluded. Such expectations are particularly prevalent in a traditionally patriarchal society like South Africa. It emerged from the focus group discussions that some fathers avoided acknowledging paternity in view of the socio-economic burden this brings with it. This factor was evident in the statement from a father in Tembisa who explained:

> "We like girls, we like to have fun and then there are those mistakes that happen, maybe if you take someone and go home with her, you sleep with her and do whatever you do and then after that she becomes pregnant, you see? After she falls pregnant, okay let's say you are a guy and you don't work, you see? Eish, the girl will come and tell you that she is like this, you see? And you are going to say eish I'm not employed you see and then you'll run away. Or she will notice that this person is

unemployed, what is he going to do for my child? All those things are the causes of kids who don't have parents".

It is acknowledged that huge numbers of women ensure that they are responsible and caring mothers despite facing similar challenges of unemployment and poverty. However, the pressure on men to fulfil the role of being a provider in order to be considered a 'real' man can cause men to retreat when they fail to live up to this ideal. It is conceivable that similar levels of pressure are placed on women to assume the role of motherhood. As a woman, abandoning one's children may be considered the ultimate negation of one's role as a woman. The same does not apply to men, especially in a society where absent fathers are so common. For these reasons, a re-orientation of gender norms is necessary, in order to encourage men to prioritise their roles as fathers. Other fathers stated that their willingness to stay involved in their children's lives was often overcome by a lack of financial and material resources. As a father in Alexandra stated: *"I am trying as much as I can to avoid it (being absent), but it seems other way round. I fail because I don't have the money".* Another participant in Alexandra relayed his friend's experience: *"Just because by the time they had children he was not working but he was trying all the best. Now he is called useless man. He cannot even access his children because he is not bringing anything in their life".* The constraining power of unemployment and its consequences for absent fathers' ability to reconnect with their children was also conveyed by a father in Alexandra in these words:

"Something that may sometimes lead me backwards is that I don't have a capacity, meaning 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 that I want to enjoy 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".

6.2.2. Predominant constructions of fathers as Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs)

Caught up in difficult economic circumstances, many fathers fail to live up to provider expectations. It is therefore not surprising that many men buckle under this pressure, or their relationship with the mother flounders, and they end up becoming estranged from their children. Due to the pressure placed upon men to provide, for themselves, their partners, families and communities, along with the strong links between being a provider and masculinity, the inability to provide material or financial support can cause fathers to feel like failures. As a result of these difficulties in conforming to successful provider expectations, many fathers retreat from their children's lives. It seems that for some fathers, it is easier to retreat than to face the humiliation of feeling like a failure. As one father put it:

"It happens sometimes you have a boy of six years and you were working by the time that boy was born maybe 2 to 3 years. 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".

A Tembisa father spoke of self-isolation as a common natural reaction from fathers who become unable to provide. He stated, *"I don't know about other guys but I think it's our nature. Once you don't have anything, as a man you isolate yourself".*

Other fathers are excluded by the mother of the child or her family against their will when they are, or have become, unable to make any material or financial contribution to the child's life. A father in Devland (Soweto) reported how his former partner would keep him away from his child:

"Even now, I am unable to see her (the partner) because I don't have money and because I don't have money for 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".

A Tembisa father illustrated the impatience with which a father that fails to provide financially is treated: *"When you are a father, if you are not financially well-off or not financially stable, you can't have access to raise your child. Women also get annoyed, you see".* Many fathers voiced the perception that female partners and their families often only related to them as *'ATMs',* i.e. providers of material and financial resources, while ignoring other functions they can play in their child's life, practically and emotionally. It is possible that the participants who reported being barred from seeing their children may have shown an unwillingness to contribute towards their child, which could have motivated the mothers to exclude them. It is also possible that other

negative behaviour on the part of the father could have caused mothers to reach this decision. It is important that the well-being and the safety of the child are always prioritised. For many of the participants however, it was clear that they wished they were in a position to contribute towards their child/ren. In a situation where a father's presence has not been found to be harmful or negative, mothers should therefore be encouraged to try to include the father in the child's life, as barring the child from their father could cause unnecessary damage to a child. The immense challenges faced and overcome by single mothers are however recognised, and fathers should be encouraged to make similar sacrifices to ensure their child's well-being.

Overemphasis on the provider role by fathers themselves, by mothers and their families tend to make it difficult for alternative father roles to develop and be promoted. Nevertheless a few fathers demonstrated that they valued or were encouraged to assume alternative father roles such as taking part in childcare, in children's recreational activities or just being there. A father stated:

> "The mother of my child ended up telling me, no, you must come and see your child with or without money. When you get there hey you find the bonding, the love, you forget that you don't have money, the child grabs you, you see? So that is something I have realised."

Other participants underscored the importance of moving beyond the provider role and placing equal premium on the moral teacher role and the emotional connection to one's child, as captured in the following verbatim quote: "It is about spending time with the child and whereby you can develop a bond with your child and so that he can always know that my father taught me this". Another father concurred: "Not that because I am unemployed I must abandon my children. No, you can be around your children even if you are unemployed, show them that love". The idea was articulated that fatherhood should not be given instrumental value, but should rather be approached as a value in itself. As one participant put it, "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".

Given the apparent fixation on fathers' monetary and material contribution, the enforcement of the child maintenance system was criticized by certain fathers as being uni-dimensional because it does not move beyond the enforcement of monetary payments. While one should be careful that this reasoning does not constitute an excuse for fathers who default on child maintenance, this criticism may be read as a call for moving beyond "economic fatherhood", and recognition that material contribution is neither the full extent of fatherhood nor its most important

manifestation. Valuing a father's emotional connection with the child may be, in some circumstances, the most effective way to promote their economic contribution. Fathers who become emotionally involved in their children's lives may be motivated in ways that they were not previously motivated, to find and maintain employment, and make more significant sacrifices in their lives to ensure they are able to contribute financially. All fathers who are able to pay maintenance should do so but in South Africa there have been challenges in implementing this law and holding fathers accountable (Duncan, 2011). Therefore, alternative methods of motivating fathers to pay maintenance are worth exploring. It is acknowledged, however, that fathers who are able to pay maintenance and default on these payments should be held accountable. Legal sanctions in South Africa should be strengthened and optimally implemented to hold men, who have the means to maintain their children, accountable for failing to deliver on their maintenance obligations.

6.2.3. Cultural factors such as the high cost of "*ilobolo*" (bridewealth) and damages (fines or *intlawulo* (isi Xhosa) in African communities

Traditional African culture preconditions access to the child and the exercise of fatherhood on a variety of payments. Despite the emergence of various relationship arrangements from which children are born, traditional African cultures still consider marriage as the indication of a man's respectability and a precondition for a father's right to access his children. In this regard Hunter (2011:1110) notes that, *"despite tumultuous social change, then, marriage remained central to men and women's urban identities - a key path to respectable social adulthood"*. This condition becomes problematic when one takes into account various monetary payments that are associated with marriage in African communities. The cultural practice of *"ilobolo"* persists even in urban contexts. Various factors may contribute to the maintenance of this tradition. As Hunter (2011:1111) explains:

> "Fathers had a material interest in securing ilobolo payments, but most daughters also strongly defended the custom: how else would a woman know that a man was serious about her and would be able to support her? Cash had to be earned, and this required commitment, sacrifice, and dedication to the project of "building a home - all signs of a good man".

On this basis, Hunter argues that to dismiss *"ilobolo"* as simply a patriarchal tradition or a sign of the commodification of relationships is to overlook its cultural meaning of a man's respectability and how it connects work and family, house and home, production and reproduction (ibid).

Socio-economic changes introduced by capitalism and apartheid have over the years altered this cultural practice. Families' livelihoods became less dependent on agricultural capacity or cattle, but rather on wage labour. The payment of *'ilobolo'* was then expected in cash from men who could no longer afford the high monetary cost. *"Ilobolo"* was codified in customary law by Natal's settlers in the nineteenth century as a payment of 11 cattle and was upheld by traditional institutions. Today, when paid in cash, *"ilobolo"* often amounts to *"several thousand US dollars"* (ibid). The cash amount is determined in a negotiation process between the two families and usually depends on what the male family can afford. However, this cash payment does not always take into account the changed circumstances of the contemporary world characterised by rampant poverty and high unemployment. Moreover, families sometimes take advantage of this practice for self-enrichment, requiring disproportionately large sums of money and expensive gifts. These deviations have been referred to as *"material 'abuse'"* and *"commercialisation in the practice of ilobolo"* (Posel & Rudwick, 2011: 2). Given the challenges of unemployment and poverty mentioned earlier, it is no surprise that many men are unable or unwilling to conform to these cultural prescriptions. This limitation however, does not prevent them from having sexual relationships and having children. When a child is born out-of-wedlock, a father's access to that child may be limited or denied. Many fathers and children find themselves in this situation.

In order to claim the right to access one's child born out-of-wedlock, there are cultural procedures to follow. Certain African cultures require the father to pay damages or intlawulo (the isi Xhosa term for 'fines') as reparation for having offended and disrespected the female partner's family by impregnating her out-of-wedlock. Other cultures demand that the father pays *"ilobolo"* for the child even if he does not envisage getting married to the child's mother. These payments are not merely symbolic as they represent significant amounts of money which may not necessarily be accessible for unemployed and poor young men. Sometimes men who are unable to pay damages or *intlawulo* (isi Xhosa) will be excluded from being involved in their child's life. Culturally, it is as if they do not exist or put differently their female partners would claim they do not know them. From this cultural viewpoint, the grandmother (or in general the mother's family) who is often entrusted with the upbringing of the child, may not consent to giving the biological father access to the child as she may view this access as exposing the child to a stranger. A man who fails to acknowledge paternity and pay the required damages is dismissed by the woman's family as irresponsible and useless (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012).

Many fathers in the study mentioned these cultural factors as reasons for being disengaged from their children's lives. A father in Alexandra underscored the omnipresence of cultural prescriptions and how they impact on his ability to be an involved father:

"So, before marriage there are damages and before damages there's marriage... there's lobolo. So, those are all the challenges and financial challenges, so that's one of the core challenges for me to be there".

These sentiments were echoed by a participant in the Devland focus group:

"Culture sometimes messes up with us and makes us to run away from our kids. I am a Zulu and I have a child that I raised from when she was still young, I supported her but as time went on I had to pay damages in order to be able to see her. Even now, I am unable to see her because I don't have money and because I don't have money for the child".

While the findings of this study do not intend to reject the practice of *"ilobolo"* it highlights the fact that this practice is perceived by fathers as an obstacle to involved fatherhood. In order to address this issue, it would seem pertinent for communities to encourage the practice of paying *"ilobolo"* in-kind, or for the payments to be significantly lowered, so as to retain emphasis on its symbolic significance rather than materialist motivations. It is also recommended that further research into this issue be conducted, for example, exploring the strategies used by men who have successfully negotiated such challenges and examining whether addressing this obstacle would indeed assist to facilitate more involved fathers.

6.2.4. Dysfunctional and conflict-ridden relationships

Father absence is often closely linked to the quality of the relationship between the parents (or former partners), especially after a divorce or a break up. This study has found that conflict- ridden relationships, desire for vengeance after the collapse of a relationship, resentment, and lack of

proper communication, often result in fathers' restricted access to their children or complete exclusion. The rate of divorce in South Africa is high and stands as a clear indication of the extent and seriousness of conflicts in marital relationships. For example, the total number of published divorces fluctuated between 31 768 in 2004 and 30 763 in 2009 (Stats SA, 2009 cited in Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Since these figures are only worked out on the basis of marital relationships, they do not capture other forms of separation which occur in non-marital relationships. Therefore, it is expected that the number of dysfunctional and conflict-ridden relationships is likely to be very high in contemporary South Africa. Moreover, while being in itself a clear indication of the widespread father disengagement from their children's lives, the great number of maintenance defaulters (Duncan, 2011) could also suggest widespread communication breakdown and conflicts among former partners.

The effect that dysfunctional and conflict-ridden relationships have on a father's ability to be present in his child's life was expressed in the following statement from a father in Devland: *"When there is conflict between the mother of the child and I, the father and in my case, there is conflict between me and the mother of my child and her mother as well, … it sort of becomes a problem for me when I want to go and visit my child"*. This account is reflective of many similar experiences expressed in the focus group discussions. These conversations clearly suggest that some fathers do not have sufficient contact with their children due to a lack of effective conflict management and resolution mechanisms.

In this context, the participants described children as both the victims and the weapons. It was perceived by some of the absent fathers that at times the mothers of their children had overlooked their children's interests by actively excluding the fathers as a way of punishing or manipulating the fathers. It seemed that a number of the participants had experienced this process of marginalization. Unfortunately, some of the fathers had expressed their frustration with this situation through engaging in desperate and destructive actions. A police officer who participated in our focus group discussion recounted how, after failing to secure custody of his three children following a divorce from his wife, he drove into the bush with his children with the intention of murdering them and committing suicide. His feelings are starkly captured in this quote:

"When I took the gun, directed it towards my youngest child, and was about to fire, she looked at me and smiled, thinking that it was just a game. I then burst into tears and drove back to my mother's house to tell her everything. She consoled me and prayed with me…"

Fortunately, these children's lives were spared. While nothing can excuse such behaviour, there are recurrent media reports of children and female partners who have been murdered by the father and (former) partner who often commit suicide after such gruesome acts. The levels to which these incidents are reported indicate that these are not all isolated occurrences, and therefore demand that we find ways in which to ensure the factors and environments that produce such behaviour are addressed. The incident described by the participant points towards deep feelings of anger, helplessness and isolation. It is worth noting that the man in question had discovered that his wife had had an affair. While we cannot speculate as to whether his actions were also an attempt to punish his ex-wife, or the manifestations of a deep depression, it is clear that the father had failed to employ healthy methods of coping with this experience (until seeking comfort from his mother). It is plausible to therefore conclude that psycho-social and other support services are lacking in many communities and situations in South Africa. At the same time, a transformation of gender norms to address notions of masculinity may also contribute towards men being able to employ healthier methods of dealing with anger and depression and situations where they feel as if their identity as a man has been undermined.

It is feasible that some fathers in these situations could withhold maintenance as a retaliatory response. While such a reaction is inexcusable, as it also causes the child to suffer, the root causes of such behaviour should be addressed. It is therefore highly recommended that solutions to address relationship breakdowns are explored, in conjunction with transforming harmful masculinity norms. l

6.2.5. Challenges of moving to new relationships following a divorce or break-up

From fathers' accounts of how they had become disengaged from their children's lives, it appears that a number of them experienced difficulties negotiating access to the child because of the new relationship the former partner had developed. It was often the case that the mother had left the children with their grandmother while she entered into a relationship with a new man. In such cases, the biological fathers experienced problems negotiating with his former partner's mother, or extended family, in order to be able to see his children. Situations were also described where the new partner objected to caring for the child when the mother brought the child into their shared residence and so the child would then be left in the care of the grandmother.

In cases where the new partner or step-father accepts the responsibility of caring for the child from the previous relationship, the biological father's access to this child may become conditional on the approval of the step-father. This scenario was described by a father in the Devland focus group:

"That thing is bad and even the person you have a child with ends up meeting another person who has got money so that he can pay for her and that person will also take the child, like it happened to me. She took the child with her when she went to get married. They all went away and now I can't see the child. When I ask to see the child I must ask for permission from this father who is not her father".

It is acknowledged that anger experienced by the fathers at their former partners moving on to new relationships could have contributed to the communication breakdown; or negative behaviour on the part of the fathers may have prompted grandmothers and extended family to deny them access to their children. The fathers' perception that their ex-partners' families or current partners are an obstacle to them seeing their children, further points to the need for counselling services that would hopefully facilitate open and constructive communication and problem solving.

Another participant from the Devland FGD explained that it was his new partner who had stopped him seeing his children:

"When I met her I told her that I have children, but now she does not want my child, I have raised hers".

Such scenarios may also benefit from counselling and improved communication but would also point towards the need for men to address obstacles which are possibly within their own control and to prioritise their children's well-being over their own. It must also be acknowledged that if a father finds that his children are being cared for by another man in a competent, caring and responsible way, it might be necessary for him to consider whether his children would benefit from his presence or not. It is vital that fathers put their children's needs first. It is important to note however, that even if a child is being properly cared for, the rejection children may experience due to feeling that their fathers have chosen to not be involved in their lives could, nevertheless, be damaging for these children. It also appeared that fathers who had children with multiple female partners experienced problems in maintaining regular involvement in each child's life.

It is important to emphasize that we know little about the driving causes of the widespread father absence in households in South Africa. The causes that have been discussed in the preceding paragraphs emerged from fathers only through a self-reporting process which did not seek validation from female partners or children. Given this limitation, the five challenges discussed in the preceding paragraphs, may not be the only contributors to father absence, or the most important. It is possible that if the research explored the views of women and/or children, this list could be different. However, other studies echo some

of the factors that were identified in this study of absent fathers. For instance, Richter *et al.* (2012: 2) point out that *"migrant labour and the resulting fluidity of family life, delayed marriage due to lobolo requirements, gender-based violence and a growing autonomy amongst South African women are cited as contributors to father absence from households"*. Hunter (2011) also confirms the fact that many young men cannot marry as a result of the high cost of *"ilobolo"*. We know, as confirmed by the focus group interviews with absent fathers, that failure to adhere to this cultural practice translates into lack of access to children who are born out-of-wedlock, and thus father absence. Moreover, scholars and practitionners have advocated for the State to put in place structural enablers such as social support, assistance with employment, or other ways of reducing stresses that interfere with effective parenting or are associated with punitive childrearing (Richter & Naicker 2013). This proposition is an acknowledgement that poverty and unemployment make it difficult for fathers to accept responsibility for their children and to stay involved in their lives. In their paper on *"Denied and disputed paternity in teenage pregnancy"*, Nduna and Jewkes (2012) allude to a lack of economic means as one of the reasons why fathers deny paternity and walk away: *"some men say when they anticipate negative responses from their parents, and inability to pay 'intlawulo' and child support to the woman's family this results in a sense of 'self-embarrassment' and contributes to fatherhood denial"* (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012: 315). Financial duress has also been alluded to as a cause of father absence in other studies (Jewkes *et al.* 2009; Hunter 2006). The present study sought to capture absent fathers' own understanding of the reasons behind their disengagement from their children's lives. Since this research was only exploratory in nature, there is a need for in-depth, focused and much more inclusive research into each of these contributory factors to father absence.

6.3 Perceived consequences of being an absent father

When the participants were asked about the consequences of being an absent father, the focus of their responses was on the negative impact for their children and included behavioural, emotional, social, financial and spiritual/cultural consequences. Negative consequences for fathers were also raised and related primarily to emotional consequences. 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 aspect was not emphasized sufficiently in the focus group schedule and was not followed up by the facilitators. This finding could be an indication of the participants' reluctance to consider the effects of their absence on the mothers of their children, a general inability to empathize with their former partners or else a tendency to prioritise their own challenges. Any

of these reasons point towards a dire need to enhance communication between men and women and promote a greater awareness and appreciation among men of the challenges faced by women, and the need to transform gender roles to be more egalitarian.

6.3.1 Consequences for fathers

Feeling like a failure, especially because of being unable to provide financially

This theme was the most predominant of those relating to the impact on fathers. The prominence of this sentiment is consistent with the importance that the fathers placed on being able to provide for their children, as shown in the section on the conceptions of fatherhood.

The fathers noted that even their children disapproved of a father who is unable to provide for them. One respondent in Tembisa described the interaction of an absent father with his child in the street: *"He will tell you, maybe you see him and you call him and he says, they say that you are useless and you don't have anything, you don't do anything for me"*.

Participants also commonly mentioned that the mother, or the mother's family, is almost always involved in causing the child to see the father as a failure. A participant in the Tembisa focus group stated: *"Who says it? It's the grandmother and the grandfather and everybody else including the mother of the child and her brothers and sisters"*.

It is plausible to conclude that such feelings of failure may prompt some fathers to disengage further from the lives of their children, and thus a reorientation of norms regarding fatherhood, and indeed masculinity, could aid fathers' involvement.

It hurts when your child does not use your surname

Culturally children are expected to adopt their father's surname, a factor which was raised several times in the discussion. But the absence of the father in children's lives is likely to lead them to use their mothers' surname or in the case of the mother having moved to a new relationship, the step-father's surname. A participant in Doornkop expressed the sentiments of emasculation that come with having a child that does not bear the biological father's surname:

"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, it means I didn't [become] a man enough. I was not a real man to give my children my surname".

Suicide

Fathers illustrated the powerful effect that being denied access to one's children can have by referring to fathers they had known who had committed suicide as a result of being separated from their children. In Doornkop, participants shared the following tragic story:

"The people at the girlfriend's parental home were refusing him access to his child, you see. He hanged himself. He just got in his room and hanged himself. We were sitting and talking like this and he went into his room and hanged himself because of such issues. That is where this thing becomes painful".

It is probable that a number of factors led to this man's suicide, but it is important to note the extreme effects that being separated from one's children can have on men. It is understandable that fathers may be perceived as being less emotionally connected with their children, but this may not always be the case. It is probable that many men are unable to express the way they feel about their children, or how it affects them when they are separated from them.

Child does not call me dad

The fathers described the pain it causes them when their children do not refer to them as their dad. This hurt was often exacerbated when another man was involved in the child's life and they chose to call him Dad. A participant in Alexandra complained:

"But he stays with another father on the side more than you stay with him. He calls that one 'Papa', when he comes to you he calls you 'Themba. It hurts me you see? I have a child, I do everything for him but he calls another man 'Papa' while he calls me 'Themba'". (Name changed to avoid identification)

Other consequences

One respondent, who was from Devland, mentioned that the depression caused by being separated from his children caused him to turn to alcohol.

A father from Devland stated that he could no longer work normally (or productively) as a result of the relationship breakdown with his girlfriend and the separation from his child.

Some of the participants expressed feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in terms of being denied access to their children. They wanted the situation to be different but they did not know what to do to address the problem.

6.3.2 Impact on children

A variety of consequences were perceived by the participants as taking their toll on children, as a result of having an absent father. The participants focused on issues such as disrespectful and wayward behaviour of some children, which the fathers perceived to be a result of having an absent father; a variety of emotional effects on the child; and the children's disconnection from good fortune and their cultural identity.

Lack of manners and respect

In terms of the impact of being raised without a father, the participants most often mentioned that as a result of absent fathers children generally lacked manners and respect for their elders. They also mentioned that children lacked respect for traditional customs. These sentiments were articulated in the following quote from a participant in the Devland focus group:

"My daughter I raised her until she was almost five years but my son it's difficult. I just contact him over month-end for two days only. I can interact with him but the way he grew up, I don't like it. He swears at people and I don't like it but the girl, she knows, I told her you see that you don't swear to other people, you don't ask things from strangers, [she] knows those things but the boy does different things. Even when he goes to the neighbours, he doesn't go through the gate, the boy uses short cuts but me culturally I know that you can't go past the yard of someone. Culturally, it's wrong".

Lack of guidance

The participants were also concerned about the lack of guidance available for children. One man in Devland related this lack of guidance to his own experience of growing up without a father by pointing that it would have been beneficial for him to have had a father present to help him and provide advice.

"You just get to situations in life…and when you are in a situation you see that this one … this one… this one, if my father was here it was going to be sorted out…He was going to tell you what to do".

The fathers also suggested that when a mother and father do not communicate effectively, it can provide children with the opportunity to exploit the situation for their own advantage and can encourage wayward behaviour.

"Because sometimes it's a situation whereby a father does not speak to the mother, he [the child] will say, I'm going to see Mandla and the child will come to me but not to me exactly, he'll go elsewhere, but he knows that the mother won't phone me and say, hey is [the child] there?". (Name changed to preserve anonymity)

Involvement in crime, alcohol and drugs

The participants were convinced that one of the reasons for children's misconduct and abuse of drugs and alcohol was the absence of fathers. As a participant in Devland put it:

> "You see, now with the youth, these boys and girls, when they are not raised by their father, they end up doing what? Nyaope and other drugs and alcohol because of what? They don't have that thing of having a father next to them to guide them, you see?"

Cultural and social isolation

The participants explained that children can often be painfully reminded of the relationship that other children have with their fathers and in this way may feel excluded. They gave the example of living with extended family and with children whose fathers are present; as well as mixing with peers who have a relationship with their fathers. This theme is illustrated by the following statements from participants in Alexandra and Devland:

> "There's also complications on the other side because there will be children in the house... the uncles they have got their children. So you will be sidelined. Sometimes as a kid you will feel left out, everyone is talking about his father and your father is not there. Everyone is in a secured place and you are always an outsider, so culturally also you are being oppressed because according to culture you need to use the surname of your father".

> "Children without fathers are abused emotionally and physically at school".

A limitation of the study was that participants were not asked to elaborate on these views. Moreover, it is acknowledged that many of the experiences mentioned were based on assumptions made by the fathers. Their children may in fact not have experienced any of these ill-effects as a result of an absent father. Hence further research into the effects that having an absent father has on children, as reported by children themselves, is needed.

Child may not receive maintenance

In relation to discussions on the causes of being an absent father, participants raised the issue of mothers using maintenance for purposes other than caring for the child. Similarly, the fathers pointed out that another way in which children suffer is when their care is compromised by mothers who misspend maintenance. A father in Devland commented: *"I left some money for the child, for clothes and food for the child, I got there, only to find out that this money was going to be used to buy liquor for [her friends] while I was still there"*. While such reasons are no excuse to default

on maintenance payments, such comments by fathers did point towards the fact that the fathers worried about their children's well-being, while separated from them.

The child being used as a weapon against the other parent

The participants expressed concern that when conflict develops between parents the child suffers emotionally and can often be used as a weapon by either parent to hurt the other. For instance one of the participants in Devland used the analogy that *"when two elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers"*. Participants stated that restricting contact with a child can be used to punish or hurt a partner when the other feels wronged. One respondent in Doornkop described the pain it causes him to see his child so upset by being separated from him:

> "When the child sees me on the street he cries and my heart becomes sore, you see? 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?"

The child is not himself around the father

One father in Alexandra explained:

> "When I go there I will go to his place and fetch him up, you know he will keep quiet the whole day… Until I leave… you know and it's something else…and people on the way will tell you how talkative and how very active he is and stuff you see. But when you are around you don't get to see that energy, I'm just seeing a sad boy".

Such comments highlight the fact that connections between fathers and children do not necessarily come naturally and that much effort may have to be put into ensuring that children feel safe and happy when spending time with their fathers. A father should not have access to his child if this will be to the detriment of the child. However, it can also take time for such bonds to be formed, and for the father to

win the trust and affection of the child, through consistent and reliable behaviour. Fathers should be supported to understand such dynamics in order to better be able to facilitate such progress. Such comments, however, also point towards fathers' concerns for their children's emotional well-being and ultimate happiness.

Disconnection from sources of good fortune, well-being and cultural identity

Owing to the belief that a father is needed to perform certain traditional rituals for the child, participants felt that children with absent fathers are bound to experience misfortune because those rituals were not observed. A father in Tembisa explained this metaphysical dimension relating to fatherhood in these terms: *"In this sense, you find this person… his future is like bright…But there are things that are closing…, eh along the way… They are closing, there are gaps, there are some things…they must perform some rituals. So that his ways can be opened, you see"*.

Another participant in the Alexandra focus group discussion spoke of a man who was denied participation in a cultural rite of passage because he did not know the identity of his father: *"I'm sitting here I don't know who my father is, and I was supposed to go to entabeni [the mountains, meaning initiation in Nguni] and I need my father to prepare me to go there. Unfortunately I cannot go because I don't know who my father is"*.

Since the fathers involved in the study were aware of the negative effects of their absence, it is plausible that this absence may not have solely been caused by negligence or disinterest. It did not appear as if the fathers never cared about being engaged in their children's lives. Neither did it appear that fathers were ignorant of the potentially harmful consequences of their absence on their children, or the negative effects on themselves. In fact, they were particularly vocal about the harmful consequences that this absence was causing for themselves.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

The research set out to explore four themes, namely: absent fathers' conceptions of fatherhood; potential reasons for father absence, as provided by fathers themselves; fathers' perceptions of the consequences of their absence; and recommendations to address these issues. Regarding conceptions of fatherhood, the research found that dominant notions of masculinity and fatherhood which emphasise financial provision and a rigid dichotomy between female and male roles precludes the emergence of other valuable dimensions of fatherhood such as paternal involvement in day-to-day childcare, his participation in his child's recreational or educational activities and his ability to be emotionally available for the child. The study also found that fatherhood assumes metaphysical meaning, particularly in African cultures, for which the presence of a father is regarded as key to the child's identity and prosperity and a connecting force to sources of success, good fortune and access to the ancestors. Findings also highlighted the fact that the fathers felt ill-equipped to assume responsible and caring fatherhood roles, as they had had no experience of this in their own lives. In this regard, the widespread absence of fathers, points to the possibility of a vicious cycle in which current fatherless young men end up with limited parental skills and moral commitment to thei r child/ren.

A key finding from this research is that conceptions of fatherhood can encourage or discourage paternal involvement. In seeking for reasons why fathers are disengaged from their children's lives, it emerged that the crisis of fatherhood in South Africa is intricately connected to the broader historical, social, economic and cultural setting. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, it would seem that the widespread father absence arises from ideological factors such as materialist constructions of fatherhood and masculinity; socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment of fathers; cultural factors such as the cost of *"ilobolo"* and "damages", and relationship issues of various kinds. This conclusion is reinforced by the consideration of absent fathers' acute awareness of the detrimental consequences of their absence, their concerns over their powerlessness in relation to estrangement from their child/ren and their readiness to participate in the restoration of the broken ties and the prevention of similar negative parental experiences. It follows that the phenomenon of absent fathers may not necessarily be ascribed to pathological, negligent, or disinterested dispositions of the disengaged fathers. This conclusion is not intended to reduce the extent of personal responsibility of absent fathers, but seeks to recognise the broader context which shapes and influences their behaviour and decisions.

At a time when the South African government and several non-governmental organisations have identified this issue as a key developmental challenge in communities and a source of multiple social illnesses, these findings are of great significance. Any programme seeking to address the prevalent absence of fathers will have to tackle both the predominant restrictive notions of masculinity and fatherhood and the current problematic dynamics that exist between men and women.

8 | RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Recommendations made by the absent fathers in the study

Participants formulated a number of suggestions in terms of steps they felt would alleviate the issue of absent fathers.

A participant from the Alexandra focus group raised the issue of ante-natal care and emphasized that he had wanted to be in the delivery room when his baby was born.

> "My thinking being we need to look at our ante-natal... kind of ante-natal / post-natal policies and see how men can actively play a role from that point on and see how we get involved in a child's development. I think one: I wanted to be in the delivery room when my son was born...I was not allowed and I think that is where men should... If men want to go in there and know what happens... if it makes them feel any better and be more committed to their children or whatever the case may be, let them go".

It was suggested that policies should emphasise the need to treat women and men equally. One of the participants expressed concern about the attitudes of service providers who discourage men from being involved in service issues as these are considered to be a women's domain. The participant articulated this concern as follows:

> "Men generally have difficulties interacting with Home Affairs to get any legal documentation. It's always viewed as a woman's terrain. So if there is anything that could be done policy wise… it needs to be written down to say certain attitudes in terms of how men interact with these policies and how they're treated when they access such services - that needs to change".

In addition to the equal treatment of men and women in engaging with service agencies and government departments, fathers also noted that when the mothers of the children encourage and support them to be involved, it makes everything much easier.

> "The mother was always there and saying that you know, whatever it is that you need to do, you have to take responsibility. I give support. So I think that's the most important thing, women acting as a supporter for a person who cares for kids."

Fathers also expressed the view that steps should be taken to address cultural barriers to men accessing their children:

> "I think when it comes to policies of the government, I think certain policies need to be properly investigated. We need interventions that are more thorough, you know. Like for instance this whole "damages" thing, you know. We need to re-look at the damage in terms of me having a right to my child and the damage [of] withholding that right from me because I do not have money. You know… We need to re-look at certain cultures as well, like how much should the "damages" cost? You know what I mean and why should I pay damage when I'm supporting the child. If I'm living with the child and the mother and I'm supporting even the family as well, you know?"

Participants suggested that women should also be encouraged to raise awareness around involving men in children's lives.

> **"My thinking being we need to look at our ante-natal… kind of ante-natal / post-natal policies and see how men can actively play a role from that point on and see how we get involved in a child's development. I think one: I wanted to be in the delivery room when my son was born…"**.

The men also spoke about the need for men and women to communicate more effectively and be provided with safe spaces to discuss their problems.

> "We need to sort our relationships with our partners first because that's where things start."

> "Because you know what breaks the spirit and we experience problems, it's because some of the people, they like to involve themselves in affairs of other people you understand? You find that your girlfriend has a friend who is going to say, 'what are you doing with this man?' because he is not working".

Participants also felt that society should stop portraying men in a negative light and rather work to help men:

> "I think instead of attacking men about these things, we should sit down and think as we are doing now and transform them, inform people, reach out to them".

8.2 Recommendations made by the researchers

The participants' suggestions have been combined with those of the researchers to formulate the following overall recommendations stemming from the findings of this study:

Challenge and transform gender norms[3]

- It is important to work towards deconstructing dominant notions of fathers as merely financial or material providers. Emphasis should also be placed on alternative fatherhood roles such as fathers' ability to provide time, care or affirmation. This approach is likely to result in greater involvement of fathers in their children's lives. This work should target not only men, but also women and should aim to transform the gender norms ascribed to men and women in terms of parenting. A man's identity should not be encapsulated by his ability to provide materially – a man who is unable to provide in this way should not be made to feel as if he is somehow less of a man.

- Government departments should work together with the media to influence TV programmes such as soap operas, and radio dramas, in order to influence societal attitudes towards positive gender norms, to foster healthy relationships between men and women and to promote engaged and gender equal fatherhood.

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[3] Gender norms refer to social attitudes about what men and women 'can' and 'should' do in a given society and what men and women 'should' be responsible for in households, communities and the workplaces. i.e. what behaviours are 'appropriate' for women and men. Gender norms draw upon and reinforce gender stereotypes and are produced through social institutions such as families, schools, churches, the media etc. Such norms are often portrayed as unchanging and natural but they are in fact socially constructed and can be changed. Gender norms are hierarchical in that more importance or value is often placed on 'masculine' characteristics (or certain male groups). Different roles are not the cause of inequality; rather, it is the value placed on these roles that leads to inequality. Gender norms, roles and relations affect women and men differently. Norms and roles that undervalue women often lead to decreased access to important resources to protect their health or uphold their rights, while male norms can encourage men and boys to engage in high-risk behaviour that harms both themselves and others. *(Gender mainstreaming for health managers: a practical approach. Engaging men and boys in achieving gender equality and health equity,* World Health Organisation & Sonke Gender Justice Network, http://www.genderjustice.org.za/resources.html [accessed 26 September 2013]).

- Men should be encouraged to act as role models in their communities, to speak out against: child neglect, gender-based violence, alcohol abuse, men who default on maintenance payments even though they are able to contribute, and other behaviour patterns which exert negative effects on families. Again, the media should be utilised to highlight men who can be seen as positive role models in their communities.

Develop support groups for fathers

- There is a need to create spaces where men are able to come together and share their feelings and challenges. Such spaces should be facilitated by people who are qualified to highlight the benefits of gender equality and the transformation of gender norms[4] for men. Efforts should also be made to guard against the space being used by men to complain and criticise the emphasis on women's rights work. Men should be enabled to start to question and challenge gender norms, in order to free themselves from the pressure it places on them to behave in certain ways. Such spaces should provide men with skills to facilitate open, honest and healthy communication with the mothers of their children and other family members. Such spaces should also provide men with the feeling that other men are there to support them and not to criticise or denigrate them.

- Government needs to work together with civil society organizations (CSOs) to ensure that support groups are available to men. This work is happening on a very small scale and is being provided for men by CSOs. Such services should become more widely accessible and media campaigns and social norms campaigns should be developed to address the stigma that is associated with counselling, especially for men.

Conduct further research

- It is crucial that further research is devoted to conceptions of fatherhood and causes of father absence, in order to further understand the dynamics of the phenomenon of absent fathers from the perspective of mothers and children. A larger scale survey is recommended that can include a representative sample of parents.

Explore alternative means of providing maintenance

- Alternative means of providing maintenance need to be explored. Men who are unable to pay maintenance could be required to provide maintenance in kind, through the use of their time or skills. Maintenance defaulters who are able to pay maintenance however, must be held accountable.

Address potential harmful effects of traditional practices

- Communities should be encouraged to meet and discuss the practice of traditional practices such as *"ilobolo"* and damages in order to address the ways in which they are affecting the community, so that possible solutions can be identified by communities themselves. However, it is crucial that such discussions are facilitated by someone who is willing to promote gender equality. Government should collaborate with civil society organisations that work in these areas to develop workshops/discussions guides which could be rolled out to municipalities.

Encourage men's involvement in ante-natal classes

- Policies should be developed to ensure that men are able to take part in ante-natal classes and learn more about child care. If men were equipped with the knowledge to care for children, many fathers would feel more comfortable in such roles. Social norms work needs to take place in order to debunk the idea that men are naturally unable to care for children. Fathers who are involved in their children's lives at this early stage are more likely to maintain their commitment to the child and to the mother. If mothers do not object, fathers should be allowed to be present in the delivery room when their children are born.

Increase men's exposure to childcare skills

- Media campaigns should be employed to educate men and boys on childcare skills. The media should also be utilized to actively challenge and transform gender norms that suggest men are not capable of caring for children. The media could be used to portray men involved in childcare and to highlight positive role-models.

Increase men's involvement in caring professions

- Men should be encouraged and supported to become more involved in caring professions such as nursing, home-based care and social work. Not only does this break down gender stereotypes that suggest that such work should only be performed by women, it will also ensure that clinics, hospitals, government departments and other service outlets become more gender neutral spaces, where both men and women feel they are able to access services freely, without any

[4] Gender transformation work refers to action that seeks to promote equitable relationships; challenge male gender norms; transform traditionally accepted norms associated with being a man or a woman; and change gender relations. Such work should also be gender-synchronised, which involves the intentional intersection of gender transformative efforts reaching both men and boys and women and girls of all sexual orientations and gender identities. They engage people in challenging harmful and restrictive constructions of masculinity and femininity that drive gender-related vulnerabilities and inequalities and hinder health and well-being (Gupta, Whelan and Allendorf, 2003; Greene and Levack, 2010)

sense of shame or exclusion. It is acknowledged that many of these services are highly problematic for all those accessing them, including women. It is imperative that municipalities ensure that such service delivery improves and that all citizens are aware of the services and rights available to them.

- Government should take steps to recruit men into training programmes for caring professions. This work should take place together with women so as to ensure that women also come to recognise the benefits of involving men and so that men and women can work together effectively. In this way, both men and women will be able to witness how the idea that men and women are only suited to certain types of tasks is a socially constructed concept that can be challenged and transformed.

- Public service officials working in delivering services also need to be educated to be more facilitative of men's involvement in caring for their children.

Increase access to counselling services

- 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 that children do not suffer. Services should be available to the public to assist with relationship problems and challenges. In addition, work should take place to address the stigma associated with this service. Such work should be accompanied by gender norms transformation work so as to promote healthier notions of masculinity. In this way, families are likely to be able to provide more stable and nurturing environments, as well as role-models to their children.

- Counselling groups could also organise mentor systems. Such mentoring is highly important for young boys and crucial in terms of providing young men with positive role models. Government should take steps to work with CSOs and other government departments in order to ensure that such a system takes place on a national scale.

Highlight the benefits of gender equality for men

- Extensive work needs to take place to raise awareness amongst men of the benefits of gender equality. Such work should highlight the negative consequences that gender norms have for men and boys and encourage men to view women as equal partners, rather than adversaries. If healthier relationships between men and women can be encouraged, it is likely to go a long way in supporting healthy parenting. Work should also take place to raise awareness among women of the benefits that having an involved father can have on a child's life.

- While it is important for all South Africans to be aware of their rights, and be able to access them, it is crucial that men recognise that in many situations, South African society remains highly patriarchal and therefore women are almost always disadvantaged compared to men. Therefore it is important for men to be made aware that women's rights movements do not attempt to take men's rights away from them, but instead are working towards ensuring that women are able to access and fulfil their rights in the same way as men. Work should be developed to address the negative backlash that some men report in reaction to women's rights movements in order to senstise men on the reasons why gender equality is so important and beneficial to all.

> **"Because you know what breaks the spirit and we experience problems, it's because some of the people, they like to involve themselves in affairs of other people you understand? You find that your girlfriend has a friend who is going to say, 'what are you doing with this man?' because he is not working".**

Address access to services and rights

- Single fathers who are the primary caregivers should not be discriminated against with regard to access to public facilities and child support grants. Programmes to raise awareness should be conducted to alert fathers and service providers to the rights of all parents.

- South Africa has good parenting policies, which are designed to treat men and women equally. Government should take steps to raise awareness among the public regarding the rights of parents, as well as the services available to people who are struggling to negotiate custody, parental agreements and visitation rights. Services should aim to support healthy communication and interaction between parents, and should never discriminate against one parent unfairly. Education should take place to ensure that men do not abuse such services, but are instead aware of the rights and services to which they are genuinely entitled.

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Contact Details

Centre for Social Development in Africa
University of Johannesburg
House 9, Research Village, Auckland Park, Bunting Road Campus
P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 11 559 1904
Fax: +27 (0) 11 559 1575
Email: csdainfo@uj.ac.za
www.uj.ac.za

Sonke Gender Justice
Sonke Gender Justice
Johannesburg Office
3rd Floor, 62 Juta Street
Braamfontein, Johannesburg
South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 11 339 3589
Email: info@genderjustice.org.za
www.genderjustice.org.za

MenCare
www.men-care.org
Sonke Cape Town Office
Tel: +27 (0) 21 423 7088

MenCare is a global fatherhood campaign, whose mission is to promote men's involvement as equitable, non-violent fathers and caregivers in order to achieve family well-being and gender equality.