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Non-resident Black fathers in South Africa

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Introduction

Fatherhood in South Africa has attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention in recent years, particularly in relation to the high prevalence of children growing up in households where their biological fathers are not co-resident. Earlier research often framed this pattern primarily in terms of father absence and its potential consequences for children and families. More recent scholarship, however, has moved towards a more nuanced understanding of fatherhood that recognises the diverse ways in which fathers remain connected to their children despite residential separation and structural constraints.[1-3] This shift reflects broader efforts to understand paternal roles within the social, economic and historical conditions that shape family life in South Africa.

South Africa's family structures are strongly influenced by a combination of historical legacies, socio-economic inequalities and changing demographic patterns. Apartheid legislation limited the entry of Black workers into urban areas and their movement more generally. This resulted in

long periods of separation of fathers from their rural families while working on the gold mines, often forming new partnerships in the city that led to the birth of additional children they were also expected to support. National survey data continue to show that many children do not live with their biological fathers, reflecting longstanding patterns of labour mobility, union instability and delayed marriage.[4] These patterns must be understood within the broader context of the country's political economy and social organisation, where extended family systems and multi-local households have historically played an important role in childrearing and family support. As a result, residential arrangements alone do not fully capture the nature of paternal involvement in children's lives.[5]

This paper examines the social and structural factors shaping non-resident fatherhood among Black men in South Africa and explores the ways in which many fathers remain involved in their children's lives despite living apart from them. The discussion considers the historical legacy of labour migration, the influence of poverty and unemployment on family formation and paternal roles, and the role of cultural norms and kinship systems in shaping father-child relationships. It also highlights the social significance of fatherhood and the different forms of engagement through which non-resident fathers contribute to the wellbeing, identity and development of their children.

Research Context and Results

Labour migration and non-resident Black fathers in South Africa

The advent of apartheid entrenched the economic and political dominance of the White minority through a system of racial segregation and labour control that fundamentally shaped patterns of family life in South Africa. Apartheid policies, including influx control, pass laws and the migrant labour system, deliberately separated Black men from their families by compelling them to seek employment in distant urban and industrial centres while their households remained in rural areas.[4,6] As Richter and Morrell[7] argue, these structural arrangements produced distinct experiences of fatherhood across racial groups, with Black men disproportionately affected by labour migration and residential separation from their families. Consequently, apartheid-era labour policies not only reorganised economic production but also transformed the social meaning and practice of fatherhood, particularly for Black South African men.[7]

Labour migration created a structural separation between sites of production and reproduction, making residential fatherhood difficult for many men. Under these circumstances, paternal responsibility became closely associated with the ability to provide financially for children and households from a distance by sending remittances. Financial provision thus emerged as a dominant measure of "good fatherhood", reinforcing the centrality of the breadwinner role in constructions of masculinity and paternal identity.[8-10] Although Apartheid formally ended in 1994, the spatial and economic inequalities produced by the migrant labour system persist. Contemporary patterns of employment, housing shortages and regional inequalities continue to require many men (and women) to work far from their families, thereby sustaining patterns of non-resident fatherhood.[6,11]

Many South African households therefore function as what have been described as "stretched" or "multi-local" family systems, in which members are distributed across multiple residences while maintaining emotional, social and economic ties.[4,12] In such arrangements, family members may reside in different households for reasons related to employment, education, caregiving responsibilities and housing constraints. These patterns of family dispersal remain common in both rural and urban contexts and are not necessarily indicative of family breakdown. Rather, they reflect adaptive strategies through which households manage economic insecurity and mobility. In practice, many fathers maintain connections with their children through periodic visits, remittances and participation in key family events, even when they do not live in the same household.[5]

Despite social and economic transformation since the end of Apartheid, labour migration continues to influence contemporary domestic arrangements in South Africa. In many economically marginalised areas, employment opportunities remain limited, forcing working age individuals to migrate to urban centres or other provinces in search of work.[13] As a result, many Black South African fathers face the difficult choice between living with their families in areas with limited economic opportunities or migrating to sustain household livelihoods. These structural constraints make it challenging for many fathers to simultaneously fulfil expectations of financial provision and residential presence within the household.

Poverty, unemployment and non-resident Black fathers in South Africa

In addition to labour migration, high levels of poverty and unemployment play a critical role in shaping patterns of fatherhood and family formation in South Africa. Evidence suggests that

employment status and income strongly influence men's ability to marry and co-reside with their partners and children. Men with stable employment and higher incomes are significantly more likely to enter marriage and establish independent households compared with unemployed or economically marginalised men.[14,15] Conversely, high levels of unemployment among young men have contributed to delays in marriage and an increase in non-marital childbearing, which in turn affects patterns of father-child co-residence.

South Africa continues to experience one of the highest unemployment rates globally, particularly among young people. Youth unemployment has remained persistently high in the post-Apartheid period, limiting economic opportunities for many men and constraining their ability to fulfil the socially expected role of family provider.[13] Under these conditions, men may postpone marriage or avoid forming formal unions because of the financial costs associated with marriage and household establishment, including cultural obligations such as *lobola* (bridewealth) payments.[16] Amongst some tribal groups, a man may also bear the responsibility of his sisters' children if they are unmarried and need additional support.

Economic marginalisation can also have important psychological and social consequences for men's identities as fathers. Research suggests that the inability to provide financially for children can undermine men's sense of masculinity, self-worth and social status, given the strong cultural association between masculinity and the breadwinner role.[8-10] When men feel unable to meet these expectations, some may experience shame or social pressure that leads them to withdraw from family relationships or limit contact with their children. In some cases, fathers may distance themselves from families to avoid criticism or perceived failure to provide adequately.[8] However, it is important to note that many men also renegotiate fatherhood roles under conditions of economic hardship by emphasising emotional support, guidance and caregiving involvement as alternative expressions of responsible fatherhood.

The role of culture

Cultural norms and customary practices play a central role in shaping patterns of father involvement and residential arrangements in South Africa. Practices such as *inhlawulo* (the payment of damages to the woman's family when a child is conceived outside marriage) and *lobola* remain important mechanisms through which families negotiate relationships, legitimacy and responsibilities associated with marriage and childbearing.[3,16] These practices are deeply embedded in cultural traditions and serve not only to formalise relationships between families

but also to recognise and regulate paternal responsibilities toward children.

However, the operation of these cultural systems is increasingly mediated by economic realities, and the interaction between cultural expectations and financial constraints can contribute to the residential separation of fathers and children. The costs associated with *lobola* and marriage negotiations may delay union formation, particularly for men facing unemployment or unstable incomes. As a result, many children born outside marriage reside primarily with their mothers, often within extended households headed by maternal relatives.[17] In such contexts, paternal involvement is not only shaped by cultural norms but may also depend on the willingness of maternal kin to facilitate and sustain relationships between fathers and their children.

These dynamics are further complicated by recent transformations in the nature of lobola itself. Scholarship has increasingly highlighted the monetisation and commercialisation of lobola practices, reflecting broader socio-economic changes in contemporary South Africa.[18] While historically grounded in systems of reciprocity and kinship-building, *lobola* has in some contexts become subject to inflationary pressures, status competition and market-like dynamics. The emergence of intermediaries, event planners and professional negotiators who facilitate *lobola* arrangements illustrates the growing institutionalisation and commodification of the practice. In turn, these developments may contribute to escalating expectations regarding bridewealth payments, intensifying financial barriers to marriage and formal union formation, particularly among economically marginalised men. Consequently, the evolving character of *lobola* may reinforce patterns of delayed marriage, non-marital childbearing and non-resident fatherhood, while also reshaping gender relations and expectations of masculinity and provision.

Within this context, processes of paternal recognition are also shaped by the fulfilment of cultural obligations. In some cases, fathers may not be recognised as legitimate parents until practices such as *inhlawulo* have been completed. Until these obligations are fulfilled, fathers may face restrictions on their ability to visit or spend time with their children within the maternal household. This highlights how cultural norms, while facilitating social order and legitimacy, may also regulate and, at times, constrain paternal access and involvement.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that these same cultural systems also provide mechanisms for sustaining paternal connections across residential boundaries. Extended family networks and kinship structures can facilitate ongoing relationships between fathers and their children, even in contexts of non-residence. Thus, cultural practices in South Africa

simultaneously enable, regulate and, in some cases, constrain father-child relationships, reflecting a complex interplay between tradition, economic change and evolving social norms.

Role of Black non-resident fathers in South Africa

Despite the high prevalence of non-resident fatherhood, biological fatherhood continues to hold significant cultural, social and personal meaning in South Africa. Fathers play an important role in linking children to their paternal lineage, clan identity and ancestral traditions, which remain central components of social identity in many African communities.[8] Through these connections, fathers provide children with access to broader kinship networks and forms of social capital that can support identity formation, belonging and social recognition. In this sense, paternal involvement is not only relational but also deeply embedded in systems of cultural continuity and social legitimacy.

However, when fathers are absent or only marginally involved, these culturally embedded roles may be disrupted, with important consequences for children's social recognition, cultural inclusion and physical wellbeing. In particular, boys who undergo traditional initiation rites without paternal acknowledgement or formal incorporation into their paternal lineage may experience marginalisation within customary systems that govern identity and belonging. Emerging evidence suggests that the absence of paternal endorsement in such processes can increase vulnerability to unsafe initiation practices, including heightened risks of illness, injury, dehydration, and, in extreme cases, amputation or death. These risks are compounded where regulatory oversight is weak and where social pressures discourage questioning of harmful practices. Thus, while cultural institutions remain important sites of identity formation, the absence of fathers may expose boys to both symbolic exclusion and material harm.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that African kinship systems have historically developed adaptive mechanisms to mitigate the effects of paternal absence. In many cases, fatherhood extends beyond biological ties to include forms of "social fatherhood," where men provide care, guidance and support to children within extended family networks or community relationships.[19] Such arrangements reflect broader kinship systems in which caregiving responsibilities are distributed among multiple adults, including uncles, grandfathers and other male relatives. While these systems can provide important sources of stability and continuity for children growing up in contexts of non-resident fatherhood, they do not fully substitute for the cultural and social roles uniquely associated with biological fathers, particularly in relation to

lineage recognition and participation in key rites of passage.

Furthermore, research suggests that many non-resident fathers remain actively involved in their children's lives through financial support, social visits and communication. Fathers may contribute through remittances, the provision of clothing and school fees, or participation in important family rituals and decision-making processes.[20-22] Advances in communication technologies, including mobile phones and messaging platforms, have also made it easier for geographically separated fathers to maintain contact with their children. While non-resident fatherhood may present challenges for sustained involvement, these forms of engagement demonstrate that paternal relationships can be maintained across residential boundaries.

Conclusion

The high prevalence of non-resident fatherhood among Black South African men continues to reflect a complex interaction of historical, economic and socio-cultural factors, including labour migration, unemployment, delayed marriage, paternal mortality, and cultural practices relating to family formation. However, recent research continues to emphasise that non-residence should not be conflated with paternal absence or lack of involvement. Many fathers who live apart from their children maintain forms of engagement through financial support, social contact, caregiving during visits and participation in extended kin networks.
Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that fatherhood in South Africa is diverse, adaptive and relational, shaped by both structural constraints and evolving social norms. Programmes and policies seeking to support children's wellbeing should therefore focus not only on promoting co-residence but also on strengthening opportunities for positive paternal engagement across residential boundaries. Interventions that support employment opportunities for men, encourage cooperative parenting relationships, and recognise the role of extended family networks may help strengthen father-child relationships even in contexts of residential separation.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that contemporary fatherhood in South Africa is also characterised by tensions, contestations and unresolved challenges. Increasing rates of maintenance claims through formal legal systems reflect the financial strain experienced by many mothers and the uneven fulfilment of paternal responsibilities. Concurrently, the growing demand among men for DNA confirmation of paternity points to shifting dynamics of trust, responsibility and accountability within intimate relationships. These developments underscore

that non-resident fatherhood is not simply an adaptive or functional arrangement, but one that may also reproduce conflict, inequality and insecurity within families. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that acknowledges both the resilience of extended family systems and the need for stronger institutional, legal and social support mechanisms to promote responsible, equitable and engaged fatherhood.

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