

Pathways to gender equitable men: Reflections on findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey in the light of twenty years of gender change in South Africa

Tamara Shefer

Abstract

This article reflects on the findings of the International Men and Gender Equality survey through the lens of contemporary South African contexts of change. While huge strides have been made toward gender justice in South Africa since 1994, there are many indications, including high rates of gender-based violence, that inequalities on the basis of gender intersected with other forms of inequality persist. Further, some research illustrates a growing resistance among men and women to gender justice policies and measures. The article argues that far more work is required in South Africa to shift both men and women's perceptions of the value of gender justice for boys and men, and in facilitating a more authentic investment for boys and men in their own and social change. It also points to how much of the current scholarship on men and boys focuses on "problems" that reproduces a negative construction of certain groups of boys and men that is also raced and classed. In taking stock of a lack of progress in twenty years of democracy and gender equality goals in South Africa, the article argues the importance of shifting emphasis to what may be seen as the "positive" moments of men's relationship to gender equality and justice. It argues that the findings of the survey point to the value of strategic engagement with and acknowledgment of existing participation of boys and men in alternative, equitable, and constructive practices, such as more active participation in caring practices.

It is indeed an imperative to understand and document how men and boys are responding to the global gender equality agenda as well as in their particular national contexts. This is especially so, given the argument made in the International Men and Gender Equality survey (IMAGES) report in this edition and elsewhere that "progress towards gender equality is rooted in men recognizing the benefits of equality for themselves" (p. 16). Moreover, as has been long argued by gender scholars working on men (e.g., Hearn 2007), it is important to not only acknowledge the negative impact that dominant forms of masculinity and male practice have on women but also how they undermine boys' and men's health and well-being. In the South African context, Ratele and colleagues have similarly alerted us to the risks boys and men face in this context, such as the high rate of mortality among young, poor men, especially by violence and other risk-related factors (see, e.g., Ratele 2008; Ratele, Smith, Van Niekerk, and Seedat 2011; Ratele, Suffla, et al. 2010).

In the light of the strides made toward gender justice in South Africa and clear intention to challenge gender inequalities as a key component of democracy since 1994, the

twentieth year anniversary of a democratic South Africa is an opportune moment for taking stock in this respect. While there have not been many large scale studies investigating the extent of continued sexist attitudes and practices, nor empirically measuring the impact of gender equality policy, a somewhat outdated study in 2000 did suggest high levels of patriarchal and sexist investment among South African men relative to men in other countries. In a study across eighteen countries, Glick et al (2000) found that South African men had the second highest mean scores on the Hostile Sexism scale, while on the benevolent sexism measure, South African men had the third highest mean score. However, speaking louder than empirical studies on sexism or attitudinal change in South Africa is the overriding picture of the country as a society still fraught with manifestations of gender inequality, including high rates of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS, both widely understood as strongly determined by inequalities in gender and normative gender roles and practices. Ratele (2014, 30) in a recent reflective piece similarly notes that “... in spite of the impressive growth in academic literature, as far as contributing to changing gender relations and masculinities our work does not seem to be having much discernible influence.”

As noted by the IMAGES research report, there has been little large-scale research in the Global South to understand how men are responding to the global gender equality agenda and the same is true for South Africa with respect to the national agenda on gender equality. On the other hand, embedded in some local research and arguably evident at a popular level is an increasing ambivalence and possible “backlash” to gains made in challenging gender inequalities and gender-based violence (Sideris 2004; Dworkin et al. 2012). To cite one qualitative research project in which resistance to existing measures are articulated (Shefer et al. 2008; Strebel et al. 2006), there appears to be a popular belief that employment equity in which women are a designated group for affirmative action has impacted negatively on men and is viewed as a loss for men. Participants in this study reported that women now had more power in the household since men had lost their status as breadwinners due to increased unemployment among men, the latter understood as associated with employment equity for women. As both a woman and a man respondent, located in a working class, historically designated Black community in South Africa comment (cited in Shefer et al. 2008, 168):

The man is sitting at home, maybe they're not working, the woman's working, the woman says what she wants to say to the man, coz she's got everything, money. (individual interview with a female social services volunteer)

Sometimes in some households a woman is a breadwinner and she does everything for the family, so you find out that she is in control, she will dictate things because she is working, you find out now that she has taken over the role of the husband, so she has got more rights than the husband, so she sees herself having more power than this man. (Focus group with men over 25 year olds)

That men articulate feeling not only undermined by women's power but also a resistance to the shifting relations of power between men and women was also evident in this study, as reflected in narratives from male participants (Shefer et al. 2008, 170–71):

It's supposed to be men that are in leadership positions in committees, now it looks as if men are undermined and women are placed in high positions, while men on the other hand decide to withdraw from community activities. (Focus group with men eighteen to twenty-four years old)

These are the problems created by this new dispensation ... they give rise to many problems at the end of the day, the women are the key figure at home instead of being a man, and a man at the end of the day finds himself alienated in much decision making. (Individual interview with male church leader)

Also emerging in this local South African study, and certainly present in popular discourse on gender equality, is the notion that gender transformation efforts may be increasing rates of gender-based violence given men's experiences of disempowerment due to the promotion of women. Thus, in some South African communities, the argument that women's economic and social empowerment contributes to male unemployment and the social marginalization and disempowerment of men may be serving to rationalize male violence against women as in the citations subsequently (Shefer et al. 2008, 171):

It's [domestic violence] because if a woman is working and brings money home the man feels threatened, as if the woman controls him. Then the man starts to show his powers, either by using verbal or physical abuse and that causes rifts in the home. (Focus group with women over twenty-five years)

For me it's [the causes of gender-based violence] the power problem you know, men want to be seen as 'I am the man in charge', and secondly for me it's the problem of unemployment that results in men abusing women. So sometimes what would happen is that I am not working and the wife is working, so the wife is bringing the salary into the home ... the clash comes out and they start fighting. (Female social worker in community)

It's because men lack self-esteem or confidence, so they have to, it's like they are nothing, they come and use their power in the household, to their wife, to their children. (Female nongovernmental organization counselor)

Whether or not this negative construction of the impact of gender equality is borne out by any real changes in women's economic or social status and the rates of gender-based violence more generally, it is nonetheless of concern that some men and women in local communities engage in narratives that subscribe negative impacts to contemporary policies and practices of gender equality in South Africa. Moreover, it is likely that such blaming discourses, and a more general opposition to gender justice imperatives, is evident in South Africa, in spite of twenty years of challenge to gender inequalities and violence against women. And of greater concern, given the arguments made in this report, is that such popular views undermine any possibilities of men considering the value of the gender equality agenda for themselves as men.

In thinking about the last twenty years of democratic and gender equality intentions in South Africa, it is notable that while earlier efforts may have been centered on girls and

women, there has been a growing move, both in scholarship and practice, to include boys and men in gender equality processes (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012). However, as pointed out in the above-mentioned article by Ratele (2014), our successes in adequately engaging men and boys in gender equality efforts are questionable. In addition, there are growing concerns that the focus on boys and men, particularly young poor, Black boys and men, may have reproduced a blaming and othering discourse, in which such boys and men are set up as “the problem” and associated with “danger” (Ratele 2014 outlines the terms of this debate; see also Ratele, Shefer, and Botha 2011; Shefer, Stevens, and Clowes 2010; Bhana and Pattman 2009; Pattman 2007; Pattman and Bhana 2006).

Perhaps “the problem” in South Africa is that we have focused on the negative components of hegemonic masculinity, such as male violence and normative male sexuality, constructed within the terms of the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway 1989). Importantly, there has been some work at an organizational and policy work to foreground positive role models of men who practice nonnormative gender and sexualities, such as the fatherhood project in South Africa and work of Sonke Gender Justice in investigating men and boys engaged in care. On the other hand, there has been arguably far less focus on the areas where men are “lacking,” such as their lack of engagement in feminized labor, outside and inside homes, with far more emphasis placed on the areas where men are viewed as a “problem” or “damaging.”

Hearn (2014, 4) talks about “a materialist analysis of men” that characterizes his larger scholarship. Such an analysis acknowledges “bodily materialism” that includes the wide range of material activities in which men and women articulate their gender and in which unequal power relations are played out. One of the key domains of such bodily materialism is that of domestic care, which notably is also considered a key indicator in the IMAGES report of men’s buy-in to the gender equality agenda. The continued gendering of care mitigates not only against the democratization of care (Tronto 2013) but also undermines the project of gender equality.

The report shows a significantly positive association between men’s reports of their fathers’ participation in domestic duties (p. 18). Further, men’s own participation in the daily care of children and in domestic tasks was also in all countries, but one, associated with more gender equitable attitudes (p. 19). While it cannot be claimed with certainty that boys’ and men’s active engagement in caring/domestic practices is solely determinant of a more gender-equitable attitude, since it may be an existing gender-equitable position that shapes such engagements, the association nonetheless flags the importance of engagement in domestic and childcare practices for boys and men within gender justice projects. On the basis of this positive association between both early childhood experience of male care and own participation in care with more gender-equitable attitudes for men, the authors of the IMAGES report argue the need for programs that address attitudes, policies, and changes in structures that facilitate more engagement of men in care practices. Indeed, the report provides support for a larger argument, implicit in feminist theoretical work on care (e.g., Tronto 2013), that male engagement in care may be a key strategy not only for addressing inequities in the distribution of the

labor of care but also for challenging larger gender inequalities and more problematic aspects of hegemonic masculinities.

In this respect, it is notable that South African research foregrounds how care remains feminized (as it does internationally; see Reddy et al. 2014, for a recent compilation). Yet, many boys in South Africa, especially in working-class communities, have been actively engaged in domestic care and labor (e.g., Budlender and Bosch 2002; Bozalek 2004). Notwithstanding, research also indicates that boys' and men's engagement in care and domesticity may be under duress, with a view to "correcting" this in the future (by engaging paid domestic and care assistance or a female partner), and that there is particular resistance to bodily practices of care, such as changing diapers on a baby (see, e.g., Ratele, Shefer et al. 2010; Shefer and Fouten 2012; Shefer 2014). Local research on men who engage in professional caregiving similarly foregrounds the challenges they face, such as stigma and questions about their masculinity (e.g., Davies and Eagle 2010; Morrell and Jewkes 2014). Challenging the powerfully gendered nature of care, as well as the larger social devaluation of care practices, is therefore an important component of the larger project of gender change.

In conclusion, this valuable report reinforces the growing understanding in South Africa that far more work is required to shift both men and women's perceptions of the value of gender justice for boys and men, and in facilitating a more authentic investment for boys and men in their own and social change. Related to this is the notion that we need to generate more focus on the ways in which boys and men currently do resist normative practices of gender, do practice alternative masculinities that are more gender equitable, and are invested in more equitable practices in their personal and public lives. In taking stock of the sense of a lack of progress in twenty years of democracy and gender equality goals in South Africa, the findings of this study raise the importance of shifting emphasis to what may be seen as the "positive" moments of men's relationship to gender equality and justice. As the report illustrates so clearly, there is a strong association between both being exposed to men caring in one's home while growing up and actively engaging in caring, whether through circumstance or not, and more gender-equitable attitudes. Such findings may point to the value of moving away from dwelling on boys' and men's continued engagement in normative and problematic practices, to strategically engage with and acknowledge existing participation of boys and men in alternative, equitable, and constructive practices, such as more active participation in caring practices.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author acknowledges the National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF).

References

- Bhana, Deevia, and Rob Pattman. 2009. "Researching South African Youth, Gender and Sexuality Within the Context of HIV/Aids." *Development* 52:68–74.
- Bozalek, Vivienne. 2004. "Recognition, Resources, Responsibilities, Using Students' Stories of Family to Renew the South African Social Work Curriculum." Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands.
- Budlender, Debbie, and Dawie Bosch. 2002. "South Africa Child Domestic Workers: A National Report." Report Submitted to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), Geneva, Switzerland.
- Davies, Nick, and Gill Eagle. 2010. "Boys as Peer Counsellors: What's under the Overcoat?" *The Journal of Psychology in Africa* 20:569–80.
- Dworkin, S. L., C. Colvin, A. Hatcher, and D. Peacock. 2012. "Men's Perceptions of Women's Rights and Changing Gender Relations in South Africa: Lessons for Working with Men and Boys in HIV and Antiviolence Programs." *Gender and Society* 26:97–120.
- Glick, P., S. Fiske, A. Mladinic, J. Saiz, D. Abrams, B. Masser, B. Adetoun, J. E. Osagie, A. Akande, A. Alao, A. Brunner, T. M. Willemsen, K. Chipeta, B. Dardenne, A. Dijksterhuis, D. Wigboldus, T. Eckes, I. Six-Materna, F. Exposito, M. Moya, M. Foddy, H.-J. Kim, M. Lameiras, M. J. Sotelo, A. Mucchi-Faina, M. Romani, N. Sakalli, B. Udegbe, M. Yama- moto, M. Ui, M. C. Ferreira, and W. Lopez. 2000. "Beyond Prejudice as Simple Antipathy: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism Across Cultures." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79:763–75.
- Hearn, Jeff. 2007. "The Problems Boys and Men Create, the Problems Boys and Men Experience." In *From Boys to Men: Social Constructions of Masculinity in Contemporary Society*, edited by T. Shefer, K. Ratele, A. Strebel, N. Shabalala, and R. Buikema, 13–33. Cape Town, South Africa: UCT Press.
- Hearn, Jeff. 2014. "Men, Masculinities and the Material(-)Discursive." *NORMA: The International Journal of Masculinity Studies* 9:5–17.
- Hollway, Wendy. 1989. *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science*. London, UK: Sage.
- Morrell, Robert, and Rachel Jewkes. 2014. "'I am a Male, although I am a Little Bit Soft': Men, Gender and Carework in South Africa." In *Care In Context: Transnational Gender Perspectives*, edited by V. Reddy, S. Meyer, T. Shefer, and T. Meyiwe, 326–41. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Morrell, Robert, Rachel Jewkes, and Graham Lindegger. 2012. "Hegemonic Masculinity/ Masculinities in South Africa: Culture, Power, and Gender Politics." *Men and Masculinities* 15:11–30. doi:10.1177/1097184X12438001.
- Pattman, Rob. 2007. "Researching and Working with Boys and Young Men in Southern Africa in the Context of HIV/AIDS: A Radical Approach." In *From Boys to Men: Social Constructions of Masculinity in Contemporary Society*, edited by T. Shefer, K. Ratele, A. Strebel, N. Shabalala, and R. Buikema, 33–49. Cape Town, South Africa: UCT Press.
- Pattman, Rob, and Deevia Bhana. 2006. "Black Boys with Bad Reputations." *Alternation* 13: 252–72.
- Ratele, Kopano. 2008. "Masculinity and Male Mortality in South Africa." *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention*, 6:19–41.

- [Ratele, Kopano. 2014. "Currents against Gender Transformation of South African Men: Relocating Marginality to the Centre of Research and Theory of Masculinities." NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies 9:30-44. doi:10.1080/18902138.2014.892285.](#)
- [Ratele, Kopano, Tamara Shefer, and Mbuyiselo Botha. 2011. "Navigating Past 'The White Man's Agenda' in South Africa: Organising Men for Gendered Transformation of Society." In Men and Masculinities around the World: Transforming Men's Practices, edited by E. Ruspini, J. Hearn, B. Pease, and K. Pringle, 247-60. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.](#)
- [Ratele, Kopano, Tamara Shefer, Anna Strebel, and Elron Fouten. 2010. "'We Do Not Cook, We Only Assist Them': Constructions of Hegemonic Masculinity through Gendered Activity." Journal of Psychology in Africa 20:557-68.](#)
- [Ratele, Kopano, Mariëtte Smith, Ashley Van Niekerk, and Mohamed Seedat. 2011. "Is it Race, Age or Sex? Masculinity in Male Homicide Victimization in Urban South Africa." In Conference Report: National and International Perspectives on Crime and Policing: Towards a Coherent Strategy for Crime Reduction in South Africa beyond 2010, edited by C. Gould, 44-58. Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Social Sciences \(ISS\).](#)
- [Ratele, Kopano, Shanaaz Suffla, Sandi Lazarus, and Ashley Van Niekerk. 2010. "Towards the Development of a Responsive, Social Science-informed, Critical Public Health Framework on Male Interpersonal Violence." Social Change 40:415-38.](#)
- [Reddy, Vasu, Stephen Meyer, Tamara Shefer, and Thenjiwe Meyiwa, eds. 2014. Care in Context: Transnational Gender Perspectives. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.](#)
- [Shefer, T., G. Stevens, and L. Clowes \(2010\). "Men in Africa: Masculinities, Materiality and Meaning." Journal of Psychology in Africa, 20:511-518.](#)
- [Shefer, Tamara. 2014. "Narratives of Gender and Practices of Care among Young Men and Women in Contemporary South Africa." In Care In Context: Transnational Gender Perspectives, edited by V. Reddy, S. Meyer, T. Shefer, and T. Meyiwe, 308-25. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.](#)
- [Shefer, Tamara, Mary Crawford, Anna Strebel, Leickness Simbayi, N. Dwa-dwa-Henda, A. Cloete, Michelle R. Kaufman, and Seth C. Kalichman. 2008. "Gender, Power and Resistance to Change among Two Communities in the Western Cape, South Africa." Feminism & Psychology 18:157-82.](#)
- [Shefer, Tamara, and Elron Fouten. 2012. "Being a Young Parent: The Gendered Sharing of Care-work." In Books and/or Babies: Pregnancy and Young Parents in School, edited by R. Morrell, D. Bhana, and T. Shefer, 149-68. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.](#)
- [Sideris, Tina. 2004. "'You Have to Change and You Don't Know How!': Contesting What it Means to be a Man in a Rural Area of South Africa." African Studies 63:29-49.](#)
- [Strebel, Anna, Mary Crawford, Tamara Shefer, Nomvo Henda, Allandise Cloete, Leickness Simbayi, Seth Kalichman, and Kgobati Magome. 2006. "Gender Roles, Gender-based Violence and HIV/AIDS: An Exploratory Study in Two Communities of the Western Cape, South Africa." Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance, 3:516-528.](#)
- [Tronto, Joan. 2013. Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice. New York: New York University Press.](#)

Author Biography

Tamara Shefer is a professor of Women's and Gender Studies and currently Deputy Dean of Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Arts. Her research and publications are primarily in the areas of young heterosexualities, sexual violence, masculinities, gender and higher education, and memory and narratives of the (post)apartheid.