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## Narrating Everyday Precarity: Women's Voices from Resource Poor Areas

**Abstract** African family life in South Africa's post-apartheid context is shaped by the socio-political history of the country. Despite various attempts to address the remnants of poverty, unequal distribution of resources and the lack of livelihood services still exist. African families from resource poor areas of townships in South Africa are still faced with poverty and deprivation. Black African women, often with minimum schooling, suffer the most from these scourges. This article aims to explore the everyday life narratives of precarity at various levels and the manner in which women from Mangaung Township in Bloemfontein cope with this. They talk about the fragile relationships within the family, about the gendered dynamics of the household, and about the importance of support networks.

**Keywords** African Family Life; Precarity; Support Networks; Narrative Approach; Mangaung Township

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Black African<sup>1</sup> families in South Africa, especially those residing in the poorly-resourced areas of townships, are still bearing the brunt of a potent mix of historical and contemporary socio-political factors that disrupt and systematically undermine their overall well-being. Family bonds are threatened, weakened, and pressurized by institutions such as the still-prevalent migrant labor system (Appolis 1996:1; Russell 2003:30) and other structural inequities that result in a skewed distribution of economic opportunities, poverty, unemployment, and service delivery (Benjamin 2007:175; Sekham-

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, we refer to the socially constructed racial categories of "Black" and "White" that is entrenched in the South African society after years of apartheid and racial oppression. "Black" roughly refers to those categories of people who were disadvantaged by the apartheid regime, and includes so-called "Coloreds" and "Indians," although this research was conducted solely among "Black" African women.

pu 2012:9504). Black African families, statistics<sup>2</sup> tell us, are most frequently at the underserved and under-resourced end of the equation. According to an editorial in *Business Tech* (2014:1), a 6.2 million increase has been seen in the number of people that can be classified as poor. Poverty in this sense refers to issues such as standards of living, education, and provision of health (Chitiga-Mabugu et al. 2014:57-60). It is estimated that there is a 103% increase in unemployment rates since 1994. This implies an additional 5.067 million, mainly Black African South Africans, relying on government grants and financial aid schemes (Business Tech 2014:1).

These social ills are still an omnipresent reality in the lives of many Black African people and their families, despite a non-racial democratic administration that has been in power for over twenty years. Marginalized population groups, especially Black African women with minimum schooling, bear the brunt of inequities as they often have few financial and other resources to sustain and operate their households. These women are often mostly responsible for the upbringing of their children. Many of them cannot meet the demands of running their households because they are, at most, in low waged part-time employment (or "piece jobs" as they are referred to colloquially). Burdened with fulfilling both roles of a "mother" and a "father," further put pressure on the household to survive with insufficient resources. This brings about that the majority of households are in a position of precarity (Kimani and Kombo 2010:12).

<sup>2</sup> Among others is the 25,5% official unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa 2015:2).

This article attempts to contribute to the body of knowledge that addresses the lack of Black African women's emancipation in South Africa's post-apartheid, democratic dispensation. The study differs from other research by focusing on exposing the unheard voices, coming from poorly-resourced households within the Mangaung Township in Bloemfontein, South Africa. These narratives are mostly told in despair as these women widely believe that insufficient efforts are directed to release them from the prison of poverty and inequality. The article draws on narratives of survival—demonstrating resilience and access to specific social networks that equip and enable the participants to manage to take care of their families, and in particular their children, under insecure and fragile living conditions.

### Precarity in Black African Families

Precarity in this study is conceptualized as a condition of existence describing human beings' lifeworlds<sup>3</sup> characterized by "instability, vulnerability, insecurity, uncertainty and unpredictability" (Ettlinger 2007:320; Waite 2009:426). In this study, the concept precarity is explored in relation to unstable and fluctuating employment opportunities, as well as overall life conditions experienced by poorly-resourced families of the Mangaung Township. Townships were originally designed as sleepover places for Black African laborers in White areas. Increased urban migration resulted in overcrowding with inadequate livelihood services. Life conditions in these

<sup>3</sup> Lifeworld is the "world of daily life along with the corresponding knowledge needed to exist in it; a world and knowledge shared by members of a society or social group" (Cavalcanti 1995:1338).

areas clearly reflect social issues coinciding with unemployment, underemployment, and poverty.

On the one hand, the notion of precarity is used to refer to the economically and socially fragile nature of part-time employment, especially low-skilled part-time employment. Such work has no safety measures such as pension schemes, medical aid, subsistence allowances, or safeguards in the form of rights reserved for tenured or better-skilled positions. The meager income hardly covers the maintenance and needs of households and families (Dodson and Dickert 2004:318; Waite 2009:416). In the context of this article, precarity also depicts life conditions experienced by individuals who occupy seemingly powerless and disadvantaged social positions in the wider historical and socio-political context. Precarity tends to “inhabit the micro spaces of everyday life” where fragile and unstable situations hinder those who experience this precarity, from predicting and planning for their time (Ettlinger 2007:320). Precarity is located in everyday life—within the spaces where individuals “think, feel, act and interact” (Ettlinger 2007:234). This precarity is transferred to the spaces in which they endure the contingencies and uncertainties of their daily lives and everyday living conditions (Ettlinger 2007:320; Waite 2009:415). Therefore, “to be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (Standing 2011:16).

The concept of precarity is “concerned not just with factors that constitute a threat of social exclusion

in the short-term but with factors that are likely to erode people's resources and capacities in a way that raises their risk of marginalisation in the longer-term” (Herrmann and van der Maesen 2008:12). Thus, precarity can be explained as a phenomenon that further erodes society because of perceived and real lack of opportunities related to participation strategies (Herrmann and van der Maesen 2008:13) affecting aspects of “intersubjective life, including housing, debt and ability to build affective social relations” (Neilson and Rossiter 2006:10). Precarious individuals tend to lack the ability to fully participate in the social-economic life within their communities because of their limited resources. The notion of “precarity” is thus more than physical wants and needs—it extends into socio-psychological realms. Moreover, problems and disadvantages often get repeated inter-generationally (Dass-Brailsford 2005:575; Van Wormer, Sudduth, and Jackson 2011:413).

Despite the overwhelming pessimism that is normally associated with the notion of precarity, the narratives of these research participants also indicate elements of resilience striving to counter harsh realities. In addition, the post-apartheid government has put in place several mechanisms to help address social, and particularly economic, problems. One mechanism is the introduction of the social grant system, which changed the Black African household dynamics. Financial burdens are alleviated to some extent as young and older members started contributing to the household income in the form of child grant and old age grants. Child support grants (R330.00 per month), foster care grants (R860.00 per month), and pension

grants (R1410 per month) serve as a safety net for many of the poor households, regardless of whether breadwinners are employed—as they contribute to the day-to-day survival. The child support and foster grants are awarded to the primary care-giver (most often women), who has to be in possession of citizenship documents—mainly a South African identity document and valid birth certificates of the beneficiaries (Kaseke 2010:160; Møller 2010:148).

There is an important traditional cultural norm that also contributes (or at least has the potential to contribute) to resilience and solidarity. The philosophy of Ubuntu/Botho is engrained in the African society. Knowledge and practice of communal support and networks still exist as a “norm” in everyday life, and is thus often taken-for-granted. There is a Sepedi proverb which states *mothoga ae phete, o phetwa ke batho*. This translates into “human beings need other people to travel the journey of life” and it means as one can only get through the challenges and hardships by relying on those who have experienced similar problems. Human survival is not only dependant on material resources, but also social capital which amounts to non-material resources and social support vested in trust (Kovalainen 2004:160).

### Methodological Notes

This article draws on a qualitative sociological inquiry vested in a constructivist/interpretive paradigm which is concerned with “understanding the world as it is and the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experienc-

es” (Burrell and Morgan 1979:28). An interpretive paradigm explores the manner in which human beings construct and understand their social reality—it pays attention to how people think, behave, interrelate with others, construct subjective perceptions, and form their ideas about the world (Wills 2007:6; Thomas 2009:75).

This study adopts a narrative approach to inquiry as this has the potential to enable participants to provide detailed descriptions of their lived experiences, feelings, and perceptions in the form of a story. Personal narratives give lived experiences structure where narrators are provided an opportunity to explain what happened in their lives. Also, expressing experiences in words allows participants to move closer to making sense of these experiences (Gilbert 2002:224). These narratives thus do not follow the sequence of events as expected of “stories.” Rather, they emerge as unsystematic and disjointed or “fragmented.” This is evident in spoken narratives at times being riddled with inconsistencies, contradictions, and incoherencies, which emphasizes how dependent real-life events are on memory, interpretation, and intent (Barak and Leichtentritt 2014:1-2).

A narrative methodology holds the potential to shed light on and to bring forth the complexities and subtleties that human beings experience in their activities of everyday life. Human beings by nature are orientated to storytelling (Gilbert 2002:225) as they “individually and socially lead storied lives” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990:2). People's stories are part of their real life because they form connections that give meaning to that

life (Webster and Mertova 2007:2-3). Narratives are therefore integral “to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with the ‘real,’ the official with the unofficial, the personal with the professional, the canonical with the different and unexpected” (Dyson and Genishi 1994 as cited in Webster and Mertova 2007:2).

The participants in this research adapt and learn to survive in their precarious world partly through narratives, as they learn how to live and navigate their lifeworlds through other people's renditions of the past, as well as through their own experiences (Gilbert 2002:225-226). The article is based on narratives that were collected from eight women aged between 29 and 59. The participants were recruited with assistance from a local social worker who identified and requested permission from several women to speak to the research team working on an umbrella project titled “Crises in Contemporary African Families.” Snowball sampling was also used through specific research participants who initially joined the research. Several rounds of interviews were held with the participants where in-depth discussions, as well as immediate observation informed us about the contexts of the participant. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated—and later thematically analyzed. The discussions often drifted to unrelated topics, as to be expected when conducting narrative research, and these discussions were considered to be part of the overall narrative of participants.

Ethical clearance to conduct this research study was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities' Eth-

ics Committee (UFS – HUM – 2013 – 002; University of the Free State). Due respect and consideration was given to participants and this helped to establish good rapport that allowed for free and unencumbered discussions to take place. All standard ethical procedures were adhered to, including the dissemination of translated informed consent forms that stipulated the purpose of the research and emphasized the voluntary participation of the women, also stating the precautions taken to uphold confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms are used throughout the project and also in this article. Despite explicit informed consent granted, the research team was also aware of and responsive to non-verbal indications of some participants and subsequently refrained from laboring some points that seemed traumatic to broach.

All the research participants are mothers and have extensive experience of motherhood. Moreover, most of them are not only responsible for their biological children, but also guardians to younger siblings, grandchildren, and foster children. The majority of the participants are involved in intimate relationships, some being married and others having partners who are not necessarily the fathers of their children. Mostly these husbands and partners also make a living through “piece jobs” (irregular employment in the informal sector) and are unable to contribute much to the finances of the household. Three women reached Grade 12 (which is the highest school-leaving qualification) while the other women all dropped out of secondary school at some point in time. One participant never attended school because of the apartheid demarcations which prohibited the

“Colored”<sup>4</sup> population to attend schools designated for Black learners. With the lack of educational and other qualifications due to various life circumstances (family commitments and financial constraints, to mention two), these women had to take up jobs as domestic workers or cleaners in and around Bloemfontein, with meager remuneration to sustain their households.

## Findings

The everyday precarity of Black African family life is illustrated by the selection of narratives of four of the participants in this project. The narratives of these women, Pinky, Nobantu, Zoleka, and Khanyisile, are chosen because of the poignancy and the clarity with which they illustrate their everyday struggles and their survival under difficult everyday living conditions.

### The Family and Fragile Relationships

The institution of the family normally plays a significant role in people's lives in as far as meaning and purpose of their lifeworlds are concerned. A normal family fulfils the primary functions of socialization and providing companionship and various forms of support. The family usually symbolizes a safety net for its members during hardships and provides them with a sense of belonging. People are usually able to overcome and face problems and challenges with the assistance of their family members, who

<sup>4</sup> Pinky (not her real name) was born to a Xhosa (Black) father and a “Colored” (mixed race) mother, thus she was classified “Colored”—a classification that she still carries, even in post-apartheid South Africa.

help them to cope with their responsibilities and obligations. Therefore, under normal circumstances, family holds an important task in ensuring everyday survival of its members both in difficult and happy times. However, some of the participants in this study express family not only as a place of refuge and stability but also as a prominent site of conflict. In fact, “family” seems to be a rather fluid concept in the lifeworlds of some of the participants. They frequently mention that they only consider those people who provide them with various forms of support as being family members. In other words, those members who benefit materially and emotionally from each other and who maintain relationships based on reciprocity and sharing are considered to be family. “Family” is not only bound by blood or genealogical links, and the participants often consider friends, landlords, prayer group members, and even tenants as family. In an African context, it is common for those with whom close ties are maintained to be thought of, and treated, as extended family. Family ties are often based on relationships that contain love, respect, commitment, sacrifice, and obligation.

Pinky is a 54-years-old mother and she lost two of her daughters to AIDS, each leaving behind a child which adds to her responsibilities. Her partner left her and she has to fend for herself and their two children. Pinky depends on her siblings, uncles, and child support grants for financial assistance as her fragile health (she was also diagnosed with HIV) prohibits her from keeping a job. She is always weak as she cannot afford the balanced, nutritious diet required for the intake of antiretroviral therapy, the life-saving medication that has turned

HIV/AIDS for many South Africans from a death sentence to a chronic, manageable disease. Pinky's survival is largely dependent on her extended family, a fact that greatly pains her as she dislikes being a burden to others, particularly given that her family members have their own struggles and challenges. It is not always possible for the family to provide for Pinky and there have often been instances where she and her dependents had to go to bed with an empty stomach:

My family is very important to me, but sometimes, you know, I feel pain, you understand. They love me and they do show me that they love me. I don't know how to say this to you because my sisters feel my pain when I do not have things in my house. They are able to do things for me, but sometimes when I ask things from them, they will promise to bring them and they never do. And then I sleep without eating with my children in this house.

Khanyisile is a 46-years-old married mother of three children. Financial constraints and early motherhood forced her to abandon her dream of a proper career and she had to settle for various "piece jobs"—currently she makes her living by selling vegetables, fruits, sweets, and snacks from her home. Khanyisile's husband is a construction worker, but is currently unemployed, so she is dependent on her extended family and child support grants for household income. Khanyisile says that the notion of "family" has lost its essence and meaning as kin support and ties have weakened over time. She is of the opinion that in the current South African society, qualities like respect and equal treatment have disappeared. Modern society

favors those with money, with the poor being excluded and isolated. Khanyisile explains that families of today have lost the values, morals, and respect instilled by past generations and now make their own rules, choices, and decisions. She says that people can choose who they regard as part of their family. Those who have money do not want to be associated with people like her:

Family is very important, but it has lost its value in these times because people control themselves and they isolate themselves. When you are poor, most family members do not want to be associated with you, but when you are rich, they all want to be close to you. Most family members do not care about you if you are poor, but if you are doing well, then they will regard you as their family.

Khanyisile's story shows how the institution of the family is also a site of potential conflicts, with families experiencing issues in different ways, leading to disagreements and fights. These conflicts have the potential of tearing families apart, resulting in family members having fragile or conflicting (or even non-existent) relationships with each other. In these circumstances, members tend to have ill feelings towards one another, especially when others fail to fulfill expected family-orientated obligations and responsibilities.

Nobantu, who is 33-years-old, was born in the neighboring country, Lesotho, and later moved to Bloemfontein in search of better employment—which she did not find. She has three children with her deceased husband, but she does not stay with her children as she does not have a house. She is

currently in a relationship and she is staying with her partner in his home where she rents one of the shacks<sup>5</sup> for R400 per month as a place to run her hair salon. Nobantu has two brothers who have turned their backs on her and they do not assist her and her children in any way. Both these brothers are employed, but they only provide for their own partners and children, even though Nobantu had provided them with help in the past. Nobantu is frustrated with her brothers, especially her younger brother, who she took to school and looked after when her deceased husband's estate's money was released. Nobantu feels like she does not have siblings as they are neglecting and ignoring her:

You know, I have two brothers and I am the only girl at home, but they don't do anything for me. They don't help me out in any way yet they are both working. The one who comes after me, I supported him when he was looking for a job. I gave him money and I made sure that he was well-fed during the period when he was looking for a job. But, once he found the job, then he forgot that his sister has problems. He and his wife just look at me and ignore the fact that I was supportive when he was still unemployed. I took him to school after my husband passed away. He attended at Cemtech [College in Lesotho] and after he completed, then he turned his back on me. He has literally disregarded everything that I have done for him. My other brother doesn't help me out either; actually, to him I am just a "thing." Sometimes I even forget about them, I seriously forget about them and that is why I say that my family is made up of my grandmother and aunt, and the rest are just there by name.

<sup>5</sup> A type of small house made from corrugated metal and scraps—it is also known as a tin house.

In contexts of familial, inter-generational precarity, expectations, especially of financial assistance, are hard to meet, and responsibilities towards fellow family members are potentially conflictual, given the limited means among the various members, even those who are employed.

### Women as the Backbone of the Family

Women often occupy strong positions within African families and are often the main agents responsible for the survival of the family—to which end they harness unique abilities that enable them to organize and fulfill the demands attached to everyday family activities and responsibilities. Women are often considered as the backbone of their families as they tend to be in charge of educating their children about moral, ethical, and social values (Taiwo 2010:230). The participants acknowledge the importance of other family members in their upbringing and socialization, and their own mothers occupy special positions in relation to their experiences of being cared for. Those who still have their mothers present in their lives, still depend on their assistance in some way—be it financial, providing moral support, or helping to look after children. Thus, their mothers help them to cope with everyday struggles and challenges.

Death has robbed some of the participants of the warmth and support of their mothers. In some cases, the lineage of care is taken up through the mothers-of-mothers. Some grandmothers step into the gap. Nobantu narrates that her life would have been different if her own mother was still alive as she would have cared for and sheltered her

children, as opposed to now where her children are living with various family members and her in-laws:

Family is very important, but nothing beats having a mother. A mother is very important, and if mine was still alive, I think my life would be easier because she would be staying with my children as opposed to them being spread out. My mother would have made sure that she looks after my children and they live under the same roof and then I would have given her the little that I make from my job. I think things would have been much easier that way because right now I find it difficult to see how they are living and how satisfied they are with the people they live with. I always ask myself whether they have eaten and if they get enough sleep, especially the one who lives with my in-laws. Every time I speak to him on the phone [her son], after that I know that he is not going to sleep. He was diagnosed with a heart problem by a doctor and that just shows that this child is always told about how bad and irresponsible his mother is. Telling a child those things causes the child to have stress. That is why I wish that he could stay with me. My wish is that he could come and live with me because if he continues this way, then he will end up being naughty and will find himself involved in criminal activities in search of money. He might end up living on the streets as a street kid. That is why I want a house and if only the government could help get my ID because Home Affairs is really giving me problems. Then I could be able to buy myself a house and I can stay with my child. I do not worry about the other two because you can see that they are happy. When I visit them, they are happy and free children. My family really looks after them well and they sup-

port me by doing that. I am very grateful to them because they have accepted my children in their homes and they understand when I don't have money. Their support and love is important to me, but they won't do as much as a mother would have done.

Most of the research participants were raised in female-headed households where fathers were absent for various reasons: migrant employment, death, separation, divorce, or abandonment. Thus, they were provided for by their mothers with the help of the maternal families. Even though they knew their paternal families and fathers, their fathers were not financially, materially, and physically involved in their upbringing.

Zoleka is a 53-years-old divorcee and her former husband moved to Johannesburg after their divorce. They have four children and one grandchild. Their oldest daughter relocated to Cape Town, leaving her own child behind for Zoleka to raise alone. Zoleka's former husband stopped paying R1 200.00 monthly maintenance in 2012, leaving Zoleka to survive on a R1 480.00 per month wage earned from cleaning at a local university. In response, Zoleka's children refuse to visit their father and his family as they feel neglected:

The father of my children sometimes puts in money for them. Sometimes he doesn't. Like now he has not put in money for them for over a year now. He stopped last year and I wanted to take him to a court in Jo'burg [Johannesburg], but I could not go as my mother passed away right about the same time. I am planning to go now to the court in Jo'burg to hear what is going on. He is quiet and when I asked him,

he told me that he is sick and he doesn't go to work anymore. These phones are troubles as they can lie. I am quiet for now and I know the type of person he is. I've had enough with his excuses, so I am planning to go to the court in Jo'burg to see what is really happening.

The research participants are constantly faced with the challenges of balancing both work and home responsibilities. Most women's narratives show that they are able to cope fulfilling multiple roles by depending on others, especially close family members, for assistance. Nobantu finds it difficult to balance her work and home roles, especially since she works from home—"home" being the shack she rents from her current partner in order to run a hair salon. Nobantu's job as a hairdresser is strenuous in that it requires her to be on her feet almost the whole day:

It's very difficult for me, but what makes me bear it all is because of my struggles. On the one hand, I am someone's girlfriend, and on the other, I work and I am very tired. When I close the salon and when I go into the house, I will find that nobody cooked. I will then start cooking and after that I just want to go to bed, and then when I get there, my boyfriend will want to have sex. Things are very difficult for me and sometimes I tell him that I will go to Lesotho for the whole month [giggles], but that will not happen because what brought me here in the first place was money. So I tell myself to hang in there because of my children.

Despite them trying hard to vouch for their children's well-being, they still experience powerless-

ness as to the real state of affairs in their children's lives. Nobantu and Zoleka, like many Black South African women, also grew up without ever knowing their fathers. Their own experiences relate to minimal fatherly involvement and these experiences are now repeated in the lives of their children. Emotional detachment from a father and leaning on a mother for support is a leitmotiv for many of these families.

### Gendered Dynamics of the Household

Domestic responsibilities tend to dominate the research participants' activities. These women are faced with the reality of having to conduct routine household chores on behalf of their dependents—duties that are considered to be "feminized." However, the women mention their sense of satisfaction at fulfilling these duties and providing their dependants with what little they have available. They also strive towards providing for their children in order to give them a "better" life and to prevent them from experiencing poverty. They thereby wish to break the inter-generational cycle of hardship and its concomitant troubles. Unemployed Pinky's lifeworld revolves around taking care of her children and their needs. She narrates the following:

After that [walking children to school] I make tea for myself and then start cleaning the house. When I am done, then I go back into my bed and sleep. I take naps and then later I will wake up and prepare food for the children when they come back from school. They will find me having cooked them pap. That is my job: that is what I do every day.

Participants are of the opinion that women can do household chores (gardening, cleaning the yard, cutting trees, and fixing appliances) that are usually associated with men, and vice versa. According to the women, gender does play a major role in their performances of mundane, largely unrewarded, tasks in the household. As Khanyisile says:

We need to help each other out, there is no such thing as women's or men's job.

Nobantu shares these sentiments of domestic responsibilities ideally not being bound by gender. She feels that families should help each other and should share household responsibilities. She blames preceding generations for this narrow thinking and behavior, whereby younger generations are groomed to perpetuate gender roles and stereotypes. This results in the imbalance and overburdening of women who are expected not only to run the entire household, but also to bring in income:

I think household chores must be done by everyone, but it depends on one's upbringing. If he was raised and told that a woman is not a slave, then he would know that he is supposed to help me with the cooking, washing of the dishes, and making the bed, and sweeping the room when he can see that I am busy. He would offer to wash the clothes, but you can see that in his upbringing, he was taught that these chores are only supposed to be done by women. But, he is not the only one with this problem as the male tenants wake up in the morning and smoke. The yard will be dirty at that time, but none of them will think of cleaning. Instead, we have to

clean it. I am the one who usually does it because I hate a dirty place. You can tell that he is relieved by me doing these chores and he can see that I am used to doing them, as I was also doing them back home in Lesotho. At home in Lesotho, the yard is cleaned by children and my brother is not lazy to help me with the cooking. He is not lazy to clean the house and he can do his own washing, but here [referring to her partner and the male tenants] you can see that there is a huge problem.

The notion of gender roles gets instilled in children from a young age. Female children are socialized to perform chores like cleaning, cooking, doing the laundry, bathing their younger siblings, and running the household. It is traditionally expected of men to be breadwinners and to provide for their families, a gendered expectation that still finds a firm footing in patriarchal societies. But, these gendered norms do not seem to hold in the case of participants in this study, who say that they are more or less solely responsible for the revenue needed to keep the household going. The income earned by these women is often not enough to sustain households and family members are often required to send remittances and groceries to assist. Some of these women talk about them having to build extra rooms (shacks) at the back of their dwellings to rent out for additional income. This income is mainly used to procure basic necessities such as food, toiletries, and electricity—primary items of daily survival.

### The Importance of Support Networks

The philosophy of Ubuntu/Botho, defined as “an African worldview that is based on values of intense

humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values,” in essence promotes social cohesion and peaceful living within the family and community (Broodryk 2002:19). Ubuntu/Botho is the foundation of support structures within African communities, which goes beyond family ties to acknowledge people as social beings living within a society—where everybody needs other people in order to be able to adapt and survive. Ubuntu/Botho is supposed to play a fundamental part in people's lives in a direct manner. This way of life is vested in reciprocity—an expectation that good deeds will be rewarded by a higher entity or by other people. Pinky echoes this philosophy:

I can't live without other people because help comes from other people. When I need help, I consult other people and ask for help.

Nobantu explains her understanding of Ubuntu/Botho as the “inner being” of a person, or as part of “humanity.” Individuals are supposed to care about each other's well-being as a means to strengthen the community's spirit. Nobantu narrates that Ubuntu/Botho is found in people's hearts and in the ability of people to feel and show compassion and sympathy towards each other:

I think Botho is in your heart: if your heart can be able to feel pain on behalf of someone and be able to think for others. Botho can also be your spirit; when you do well towards others, then you know that the Almighty God is watching you. And you are scared to do bad things towards others because God can see you and He will deal with you. I think Botho is in people as in their spirit.

Some participants feel that the ethos of Ubuntu/Botho has weakened over generations, as it does not speak to some individuals, especially those who fail to reciprocate assistance and thereby neglect their responsibility. As noted earlier, Khanyisile sees respect and recognition as being extended only to those who have money. And Zoleka notes that she assisted other people and showed Ubuntu/Botho, but her good deeds were not returned. This inability or reluctance to reciprocate has forced Zoleka to rethink her willingness to help in future:

I have helped too many people, but I have bad luck when it comes to them returning my help. I really have bad luck, so I just keep quiet and tell myself that someday they will find themselves in trouble and they will want my help, but it won't be there. I won't have their help because they didn't help me when I needed them. They don't want to help me, but they expect me to help them all the time.

Participants clearly depend on selected individuals for social support. This equips them with the strength to cope with the burdens, demands, and stresses of everyday life. The negotiated spaces with their ties, bonds, and relationships are where participants find comfort, relief, and strength to continue with their everyday activities and overcome their difficult circumstances. This social network, in most cases, provides care to the participants when they are sick, and this support also ensures that their households continue to function during periods of hardship.

Some participants also call on religion (God) and religious fellowships for strength. Khanyisile

relies on two friends from church to a point that she sees them as part of her family. She describes these friends as:

Individuals who are supposed to know everything about you. Even when there is shortage of food in the house, they are supposed to say: "My friend, I can see that the children are hungry. So here is something. Please go buy food and hide the embarrassment."

Another form of support network in Black African neighborhoods is the *stokvel*. Members of *stokvels* contribute money throughout the year. Often the proceeds of this collective saving is divided between members during times when additional money is required, such as when a funeral needs to be arranged for or during festive periods. A *stokvel* is therefore a "type of credit union in which a group of people enter into an agreement to contribute a fixed amount of money to a common pool weekly, fortnightly or monthly" (Lukhele 1990:1). Participants often join different *stokvels* as means of financial security (investing and saving their money) and social well-being (as relationships based on trust, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging). The participants contribute money throughout the year and in December they often buy and share groceries. In addition to *stokvels*, some women pool money monthly to buy food stamps from large retail supermarkets. These savings mechanisms ensure that they have some money and groceries over the festive season. The *stokvel* members sometimes also increase their money by loaning it out and charging interest.

Nobantu is a business woman (hairdresser) whose income depends on the number of customers. She invests some of her money in a bank and, in addition, joined different *stokvels* to increase her savings and make sure that she has enough groceries and money when she returns to Lesotho for the festive season. Nobantu trusts the women that she is operating the *stokvels* with.

I am part of different *stokvels*: the first one we contribute R500 a month each, another one we contribute R300 a month each, and another one where we contribute R400 for groceries, and the last one we contribute R200 that we buy meat with. From there on I just invest the rest of my money in a bank. The women are really trustworthy and I do trust them. When they have serious problems like a child being admitted to hospital and they can't pay, they make sure that they tell us.

*Stokvels* are thus constructive means of saving money and, in addition, a way of socializing for the majority of these women. But, there are those who are unable to be part of these informal networks. Women who are unemployed or dependent on erratic sources of income, and those whose major source of income comes from social grants and hand-outs, find it difficult, if not impossible, to be part of *stokvels*. Thus, they forfeit the services provided by these networks: an informal means of saving, but also a sense of belonging and trust in a hostile context characterized by hardship and isolation.

Pinky agrees that *stokvels* require one to have income as she used to be part of a *stokvel* when she

still received her monthly disability grant. She was forced to withdraw from the *stokvel* when the grant was stopped:

I used to be part of a *stokvel* with my sister when I still had my sick pay [disability grant], but now I can't anymore because I don't have money to contribute.

This holds very negative consequences for Pinky. Notwithstanding her troubles, she is of the opinion that one should not let other people see one's challenges and struggles and that it is better to suffer in private:

You know, I always think to myself that people who do not have problems, do not know what problems are. There are some days where we sleep without eating for like two to three days. But, we do not worry. We just stand there and drink water and clean the house like everybody else. People do not need to see your problems in the house and yet life still goes on. Today my children have grown and they are used to go to bed without eating. I sit them down every day and tell them that they have experienced problems and they now know what problems are and they will show their children what problems are. There are some people who find me irritating when I go to their homes and tell them about my problems and there are some people who actually are willing to help out. Sometimes I feel like not telling anyone that I don't have things in my house because they get irritated with me. I don't want to go to people all the time with my problems.

Her story demonstrates that there are limits to reciprocity and generosity in contexts of prevalent pre-

carity. The idealistic and romanticized notion of Ubuntu/Botho has often failed participants during their most pressing times.

### The World of Work in the Context of Precarity

Well-remunerated employment is a dream for most of the women who participate in this research. They feel that their lives would have turned out differently if they had the opportunity to complete high school and to obtain further qualifications. The inability to get better employment prevents them from escaping the cycle of poverty. Pinky is saddened by her situation and she is reminded of her struggle every month-end when, unlike herself, other parents are able to buy their children things they need:

Not having permanent employment makes me feel bad. Seriously, that thing pains me so much. Like at the end of every month, people buy things. They buy things for their children and I can't afford to. I also want to buy things for my children, but I can't because I do not have money.

Khanyisile echoes Pinky's frustrations and pain of not being able to get a stable and well-remunerated job—although she is studying towards a Matric in the hope that it will afford her better prospects. Khanyisile's husband is struggling to find a steady source of income. Her situation leaves her wondering and questioning if there is something wrong with them compared to other people who have stable and well-paying jobs. Khanyisile fears that one day their children will ask them what they were

doing while other parents were making sure that their children are well-provided for:

Not having a good job makes me feel bad. It's like something is wrong with me because I can't find a job like everybody else. You ask yourself questions when you are alone and someday I also asked the Lord: "My husband and I are not sick, we are healthy people and we are both hard workers because when my husband finds a job, then he does his work very well and same with me. So, why can't we get jobs?" We need to work for our children because tomorrow they are going to ask us what we were doing while other parents were working for their children. "Were we just sitting in this two-roomed house," they are going to ask us?

Emotions of fear and anxiety in the lives of these women leave them in a state of being constantly uncertain and having to face the unknown. The majority of the participants state that death is one of their greatest fears because they do not know how their loved ones, in particular their children, will cope in their absence. Nobantu, for instance, feels that she is the only one who protects and guides them without the presence of a father, and she experiences gnawing uncertainty as to the continued support of her extended family. She is concerned with the types of lifestyles that the younger generations are exposed to and mentions worrying trends among the young. She narrates her fears:

My greatest fear is the thought of God calling me—death. You know, I ask myself how life will be on our children. Today, teenagers are experiencing the

harshness of life, so how will life be for them when we are not here. How will things be, since we won't be around to protect, guide, and show them their wrongdoings and how are they going to live. I always ask myself that question about the kinds of life these children will live. Things keep getting worse. Right now there is Nyaope [a drug] among many things. I wonder what will happen when my son is between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Would he smoke the Nyaope drug and what will I say or do if he smokes it? That's my fear and I wish they didn't have to grow old. But, it's God's will for children to grow old. When it comes to my daughters, their challenges are better because the worst she can do is to bring a child home and I can raise the child. But, how will I handle it if she brings more children home. Those are my fears. I really wish my children didn't have to grow old.

Khanyisile shares Nobantu's fears as to the type of lifestyle her children will lead. Khanyisile is more worried about the well-being of her two daughters compared to her son. Her son is an adult now and, according to her, a respectful young man who was able to get through his teenage stage without smoking (drugs), drinking, and having children. Khanyisile is scared of the challenges her daughters will face in society where young children, especially girls, are raped on a daily basis. She is worried about influences they are going to come across and the types of friends they will surround themselves with. These fears are made more real by the fact that she has limited control over her daughters' whereabouts seeing as she is not always at home because she has to accept whatever job comes her way to make ends meet for the family. Khanyisile

says that her only hope is prayer and she relies on God to protect and guide her children:

As a parent, you tend to worry about your daughters and fear for them. I always wonder what will happen when my daughters turn fifteen years old. What is going to happen to them? What is going to frustrate them and the types of people they are going to meet? At that age their bodies will be developing and I can't help but worry about the people that they are going to come across. I ask God to protect them when they walk on the streets, especially when they are walking alone because you will never know what can happen. What if they are kidnapped? These things are very scary when you have daughters, but when you have sons, one tends to be more relaxed. I did not have the same concerns with my son because he was a very respectful child. He used to get scared when I was praying. He doesn't even know how he managed to escape and not use drugs in his teenage years.

## Conclusion

Far-reaching, entrenched, and pervasive socio-political and economic factors left visible scars on the Black African family in post-apartheid South Africa. The African family was strained and weakened by the race-based disruptions and concomitant inequalities that saw a gradual and far-reaching undermining of African family life. The systematic weakening of the African family made them vulnerable and exposed them to a variety of problems and a manifestation of social ills such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of proper education. Although the African family has become unstable

and struggles to fulfill its critical roles and functions related to nurturing, care, and protection towards its members, all is not gloom and doom. Community members tend to strive for self-preservation in these precarious contexts and are lending a helping hand often extending beyond those that they have close relationships with and that they consider to be part of their immediate families.

Family is still one of the most important social institutions (especially for the poor and vulnerable sectors of the population). It is known to provide support and care to its members. For this reason, participants regard individuals who provide them with material, emotional, and spiritual support as part of their families. Family members form a support structure that is available during good and bad times. Thus, family is important to the research participants because it also creates a space that allows them to have a sense of belonging and a place where they can turn to when faced with challenges and difficulties during their everyday struggles. Family serves as a site of some stability for the participants as it provides a major means of survival. But, simultaneously, family is a potential site of conflict and tension, especially when members are unable to contribute to the household operations or are unable to reciprocate previous acts of generosity.

Amidst all the hardship and suffering that the research participants experience, it is touching that they can still talk about happiness. It testifies to resilience—an ability to withstand the trauma and destruction of poverty. Their abilities to deal with difficult conditions are admirable.

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