

## **THEMED ISSUE - SOCIAL PROTECTION, INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CONFLICT IN SOUTH AFRICA**

### **CSP ARTICLE: SOUTHAFRICA2**

#### **Parental Absence: Intergenerational Tensions and Contestations of Social Grants**

##### **Abstract**

Most recently the role of grandmothers has been highlighted as significant in the lives of their grandchildren. These studies focus on the contribution the old age grant allows grandmothers to make in contexts of poverty, orphan hood and migrant labour. Similar studies on the child grant also illustrate its contribution to the well-being of children and families in general. However missing in these examinations has been an understanding of how these social grants are contested in contexts of parental absence and internal labour migration. Through a thematic content analysis of qualitative interviews with members of migrant's families from Madibeng, a rural setting in the North-West this article illustrates that, in context of internal labour migration, family responsibilities shift in ways that make unemployed grandmothers who do not receive the old age grant vulnerable. This vulnerability is manifested through a tension in familial relationships. This tensions stem from the contestation of the child support grant between the young labour migrant mothers, the guardian (grandmother) and the recipients of the child support grant (CSG). These tensions the article shows are a result of continuing socio-economic struggles experienced by poor households.

**Key Words:** Internal Labour Migration, Child Grant, Old Age Grant, Grandmothers, Livelihood Strategies

##### **Introduction**

Studies show that labour migration, as one of the options for survival, brings both benefits and costs to the labour migrant households (Yao & Treiman, 2011:1120). This was true in historical migration and in the current socio-economic climate. On the other hand other studies emphasise that many of the household members especially the children of the labour migrant, are negatively impacted through labour migration even more than the labour migrant (Macours & Vakis, 2010). Negative impacts for these households includes, but are not limited to the perpetuation of poverty, poor quality of education and health as well as absent parenting. Studies, especially on father absence, have also begun to link labour migration to father absence (Author, 2015). Father absence in especially African households has been attributed to labour migration among other socio-

economic factors. Even though father absence is experienced more in African households (Langa, 2010; Padi et.al 2014) mother absence is also an important social phenomenon also having its history linked to labour migration (Posel & van der Stoep). According to Chuong (2012:430) rural family structures in post-apartheid South Africa are highly impacted by poverty, unemployment and at the same time they are highly influenced by labour migration.

Although the South African government through the Department of Social Development has tried to mitigate some of the above mentioned impacts through the provision of social grants for the elderly, children and the disabled (Rossouw, 2017; Zembe-Mkabile, 2017; Wright, Neves, Ntshongwana & Noble, 2015) the number of dependents on social grants exceeds the number of the social grant beneficiaries by a considerable margin. That is, in most cases social grants which include the child support grant, old age pension as well as disability grant end up supporting entire households (Rossouw, 2017).

Even though research on social grants has already indicated the contestation of social grants, this study shows this in a context of internal labour migration, grandmothers who are not old age grant beneficiaries, unemployment, mother absence and vulnerability of grandmothers. To unpack how this contestation and tension unfolds this article presents three sections. The first section provides a detailed discussion on the role of the social grants in the labour migrant households. The second section briefly describes the methodology on which the research for this article is based. The third section explores the contestation and tensions brought about by the child grant in the labour migrant households and how this contestation shifts family responsibilities and leads to vulnerability of grandmothers. Finally the article provides concluding remarks and recommendations for further research.

### **The Role of Social Security Grants in Labour Migrant Households**

Unemployment has to be one of the biggest challenges to face South Africa since the first democratic elections in 1994 with the majority of working age people consistently being unemployed (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015). The “triple challenge” of poverty, inequality and unemployment in South Africa is responsible for many households living below the poverty line.

This is seen in the overall income inequality that remains high for South Africa when measured by the Gini-coefficient (Van der Berg, 2014). Thus many South African households are pushed to depend on social grants for income (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015). This also includes some of the households who have an employed individual(s). According to Statistics South Africa since 2006 more than one fifth of South Africa's total workforce has been living in households which are not able to meet their basic minimum food and non-food requirements (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015).

The former South African Minister of Welfare Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi made an announcement in March 1997 which proposed the department's new child support programme that aimed to bring an end to the racial discrimination in state maintenance grants (Johnson, 2000:20). The new program aimed to target the needs of the "poorest of the poor". The Department of Welfare's new child support grant would form part of the new democratic government's package of programs aimed to alleviate poverty. These programs were designed to support women, children and people in a sustainable way, particularly in rural areas. The Child Support Grant's implementation in 1998 was an important step as it embedded a social assistance transfer aimed at reducing child poverty in modern South Africa (Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013:123).

Therefore poor households then turn towards social security grants for survival. These grants include, but are not limited to, the child grant, old age pension grant and disability grant. For many households the child support grant (CSG) and the old age pension grant are the only forms of predictable income that they rely on (Zembe-Mkabile, 2017; Wright, Neves, Ntshongwana & Noble, 2015 ). Mosoetsa (2011:30) also suggests that the social security grants, account for the only source of household income in many rural households in post-apartheid South Africa.

The CSG is a type of income maintenance and as such helps to alleviate poverty and has other positive outcomes (Wright et.al, 2015:448). Evidence has shown that the child support grant not only supports children within a household, but in most instances it helps everyone in the household (Zembe-Mkabile, 2017). In their study Patel, Hochfield, Moodely and Mutwali (2012) found that the CSG positively contributed to household food security, improved nutrition of children, school attendance and performance, care of children, family cohesion, access to services and it also empowered women. It is safe to say that the CSG is a diversified household income in many grant recipients households. According to Patel et al (2012) the role that the CSG plays in the lives of poor families and households with children goes beyond reducing income poverty and

vulnerability as it to social transformation and most importantly to women empowerment for instance women get to form part of financial decision making, make decisions around children and care responsibilities in the home (Patel et al, 2012). Therefore CSG income as with the old age pension grant are, in other households, collectively shared to support the whole household in more ways than one (Patel & Hochfeld, 2011).

More research also show that the child grant enhances women's agency, it allows them to mitigate financial crises and access reciprocal exchange networks for informal credit and swapping of food (Zembe-Mkabile, 2017). On the other hand the old age grant, which is about four times the amount of the child grant, is used in the same manner as the child grant if not more. Despite the fact that the beneficiaries are elderly citizens, the old age grant is used to care for entire households bearing the burden and closing the gap created by high rates of unemployment and inequality in the country (Zembe-Mkabile, 2017). However, for participants in this study the benefit of the old age grant is unknown as the grandmothers of the households were not yet beneficiaries. In his budget speech the former minister of finance Minister Pravin Gordhan (2017) announced that the child grants would increase by R20 which would bring the monthly rate to R380. While the old age grant would increase by R90 to bring it to current monthly rate of R1, 600.

## **Methods**

This study was carried out in March and April of 2016 through a qualitative approach which involved in-depth interviews with 11 labour migrant households. The average number of household members from the participating households was between 7 and 9, where the majority of the members were dependent children between pre-school and Grade 12. Income of these households varied as some were solely dependent on social grants which included the disability grant and the CSG, piece jobs and selling; their monthly income therefore averaged to about R3700.

The majority of these households identified themselves as having a young female labour migrant who left her young children behind with her mother as the guardian. Only two participants from the study mentioned that fathers of the children were involved by taking their oldest children to live with them in an attempt to ease off the burden from the grandmothers. The rest of the

participants did not mention fathers of their grandchildren; this might be because of the high prevalence and normalisation of father absence in African communities (Padi et.al, 2014). The age of the children of the labour migrants ranged from 3 up to that of a Grade 12 who was approximately 18 years. Only one labour migrant young woman was identified as holding a post school qualification, which was a diploma in electrical engineering, while the rest were said to only have Grade 12 as their highest level of education. The majority of these young labour migrant women had no higher education or skill.

Those who participated in this study are guardians (grandmothers) of the labour migrant children and mothers to the labour migrants. The majority of these participants were unemployed and had not reached sixty years and thus, were not eligible to claim the old age grant. However, two of these participants were recipients of the disability grant. Interviews focused on the following issues:

- Remittance patterns of the labour migrant,
- The socio-economic status of the household in the absence of the labour migrant,
- Recipients of social grants in the household, and
- How the social grant, specifically the child grant is used in the household in the absence of the labour migrant.

Unstructured, in-depth interviews were used to collect data and the interviews were conducted in Setswana which was later translated to English. The first author of this article conducted all the interviews; she is conversant in both Setswana and English. Only mothers of the labour migrants were interviewed. It has to be noted that only part of the bigger story was heard from the guardians of children of the labour migrants and children of the labour migrants were not interviewed as they were too young and not ethically cleared to participate in this particular study. Thus the story from the children of the labour migrants about the contestation of the child grant was heard from their guardians (grandmothers) point of view. One of these studies recommendations for further research is for research that focuses on the stories of young children with labour migrant mothers and to also focus on young mothers who are labour migrants with children left behind.

All the participants lived in Madibeng Local Municipality in the North West and were African. Madibeng Local Municipality was chosen because of its history of inward and outward migration

(Makgetla et.al, 2016). Three main access routes were used to identify and recruit the labour migrant households: headmen and councillors in the respective villages (five households), the researcher's social networks in the area (two households) and snowballing (four households). Because of the deliberately non-prescriptive nature of the recruitment process, the sample varied in terms of age of the participant, the number and age of children that labour migrants left with the participants, the level of education of the labour migrant and the socio-economic status of the participating household.

Interviews were coded and data was analysed using thematic content analysis. For reliability, objectivity and validity the study relied on the use on an audit trial. The researcher was reflexive throughout the research process, which includes the data collection, interpreting of data and the analysis thereof. The researcher was mindful that she does not have personal experience of labour migration and poverty given her middle class position. Even though the researcher was somewhat of an insider given her upbringing as a Motswana woman she was constantly reflective on her outsider status as an MA student and middle class woman with no experience of labour migration. This reflexivity was useful in constant questioning of her earlier conclusions and allowed her to constantly review her position and thus how she captured the narrative of the participants.

### **Contestations of the Child Grant**

The child support grant is highly contested in rural labour migrant households which participated in this study. The study found that the child grant is regarded by rural households as an income, thus it is used by mothers of the children, as a significant income whilst they search for work or to augment their meagre migrant labour incomes. The majority of the heads of labour migrant households reported that the labour migrants, who are mothers, regard the child grant as their 'own', meaning the prerogative lies solely with them on how best to use it. On the other hand, the heads of the households themselves were strong in their views that the child support grant should be their responsibility to collect and distribute in accordance to the household and children's needs as they are the guardians of the children in the absence of the labour migrant mothers. While the young children also felt entitled to the grant and wanted a say in how it is controlled.

According to the Department of Social Development South Africa the child support grant is the money paid to the primary care giver of a child to provide for the child's basic needs. The Social

Assistance Act of 2004 also states that the primary care giver of the child should be responsible for collecting and ensuring that the grant benefits the child as required by the law. Meaning that the grant must follow the child where he or she is based. The Department of Social Development (DSD) has also argued that the social welfare assistance in South Africa plays an important role in the alleviation of poverty for children, women, the elderly, people with disabilities and their families (Manicom & Pillay, 2003:94).

What came out strongly from this study is that the child grant is highly contested by three parties, the heads of the households and guardians (grandmothers) of the labour migrant children, the young labour migrant mothers as well as older children of the labour migrants who understand that the grant is for their benefit.

For example, Ipeleng who is looking after her labour migrant daughter's children gave details as to who collects the child grant and how it is used in their household. She said:

*All my grandchildren receive the child grant. So the two mothers who are unemployed use the grant as their income. But from time to time they contribute towards the households monthly groceries for the house. But previously the eldest sister who is working used to keep the grant to herself then she would meet with her eldest son in town every month end to buy and send him with some goods. Even that was not consistent. I used to ask her how she thinks we are surviving and what her children are eating. I even threatened to report her to the social workers (Ipeleng, 31March 2016).*

In Ipeleng's household the labour migrant is the only one working. The entire household mainly survives through Ipeleng's chronic illness grant and minimal contribution from the child grant. According to Ipeleng her labour migrant daughter would keep the child grant money for her three children with her in town and would sometimes send groceries home at the end of the month. To Ipeleng this was still not enough, more so that her daughter does not live with them, therefore she does not comprehend the daily struggle that the household goes through to survive.

Given the challenging shifts in household care responsibilities resulting from the migration and contestation of the grant Ipeleng threatened her daughter with Social workers. As a result the daughter handed the SASSA cards to the children, instead of to Ipeleng so that she can collect and use the grant as she sees fit for the household. Ipeleng believes that she was given the SASSA

cards not because of her protest and threat of involving Social Workers but because her grandchildren were getting violent with both of them due to their frustration with the poverty they experienced at home. This has since shifted the care responsibilities further, as Ipeleng does not have control of the SASSA cards and money and her daughter the labour migrant also does not have control of how this money is used. She shared the following;

*Ipeleng: Since that threat she has given the grant cards to her young children who misuse the money instead of buying food. I would have preferred if she gave the cards to me so that I can buy food for everyone, food that can last us the whole month (Ipeleng, 31 March 2016).*

Researcher: *What are the reasons she gave the cards to the children instead of you?*

*Ipeleng: I don't think she had much of a choice either because these kids were being violent demanding their grant money. Especially this boy... the second born... he doesn't like it when there's no food... he gets very frustrated and violent... the other day I heard him shouting at his mother saying he is dying of hunger but he gets a grant... so you see.*

Ipeleng also said she has since decided to take a step back and not be party to the child support grant fight anymore because of fear of her grandson who has since become aggressive when it comes to matters concerning his grant. Even though the grant is for the care of the child through the guardian the older child argues that it his grant thus suggesting that he should manage it. Even though Ipeleng is frustrated by these shifts of responsibility and seeming disrespect, she is sympathetic and understanding that as a growing boy he needs more food and constant replacement of clothes as he is growing up quickly. Ipeleng also added that the money is meant for him in any case, that is why she has taken the resolution to abstain from the child grant contest.

On the other hand, Lulama another grandmother is of the opinion that her daughter, the labour migrant, should leave her with the grant card, at least for the grandchildren that are in her care. Lulama said the following to illustrate her experiences;

*No, it's not me who collects their grant money... she collects it. I tried talking to her about it saying because these kids stay with me, your salary at least... even if you don't do anything for us, just keep your salary and do whatever you need to do and advance yourself,*

*but give me the SASSA cards for your children so that I can collect the money and see what to do with it to ensure our survival this side. But she's resisting... she gave it to me I think for about two months and then took them back... so the way I see it she uses the grants money to buy us groceries, because she spends more or less R800 every month on groceries when she comes... its only once where she bought us groceries of more money, she spent close to R1200... but most of the time, when she does spend on us, she spends around R800 for our groceries... I tried to talk to her many times, I failed... I then decided that for peace sake let me leave her alone; we will push the way we've been pushing (Lulama, 31 March 2016).*

Lulama's daughter is working as an electrical engineer trainee. Her monthly salary or stipend is confirmed but she has decided to keep the grant meant for both her children with her, and manage it herself. Lulama argues that her daughter should think for her children and the rest of the household she has left behind. According to Lulama, the monthly grocery that her daughter buys is not enough to feed all of them in the household the entire month. Every month is a struggle so much that it affects the labour migrant's daughter who sometimes is forced to go to school without a lunch box.

Even though Lulama admits that her daughter uses the child grant money to buy food for the household, she also adds that it is not enough and it should not be up to her how the grant money should be spent or what kind of food should be bought. Lulama feels that her daughter should allow her discretion to spend the child grant accordingly since she is the guardian of the children in her absence and sees to the day to day functioning of the entire household. Lulama believes that as a responsible adult who has been left with children in her care she is able to buy the kind of food that can last them for the month with the two child grant combined, something that her daughter is not able to do and does not want to correct even when she is advised. Lulama expressed that her heart breaks every time her granddaughter goes to school without a lunch box. She insists that given the chance to manage the child grants she will prioritise her granddaughter's needs and also incorporate survival of the entire household with the money. It is clear from Lulama's narrative that the shift of responsibility without the respect of doing the care duties of a grandmother fully makes Lulama helpless. Again the fact that she does not have an income that she controls either from employment or social security makes her more powerless

Dinah also shared similar sentiments as the above participants. However, her story is a bit different in the sense that her daughter left going to look for work, she had not confirmed employment in the city when she left. Dinah is left behind with the labour migrant's two young children but her daughter took the SASSA cards with her to the city. It became clear that Dinah is conflicted in the issue because she strongly believes that her daughter as a mother should have left her children with access to the grant money. Dinah shared the following;

*I understand that she needs the money to survive seeing that she left here without any promise of a job, but I expected her to think of her children first. As a mother you put your children's needs ahead of yours. She should think for her kids' stomachs (Dinah, 06 April 2016).*

Dinah said that she is struggling to put food on the table and added that she cannot wait to receive the pension grant which she was expecting later in the year. She said that she understood that her daughter might not have secured employment in the city as she had not sent any money back home since she left. Research shows that the child grant supports more than the child, and at times it is used as the source of income that allows for migration (Patel et.al, 2012; Wright et.al, 2015). It seems that Dinah's daughter uses the child grant in the city as she struggles to find work. She left home as an unskilled labour migrant with no guaranteed employment in the city. Statistics SA (StatsSA, 2006, 2016 2017) reports that there is an increase and prevalence of high rates of unemployment in South Africa. At the same time more and more young mothers are migrating to go look for employment, leaving their children under the guardianship of their under resourced mothers with no alternative means of livelihood.

The frustration illustrated by the three women Lulama, Dinah and Ipeleng clearly concerns how they are undermined as care givers to their grandchildren by the contestation around the CSG. This frustration is exacerbated by the fact that the responsibility for the care of their grandchildren is shifted to them when their mothers migrated but the responsibility of the grant is withheld, this then makes it difficult for them to carry out their care responsibilities effectively. For example, Lulama argues that if the child grant was given to her to manage, it would benefit and provide for the child's needs and ease the anxiety that the child feels as a result of not living with their parent. Lulama explained what happens to her grandchild most days before she goes to school, she said:

*Children are clever they understand... you see when she goes to school most times she likes to ask for carry money like R2. And the majority of the time I don't have the money to give her. She would then plead with me and even ask if her mother didn't give me her money. And when I try to explain that her mother didn't give me any money she does not believe it. During mornings like that she leaves home crying and that also breaks my heart. You can see that this child is hurting and wishes that her mother was here because she holds the strongest believe that with the presence of her mother there is no suffering, her mother always makes a plan. It is not nice for a child to go to school crying, I believe that it even affects her learning experience... a child must start her school day on a happy note... I always tell her mother about this but she doesn't listen... she takes it lightly because she is not here to see it herself (Lulama, 31 March 2016).*

According to Lulama if her daughter was giving her money for the child the burden of having a labour migrant mother would be much easier on her granddaughter. She feels that with the money she would ensure that children of the labour migrant's financial needs are taken care of, and that would ease the anxiety on the children of the labour migrant more especially that they are young and do not fully comprehend what it means to have an absent parent who works far away from home.

The issue of anxiety of the grandchildren and the vulnerability of the grandmothers as 'incompetent' carers was also raised by Ipeleng. She argued that her grandchildren live in constant anxiety of whether they will eat at night or have their other needs like school necessities met. She said:

*They always ask about their mother, they miss her and always enquire if their mother is at work and whether she is aware of the situation (the fact that they don't have enough food) at home... does she know that they have no food to eat... they are too young to be always thinking about availability of food and how their grant money is spent (Ipeleng, 04 April 2016).*

Ipeleng feels that even if her daughter is caught up at work and her schedule does not allow her more time to visit the children and spend time with them, sending money and other goods for them can make the children feel like their mother is present even in her absence. She emphasised that if

her daughter had left the child grant with her the situation would be much better than it was at the time of the interview. Xaba (2016:161)'s study found that the child support grant played a major role in reducing child hunger and assisted with other needs of the children. Thus Ipeleng strongly felt that her grandchildren are not supposed to be worrying at least about where their next meal is going to come from, instead their child support grant should be security enough. But that is not the case as her grandchildren are constantly anxious as to where their next meal will come from because of the lack of food security in their household.

This study shows that the welfare grants, specifically the CSG, could be a significant financial resource for these households if it was not contested. For most of the young unemployed women in rural South Africa the CSG is an important financial resource (Compton and Cook, 2006:99), however where the needs of the household are not aligned as in the case of the grandmothers and the migrant households left behind and the needs of the labour migrant in the city then it is a source of tension and contestation. However, the South African government through the DSD argues that the grant money is a small amount of money and should just be an addition to existing income. What the DSD suggests is an ideal situation but clearly that is not the case with the majority of the grant recipient households. The households that participated in this study do not have other existing income; this lack of other income explains the need for these young mothers to migrate to the city for employment. On the contrary, to the intentions of the DSD evidence points towards heavy reliance on the CSG as a 'household grant', and thus the tension and contestation.

For some of the households there is 'existing income' which includes the chronic illness grant, pension grant and piece jobs. For instance Lulama looks after two toddlers from the neighbours during the day while the young mothers are at work. This gives Lulama extra income as she is not a pensioner yet which means she's unable to get the old age grant. Tshenolo is in the same situation as Lulama, she is unemployed and too young to receive a pension grant thus she relies on her mother's old age grant. Ipeleng relies on her chronic illness grant to take care of her unemployed children and grandchildren. She augments her chronic illness grant with the little bits she occasionally gets from her unemployed daughters who gets the child grant.

What is coming out clear though, is the state's role in facilitating livelihoods through social grants. The social security system through the different income grants is a livelihood strategy for these households. Another thing that is emphasised when analysing the role of the child grant in these

households is that the contestation for the child grant is among the vulnerable groups, that is women and children. The women in question are economically and socially vulnerable.

Financial vulnerability is emphasised by the fact that the older women are not at pension age yet and are unemployed. On the other hand the young labour migrant women are made financially vulnerable by the fact that they are expected to thrive in these current economic conditions without skills and resources. Another vulnerable group, children who are the rightful recipients of the grant, are unable to enjoy or benefit fully from the grant because of this contestation that mainly results from the difficult socio-economic conditions of their families. According to law the child grant is supposed to be a child based grant. The funds are supposed to follow the child even if the child moves to another household or as the parent or guardian situation changes the funds are supposed to be where the child is (Whitworth & Wilkinson, 2013). But according to the findings in this study, these young labour migrant mothers collect and keep the funds with them in the city. It can then be concluded that labour migration of young mothers who leave children behind negatively affect the livelihood strategy of the households they leave behind when the child support grant is taken away instead of being left as the responsibility of the primary care giver and the child.

## **Conclusion**

As socio-economic conditions of families change intergenerational tensions ensue as a result of the pressures resulting from the variations. In the case of this article it was illustrated that the labour migration of young mothers results in socio-economic shifts in households. These shifts lead to contestations of the CSG, where children, grandmothers and the labour migrant contest the management and use of the grant. This contestation the article shows result from the both the poverty experienced by the household and the shifts of responsibility resulting from the migration and the shifting of responsibility of child care to grandmothers without giving them the full responsibility of the CSG. This tension is made worse by the already vulnerable position of these grandmothers as they are unemployment and too young to receive the old age grant. Without income of their own grandmothers are powerless and vulnerable in context of labour migration.

In conclusion the article argues that even though the CSG is an important poverty alleviating strategy, its effective use is impacted by multiple socio-economic conditions including labour

migration, the position of grandmothers in context of parental absence and the understanding of who is responsible for the CSG. It is important to acknowledge that the CSG is in most contexts a 'household grant', there is therefore a need to review how that impacts its effective use and whether there are possibilities for introducing a household/family grant for effective poverty alleviation at the level of the household.

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