

The status and role of women in an ageing society: Black South African older women's experience

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Demographic and social background

Although the populations of sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries are ageing, the pace of ageing is the slowest of all world regions. Fertility and mortality rates remain high, with women bearing almost 5.5 children, on average, compared to 2.8 in North Africa (Kinsella & Phillips, 2005). Average life expectancy at birth (without AIDS) in the sub-continent is projected to increase from about 45 years at present, to 63 years by 2050 (UNPD, 2005). At age 60, women are likely to survive men by only two years, based on life expectancies of 17 years and 15 years, respectively. However, mortality associated with the HIV/AIDS epidemics has greatly reduced life expectancy at birth in several southern African countries (Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, in particular), reversing gains in human development and resulting in possible premature population ageing (Kinsella & Phillips, 2005). In South Africa, life expectancy at birth is 45 years for men and 51 years for women (UNPD, 2005).

Although the proportion of older persons (aged 60 years and over) in the population of SSA countries is likely to remain fairly low (a projected increase from 5 per cent in 2005, to 8.3 per cent by 2050), the absolute number of older persons is projected to increase fourfold over the same period: from 36.6 million to 141 million (UNPD, 2005). In 2005, South Africa had a total population of 46.9 million, 3.6 million of which was 60 years or older and constituted 7.7 per cent of the total population. South Africa's population is multi-ethnic, and under apartheid its citizens were categorised as black, coloured (people of mixed ancestry), Indian/Asian and white. At present, blacks constitute 79.3 per cent of the total population, coloureds 8.9 per cent, Indians/Asians 2.5 per cent and whites 9.3 per cent. In the population aged 60 years and over, blacks constitute 65.9 per cent, coloureds 8.1 per cent, Indians/Asians 3.2 per cent and whites 22.7 per cent. Women aged 60 years and over are more numerous than men in that age group: 2 million women against 1.6 million men, representing 55 per cent and 45 per cent of the older population, respectively – a ratio of 1 : 0.8. Female to male ratios in different older age groups range from 1 : 0.9 in the 60–64 years age group, to 1 : 0.6 in the 80 years and over age group, reflecting the relative longevity of women (StatsSA, 2005).

For a variety of historico-political reasons spanning three and a half centuries, relating to colonial occupation first and later to apartheid, the socio-economic circumstances and opportunities for self-advancement of people in the different ethno-racial groups have differed, with whites being most advantaged and blacks most disadvantaged (Ferreira, 2006). The inequalities persist largely, despite racial

declassification in 1988, and the advent of democracy which ended apartheid in April 1994 and promised a better life for all. Although a growing black middle class has emerged, estimated at less than 10 per cent of the adult black population of about 22 million (*The Cape Argus*, 2006: 9), the majority of citizens continue to live in dire poverty; unemployment remains high, crime is rampant, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its consequences impact virtually all areas of social and economic life. A strong urbanisation trend is resulting in the depopulation of socially, economically and environmentally deprived rural areas and a proliferation of sprawling, largely disorganised human settlements on urban fringes. The trend, the migration of mainly young working age adults to metropolitan areas, leaves numerous older persons, older women in particular, behind in rural areas without kin support and often with grandchildren to raise (Ferreira & Van Dongen, 2004). Older women who have been disadvantaged across the life course, especially if they reside in a rural area, have heightened vulnerability.

Living arrangements in South Africa are determined to a large extent by sociocultural preferences and socio-economic factors, and vary across the ethno-racial groups as well (see Ferreira, 2006). White older women are more likely than black, coloured and Indian/Asian older women to live independently – either alone or with a spouse, or to live in a residential care facility. Older people in other ethnic groups have thusfar shown a preference to co-reside with family in multigenerational households. Previously, few institutions were available to black older persons, but facilities were desegregated racially under new government policy and are theoretically accessible to all financially and socially indigent individuals in need of 24-hour nursing care. Although policy stipulates that no more than two per cent of the older population may be accommodated in state subsidised homes, a trend is noted for women rendered vulnerable by the effects of rapid social change to seek admission to a home. Of the non-institutionalised older population, across racial groupings, approximately 19.5 per cent lives independently, 72 per cent co-resides with children and/or grandchildren, and 8.4 per cent lives with other relatives (6.7%) or non-relatives (1.7%). Only 8.1 per cent of all older women live alone, predominantly white women. Almost all black older persons who co-reside with children and/or grandchildren, or their spouse, head the household (United Nations, 2005: 33).

Such is background against which the status and vulnerability as well as the roles and contributions of older women in South Africa may be considered. However, although a gender dynamic operates in all the ethno-racial groups, the situation of black older women, particularly those who reside in a rural area, is most precarious and is focused on below.

Status and vulnerability

In general, African society is patriarchal and has deep gender divides (Ferreira, 2004a), which are most pronounced in rural areas where they are buttressed by tribal structures and traditional authority. In South Africa, a high prevalence of gender based violence renders poor older women especially vulnerable to abuse, violence and exploitation (Ferreira, 2004a; Keikelame & Ferreira, 2000). Where older women were disadvantaged across the life course, as were black women under apartheid

and before that, they lack power largely to assert their rights and to withstand abuse and exploitation (Ferreira, 2004b).

South Africa has a new, progressive Constitution and Bill of Rights that provide for the protection of the rights and freedom of all citizens. (The Constitution was adopted by means of Act 108 of 1996.) However, the bill does not cover the rights of older persons specifically. Moreover, where legislation exists to protect older persons, the application of the legislation may not be systematic – moreso in the case of older women and especially those who reside in rural areas (Ferreira, 2004a). A gap exists therefore between protection for all citizens as provided for in the Constitution, and the power that male dominated tribal authorities in rural areas wield and a lack of protection of the rights of women in these areas.¹ Rural women are especially disadvantaged and vulnerable regarding land rights, security of tenure, inheritance and succession, and abuse and violence; these specific areas of vulnerability, which indicate the women's status, are examined more fully.

- Under the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004, unmarried women are unable to claim land rights – a similar predicament to that of women married under customary law.¹ Women's rights to land depend on the consent of a husband. Women in a customary marriage face inordinate difficulty in asserting their rights in this regard. Although the marriages are recognised in current law, during disputes the women will struggle to defend their rights to ownership and inheritance. The act condones the control of land by tribal authorities and recognises them as traditional councils. Hence, the role of traditional male dominated leadership in communal land allocation and ownership in rural areas continues to disadvantage women (cf. Maitse & Majake, 2005).
- If land is not controlled by a tribal chief, it is likely to be owned by white farmers. Although farm workers are protected by the Extension of Security of Land Tenure Act of 1997, they may be dismissed by a farmer when viewed as being too old to be productive and evicted from the farm. They will have no title deeds to the land and the house they occupied, often for decades, as they were not legal custodians of the land. Farm owners have been unwilling to allow workers to establish permanent structures on the farm. Thus, when a husband who was a farm worker dies, not only may the widow be evicted from the farm, but there will neither be any property for her to inherit (Maitse & Majake, 2005; see Ferreira, Charlton & Mosaval, 1998).
- Problems of succession and inheritance of property experienced by older women are predominant in rural areas but also occur in urban settlements. In rural areas traditional structures still play a major role in the distribution of assets and the division of the estate on death. Under customary law property may only be inherited by male figures and a male figure must head a household. The practice of property being seized from widows is dominant. Widows will be evicted from their home and land by male in-laws, who claim they are sole owners of the property. Eviction and seizure of the property of a widow dispossesses her of all material assets and contributes to destitution and homelessness among widows. A brother of the deceased husband may even impose himself on the widow, citing "culture" as reasoning behind the behaviour (Maitse & Majake, 2005). In urban areas widows may be similarly vulnerable to seizure of property by in-laws,

but may forgo a claim to inheritance due to difficulties and costs involved in accessing legal intervention (Maitse & Majake, 2005).

- Where a woman has been in a traditional marriage – most older black women were married under customary law, she may experience inordinate difficulty in obtaining her husband's occupational pension benefits. The difficulty is more complicated when the spouse later married a younger woman under Western law. The in-laws of a widow of a traditional marriage may seize or destroy documents that she needs to claim benefits. Such widows are unlikely to receive support from the husband's relatives, who often blame her for the death of her husband. Widows who did not conceive children with the deceased, or who do not have proof of marriage to him are most vulnerable (Maitse & Majake, 2005).
- Where widows manage to continue to live in the house of their deceased husband, they may experience abuse by unscrupulous relatives of the husband and even their own sons (Maitse & Majake, 2005). Ferreira (Ferreira, 2004a; Keikelame & Ferreira, 2001) has investigated types of elder abuse prevalent in communities in South Africa and other African countries, and has concluded that the abuse is more violent than that reported in other regions and covered in the Western definition of elder abuse (cf. Moser & Clark, 2001; United Nations, 2002a). In particular, she has examined the practice of allegations of witchcraft and their consequences for vulnerable older women. This form of violence is typically directed at widows or single women who are frail, may be demented and live alone, and have physical characteristics such as a stooped back, wrinkled skin, gnarled hands and yellow eyes. An air of suspicion grows around such a woman, and when ills or events befall a community that cannot be explained, such as drought, floods and deaths (possibly due to AIDS), the community will seek a scapegoat, and identify the woman as a witch and allege that she is responsible for the ills. The woman will fear for her life, and will be forced to flee her house and the community and to relinquish her assets. Not only may she be ostracised and banished, but also lynched, tortured, maimed and even killed. Underpinning the allegations is usually conflict over property ownership, where it is perceived that removal of the woman will expedite occupation of the house by other family members impatient to inherit the property (Ferreira, 2004a).

A huge gap exists therefore between legislation to protect the rights of women and the reality of the lived experience of some older women in rural areas (see Maitse & Majake, 2005). The enhancement of black women's status, especially widows who reside in a rural area, is thus up against deep rooted cultural or traditional practices that are sustained largely by a lack of reform and democratisation of the traditional rule of tribal authorities. The situation of powerless older women, similar to that described above, is noted in the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing* (2002). First, the Plan points out that older women's poverty is related directly to the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, a lack of access to economic resources including land ownership and inheritance, and minimal participation in decision-making processes. Second, the Plan notes that older women face greater risk than older men of physical and psychological abuse through discriminatory societal attitudes and the non-realisation of human rights. Indeed, some harmful traditional and customary practices may result in abuse and violence directed at

older women, often exacerbated by poverty and a lack of access to legal protection (UNFPA, 2002a: 33; UN, 2002a,b; Ferreira, 2004a).

The status of all older women in South Africa is however not necessarily as negative as represented above. For one, older persons' status is enhanced considerably through receipt of the social old age pension by the majority (Ferreira, 2004b; Ferreira & Van Dongen, 2004); social welfare is an integral part of the lives of poor older South Africans. Black women are shown to employ pension benefits in a variety of ways that earn them respect and dignity, and enhance their status within their family, household and community (Sagner & Mtati, 1999; Møller & Sotshongaye, 1996), as is examined below (cf. Ferreira, 2004b).

Roles and contributions

Women in Africa play multiple roles and make numerous contributions to family, community, society and development. In South Africa, roles played and contributions made by black older women, in particular, include supporting households, raising grandchildren, caring for sick and disabled family members, caring for persons infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS, engaging in livelihoods to augment household income, and participating in activities of community organisations and in political processes. A dark side of roles played and contributions made however is the burden of care and responsibility on the women. Examples are given of older women's roles and contributions in these areas below.

- Under South Africa's non-contributory social pension programme, men aged 65 years and over and women aged 60 years and over are eligible, subject to a means test, to receive monthly pension benefits. In 2006 approximately 2.9 million beneficiaries receive a pension with a value of R820 a month (about US\$117)(Ferreira, 2006; 2004b; Ferreira & Van Dongen, 2004; Møller & Ferreira, 2003). Pension income has been shown to reduce individual and household poverty and vulnerability (Ferreira, 2006; Møller & Ferreira, 2003) through pension sharing (Møller & Sotshongaye, 1996; Sagner & Mtati, 1999), and to contribute to household income, the empowerment of beneficiaries and development broadly (Møller & Ferreira, 2003). For one, poor families rely heavily on a woman's pension income for food and shelter; the money enables the beneficiary to meet a variety of expenses to support her family and sustain her household. Major expenditure items reported by multigenerational pensioner households include food (the greatest portion of household income is expended on food); school fees, books and uniforms; fuel; health care for household members; burial society dues (multiple deaths, e.g. due to AIDS, may be anticipated in large, poor households); and debt repayments. Debts are incurred mainly to purchase food and to take out micro loans to service other debts, such as accounts at furniture and clothing stores (Ferreira, 2006; Møller & Ferreira, 2003). Older women, and not older men – as evidence shows (HelpAge International, 1999), assume primary responsibility for the financial support of their household and debt repayments.
- Apart from being major contributors to household income and the maintenance of households, black older women are shown consistently to be main caregivers in

large families of poor communities. Despite increasing age associated ill health, they often care for sick and disabled family members and their children – in addition to performing household and agricultural chores, engaging in livelihoods to earn additional income, and raising grandchildren where the parents are absent or have died. The burden of caregiving, additional work and reduced economic circumstances have been shown to exhaust them physically and emotionally, and to leave them with less time and money to take care of their own health needs (UNFPA, 2002a).

- The burden of care on older women is greatest where they are carers to adult children with AIDS and affected grandchildren (see Ferreira, Keikelame & Mosaval, 2001; UNFPA, 2002a). The HIV/AIDS epidemic has reversed numerous older women's roles: instead of being cared for by adult children, as they may have anticipated, AIDS associated morbidity and mortality in their family requires them to become caregivers, no longer care beneficiaries. The burden of caregiving on the women is multi-faceted, and the effects are physical, material and emotional (Ferreira *et al.*, 2001). The roles and contributions of older women in the care management of the epidemic have hardly been recognised in policies and programmes to fight the disease and to mitigate its effects; yet older carers constitute a valuable care resource, and their capacity should be harnessed and acknowledged formally and they given status accordingly (cf. United Nations, 2002b).
- Older women often engage in a variety of livelihoods to earn income to augment pension money. Typically, they engage in petty trading – growing and selling vegetables and fruit; selling meat or chicken, sweets or cooldrink; collecting and selling firewood; cooking and selling food; and sewing and crocheting, which products they sell. In rural areas they may still engage in subsistence farming, if able to do so physically and have access to land; rural based households are likely to keep livestock and chickens, both for consumption and trading. Historically, men were absent from rural households, as they migrated to cities for wage employment; families were divided (often a husband might start a second family in the city), and women maintained the rural home and assumed the responsibilities of household head (Maitse & Majake, 2005; Ferreira & Van Dongen, 2004).
- In urban areas, in particular, older women typically participate in activities aimed at the development of their community; ample evidence exists of women being more active than men in such activities (see HelpAge International, 1999). At senior centres women engage in educational and social activities; they also become volunteers, affiliated to an agency or group, and do home visiting, give advice and counselling, and teach young people about HIV/AIDS. Older women are similarly likely to be active members of a church and to engage in a variety of church group activities, for the main part aimed at the development of their community. They have been shown moreover to be singularly conscious of their part in the struggle for equality and freedom, and to demonstrate a high level of participation in national and local elections, and a genuine willingness to contribute to new nation-building (Ferreira & Van Dongen, 2004; HelpAge International, 1999).

In South Africa, the month of August is Women's Month and August 9 is a public holiday, celebrated as National Women's Day. Fifty years ago this year on this day, in 1956, thousands of women from across the country marched defiantly to the Union Buildings, the executive seat of government in Pretoria, to deliver a petition bearing 100 000 signatures protesting against the law that required blacks to carry a pass. This watershed event heralded a major contribution that black women would make to the liberation struggle and who are now revered as veterans of the struggle. The slogan of the march was "You strike a woman, you strike a rock." Activities to mark Women's Month annually are directed primarily at honouring the contributions that women make and campaigning for the eradication of abuse and violence against women. Overall, the month is dedicated to the enduring resilience of the spirit of millions of South African women.

Whereto from here?

Although the South African government has demonstrated the political will to address gender issues and to enhance the status of women in society, widespread poverty and inequality of women's access to resources remain problematic and a challenge. Although the economic status of older people in the country has improved since 1994, mainly through wider distribution of the pension, the incidence of poverty among older women and their households remains disproportionately high (Ferreira, 2006; Møller & Ferreira, 2004), especially where they care for children orphaned or rendered vulnerable by HIV/AIDS (see Maitse & Majake, 2005; Ferreira *et al.*, 2001). Although legislation exists to ensure gender equality and protection of the rights of women, the lived experience of poor and powerless women is a contradiction to this provision.

Research carried out in India and South Africa in 2001 (UNFPA, 2002b) found that main concerns of older people in both countries relate to conditions associated with severe poverty, and include inadequate shelter, a lack of access to social services, and intergenerational violence and abuse. In both countries poverty was linked to low levels of literacy – especially among women, poor health, a lack of awareness and access to information, and a lack of participation. Priority needs identified by older people in the countries were food security, clean water, good health, adequate accommodation and support in caring for family (UNFPA, 2002a). In South Africa, poor older women may concede that the new government is succeeding in transforming the country, but will complain that they see few improvements in their own lives, and must still contend with poor sanitation, a lack of running water, poor service facilities, crime and neglect (Maitse & Majake, 2005; Ferreira, 2004b).

However, not all is bad in the lives of poor older South African women: several report "good" things in their lives, such as having strong faith and religion, and other constants, such as tradition – and keeping it alive through the practice of cultural rituals; children – who offer care and support to them, and "are always there when I need them;" being able to foster grandchildren's education; and liberation – the struggle and achievement of freedom for the country. Some women will refer to small improvements in their lives, such as now having a brick house in which to live; receiving pension income – and being able to pay for groceries "for my family," burial society dues and utilities; and owning a cellphone (the joy of being able to stay in

contact with children “at any time”), or a new bedroom suite (paid for in instalments from pension money) (Ferreira, 2004b: 38; cf. UNFPA, 2002a). But small and salutary joys aside, the daily grind for poor older women cannot be overlooked: the quest for decent housing; the burden of looking after a large family in which no-one is employed; and abuse by relatives and even their own children (Keikelame & Ferreira, 2000). An increase in problems associated with unemployment, poverty and HIV/AIDS faced by the country as a whole are translating into an increasing social burden borne progressively by poor older women, especially those who reside in a rural area (Maitse & Majake, 2005).

Hence, the country itself faces continuing challenges of alleviating poverty, establishing equality between men and women, and meeting the basic needs of older persons in general – to name only a few. Granted, the government has committed itself through policy and legislation to improving the lives of older people, mainly through the provision of social services and pensions. However, huge disparities exist in the allocation of resources between urban and rural areas, and older persons are debilitatingly poor and services are severely inadequate in rural areas (Ferreira, 2006; Ferreira & Van Dongen, 2004; Møller & Ferreira, 2003). Poverty and landlessness remain rife in the areas, which still fall under male dominated traditional authorities and where culture tends to impact negatively on the quality of life of widows (Maitse & Majake, 2005). To address developmental, legislative and policy backlogs, in order to achieve gender equity and to improve the situation of poor and oppressed women, patriarchal structures of traditional authorities in rural areas thus need to be democratised in line with the country’s Constitution – for one. At the same time stronger measures are needed to protect the rights of women, and to eliminate gender based discrimination, violence and abuse. Overall, poverty alleviation, indeed poverty eradication in the long term, will contribute to a transformation of gender roles and a reduction of gender based violence (Ferreira, 2004b; UN, 2002a; see also Maitse & Majake, 2005).

Where else to from here? President Thabo Mbeki is punting for a woman to succeed him as President when his second term of office ends in 2009. His suggestion is being met with dissent and even outrage from some: especially powerful, traditionally male bastions such as trade union organisations and the ANC Youth League. The country already has a woman as Deputy President, as does Zimbabwe, and South Africa has the greatest number of female parliamentarians of any African country – heading close to equal representation. Liberia has the first female President in the continent: Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, 66 years old and a grandmother of six. And Kenya is home to the first woman Nobel Peace Prize laureate in Africa, Wangari Maathai, 68 years old, awarded for her work in conserving the environment – interestingly, in rural areas. Maathai and indeed many other older women in the continent may serve as role models and an inspiration to generations of Africans, to place a greater value on women and to ensure a better deal for them.

Note

- ¹ Historically, tribal chiefs wielded patriarchal “control over minors and women,” which became known as “customary law.” The law stipulates that “females are always considered minors and without independent power,” as they can “neither

inherit nor bequeath.” South African women in rural areas were therefore oppressed historically under patriarchal “tribal” institutions, which for much of the 20th century were still entrusted with the delivery of welfare and other services to the rural population (Maitse & Majake, 2005: 5).

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