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## Research note

### **'Resting', AIDS-affliction and marital constraints: Engendered livelihood issues in the aftermath of Lesotho mineworker retrenchments**

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*Since the late 1990s retrenched Basotho mineworkers have been returning in steady numbers to the rural areas of Lesotho. While marital and household relations have been rekindled in the process, there is currently much curiosity about how the large-scale presence of men in rural areas is reconfiguring married women's livelihood strategies and their striving for financial autonomy. The Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act of 2006 has been celebrated as a victory for married women, but customary practice and societal perceptions of the legitimacy of men's marital powers continue to restrict women's activities and livelihood efforts. This reflection on ethnographic research in Mafeteng, Lesotho, illustrates key constraints, in particular gender ideologies and debilitating health conditions that aggravate rural households' economic crises. It is argued that more institutional interventions are required in order to socialise the values and promote the cause of gender equality between married partners and to tackle persisting familial and cultural impediments affecting women's lives.*

**Keywords:** gender equality; ethnography; experiences of poverty; marital powers; Mafeteng

## 1. Background

Throughout the 20th century, rural communities in Lesotho witnessed the periodic out-migration of men who left in large numbers to work on the South African mines. The high percentage of semi-permanent male absence affected the pattern of marital, household and sexual lives and skewed the country's sex ratio (Murray, 1981; Safilios-Rothschild, 1985; Gordon, 1994). Remittances sent back by migrant partners were central to household survival but this source was often supplemented by individual income-earning or cooperative schemes among groups of women. During the months when the rural areas were primarily female-centred, women engaged in a range of domestic and productive activities to sustain their households. Subsistence farming, hawking, sewing, craftwork and beer-brewing are on record as alternative livelihood strategies that women pursued (Sharp & Spiegel, 1990; Maloka, 1997). Ulicki and Crush (2000) also refer to women's ad hoc work efforts on Free State

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farms. While it is evident that as de facto heads of households many women asserted their authority and managed their households resourcefully, they did so within set boundaries, conscious of the fact that their formal economic and 'public realm' rights were heavily curtailed. They had access to 'property, support, and the courts only through their male relations' (Eldredge, 1991:728). Specifically, this meant that women were legal minors, with limited social rights, who needed to obtain the permission of fathers or husbands for economic, social and even basic medical decisions (MCC, 2010).

Concerted lobbying and grassroots mobilisation over the past few decades have led to the institution of gender and development policy, coordinating gender mainstreaming structures and anti-discriminatory legislation (such as the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act, Government Gazette, 2006) that have outlawed gender discrimination. Notwithstanding such definitive changes at the macro-societal level, there is currently debate about the extent to which people in 'deep rural' contexts are embracing gender sensitivity and equality or continuing to 'regulate their affairs in accordance with custom' (Matashane-Marite, 2005:6; MCC, 2010). Our intention in this research note is to offer a glimpse into the experiences and sentiments of rural married Basotho women in the current era, against the background of large-scale male migrant retrenchment, the significant increase in female migration and wage labour, and changes in the legislation with regard to women's rights. Do married women consider themselves to be sufficiently empowered to seek out independent livelihoods, if they so wish?

Marriage in popular Lesotho discourse has commonly been described as the route to economic security for women, with those who lack husbands or male patronage being represented as the most deprived or vulnerable group (Goebel & Epprecht, 1995). Sharp and Spiegel (1990) suggest that in the absence of men, women's confidence and autonomy grew as they carved livelihoods beyond remittances. In contrast, Gordon maintains that 'the absent men have such authority that forward looking well-educated wives are afraid to innovate for fear their husbands will disapprove' (1994:438). Sweetman (1999) says Basotho women commonly reported that they spent their spare time 'sitting on a rock'. She maintains further that women married to migrants frequently explore income-earning opportunities but need to present a facade of being inactive and completely dependent on their husbands. Gender analysts concur that misrepresentations of this nature were simply tactics to maintain harmony in the household, as subservience on the part of wives was a cultural expectation (Sweetman, 1999, Schech & Dev, 2007). Similarly, in-depth studies have revealed complex ways in which Basotho women sustained busy lives but maintained deferential appearances, treading carefully so as not to subvert prevailing gender norms (Safilios-Rothschild, 1985:304; Francis, 2002:182; Matsie, 2010). As migration from Lesotho has become increasing feminised (Crush et al., 2010), and gender relations arguably reworked, growing tensions between men and women have been reported, highlighting contests over control and power at the household level (Slater & Mphahlele, 2008).

Thus, an ethnographic study that entailed recording the life experiences of a sample of women in Lesotho, and jogging their memories to elicit information about past practices, was deemed most useful to explore changes in livelihood strategies as a consequence of men's retrenchments, and by developing broad familiarity with these women we were able to gain insight into their 'practical' and 'strategic' needs (Moser, 1993).

## **2. Methodology**

In 2009 we spent four months doing ethnographic work in Mafeteng, Lesotho. Ethnography was chosen because, as a qualitative form of research, it places primary emphasis on detailed and in-depth study of a few cases in a ‘natural setting’. Researchers adopting this method are generally expected to immerse themselves in the field by observing daily routines and participating in the various activities of research subjects. An understanding of people’s life experiences is developed through consistent interaction and ongoing dialogue rather than one-off interviews (see e.g. David & Sutton, 2004). We follow the trend of most ethnographers in cautioning that ethnographic findings do not immediately translate into generalisable claims – at best they are provisional and contingent upon continuing fieldwork and theoretical analysis over an extended period (see e.g. Burawoy, 2003). This research note, therefore, purports merely to illuminate a problem difficult to pick up in large-scale surveys, viz. the constraints of marriage, gender and household relations and their implications for women’s economic independence and empowerment.

Mafeteng was purposively selected because it is a site with a high concentration of ex-miners and their families. It is a locale lying on Lesotho’s western border with South Africa, conveniently situated to facilitate the circulatory migration efforts of both men and women. The area is split into 12 wards, each of which has a chief, who in turn reports to the senior chief of Mafeteng. It was after the senior chief, as ‘gatekeeper’, sanctioned this research initiative that the individual consent of the women could be obtained and the study formally conducted. Twelve women, one from each ward, agreed to participate in the study. All were married in customary or civil unions. While there might be considerable value in exploring the different freedoms and entitlements of women in various forms of cohabiting union, here we had an interest in examining the constraints and parameters of ‘formal marriage’, with all the concomitant duties and obligations as understood by the research participants themselves.

Similarly, given that a principal interest was in examining household dynamics and the nature of duties and cooperative relations with regard to livelihood and economic decision-making, in all 12 wards we approached only women who were married to migrants who had returned from South Africa. Thus as a criteria for selection, the women had to be defined as ‘married’, in other words, be in an existing customary or civil union and living in one of the following wards: Lifelekoaneng, Khubetsoana, Matholeng, Ha Seithleko, Ha Lebenkele, Ha Sekoati, Thabaneng, Ha Matsepe, Ha Qhobete, Mafeteng Reserve, Matlapeng and Ramokhele. While no deliberate attempt was made to ‘standardise’ the ages of the selected women participants, all were between 35 and 55 years of age. Rural women of this age category are commonly economically active, with non-dependent children. In the field, and to fit in with conventions, the women were referred to respectfully as Me’ (‘mother’, ‘married woman’), hence the designations used below. All the interviews were conducted in Sesotho, and translated into English, by the same interviewer. The translated transcripts were carefully studied to identify broad themes on past and present experiences, particularly with regard to livelihood strategies and the related opportunities and impediments.

## **3. Fieldwork narrative and emerging themes**

From 125 000 in the 1980s, the number of Basotho men employed in the South African mines dropped dramatically to 35 000 by 2010 (IRIN Africa, 2011). Their return to their homes, however, has not signified a decline in oscillating migration or reduced the

dependence of Lesotho's households on remittances. About 240 000 Basotho, 83.6% of them men and 16.4% women, can be defined today as migrants working in a variety of fields (Crush et al., 2010). Of this proportion, only a minority are married – the majority are single, separated or widowed. Besides migrating to South Africa, women are also finding jobs in Lesotho (e.g. in the textile industry).

Reflecting on their early marital histories, the women talked about their huge reliance on the remittances sent home. When these sources of income were regular and adequate, women chose not to actively seek income-earning outside the home. They worked conscientiously on domestic responsibilities and building their social support networks. For women like Me'Malomile, husbands' remittances were sufficient for survival and no other initiatives to gather funds were necessary. Another participant, Me'Mapule, said that when her husband was on the mines she deliberately avoided getting involved in agricultural activities. Her husband 'did not permit her' to participate in cooperatives or start her own business even though she was keen, at one point, to do so. He was, she maintained, 'a traditional man', who believed firmly in a gendered division of labour, i.e. in the normality of a male breadwinner/female homemaker dualism. Similarly, other women talked about having to give up formal work before getting married because their husbands saw it as being at odds with their roles as wives and mothers. The women who became most heavily reliant on their husband's remittances (after marriage) found themselves extremely impoverished in the aftermath of their husband's retrenchments, particularly if they took few initiatives to engage in livelihood activities. Thus, the *first theme* emerging is the reality that for most women marriage marked the end of extra-household livelihood activities in Mafeteng; the more intact the marital bonds, the deeper the experience of poverty upon the husband's return.

Ironically, the women who voiced the least amount of distress during the course of fieldwork were the few who had dealt with conjugal disappointments over the years and created space for alternative livelihoods. For example, when Me'Mamolefe's husband stopped coming home when he was working on the mines she sent one of her children to find him, and learnt that he was married again and had a new family in South Africa. This prompted her to painstakingly create additional avenues for survival. Me'Masethabele had to take timely trips to collect money from her husband at the mine compound because he would frequently default on his remittances and often not come home. For some women, creating avenues for piecework and independent earning was crucial because they saw their husbands as 'wanting to control them' through the irregular and intermittent transference of monies. When facing such phases of insecurity, women often banded together and developed cooperative systems of support and production, similar to that described by Turner (2003:15–16). Some left to do domestic work but many turned to brewing beer and selling vegetables, usually without their husbands' knowledge. In general, the women's reminiscing suggested that they drew on multiple sources and managed their finances shrewdly and resiliently. Thus the *second theme* is that where marriage was less secure, and relationships more fragile, women were driven to practise multiple livelihoods in ways that have benefited them in the longer run.

Declining profits and the restructuring of the South African mining industry led to massive retrenchments (Boehm, 2000) of Mafeteng men. For the women, the returning men had suffered not just economic setbacks but a loss of social esteem and respectability. They described their husbands as enduring 'deep shame' upon returning home. This became the rationalisation for why the men prevented their wives from working and becoming principal earners and the reason why the women constructed a respectable concept for their jobless spouses – the men at home were consistently referred to by the participants as 'resting' rather

than unemployed. Me'Malomile maintained, for example, that although he was resting at home her husband did not want her to go out and do piecework because it would require her to travel and he would find it 'too embarrassing'. Many of the migrant men thus preferred to create the impression that they were living off huge pensions rather than struggling to make ends meet.

Me'Mamojela described her husband as becoming quite bitter since being retrenched; he saw himself as having 'lost some dignity' because he was now a poor provider. This was the case particularly with the younger men who were retrenched before being close to retirement age. The older the couple, the less unhappy they were with their situation. Older men could easily claim to be taking a well-deserved 'rest' after their many years of hard labour. Me'Matho said that her husband, though unemployed, seemed fulfilled because he had worked until his retirement age. While she was able to sustain her phone business and it brought in some money, she, like most of the women, complained that her husband was obstructive and displeased about her spending time away from home. Thus, the *third theme* is women's rationalisation of men's loss of esteem and, along with this, their acknowledgement of men's resistance to women's headship of households, which creates retrogressive conditions both for individual households and for women's involvement in socially ameliorative, anti-poverty projects.

Me'Malebohang expressed her disappointment about the lack of 'regular jobs' in Lesotho. Sometimes, however, opportunities arose, such as national works initiatives to rebuild roads. If such opportunities had been readily available, she would have been willing to take advantage of them, but her husband saw such work as demeaning and located a bit too far away from her domicile. Me'Malebohang was active in support work for the terminally ill but left the project after it became dominated by a group of men (ex-miners). She claimed that many women, including herself, left the support group because they could not work well with the men. The men were argued to be over-exerting themselves and 'men don't help out other men', she said, and that was partly why the support group was a failure: the men did not work at building social capital in the way the women said they themselves were able to do in the community structures of the past. Me'Malebohang echoed the sentiments of most of the other women who were living under conditions of poverty. Hence, the *fourth theme* is the way the married women's deep desire for independent income-earning – close to home – was being shaped by their declining confidence in cooperative initiatives which had become male-dominated and debilitated by acrimony.

Lesotho has a very high rate of HIV infection, with returning mineworkers accounting for a large proportion. In almost every household we visited there were complaints about illness, especially tuberculosis. A few of the men had returned home from the mines specifically because they were no longer effective in performing their duties. This created an added burden for their wives, who had to invest time and energy in caring for them, as well as seeking to mobilise resources to pay medical bills. Me'Matokela said her husband grieved over the loss of his job, but he was stricken with tuberculosis and was also becoming quite infirm because of rapid ageing. She said it was difficult for a man to accept his wife as the principal breadwinner, but household needs have to be met, so if she could find work she would do it, despite his resistance. Me'Mapakiso, was herself intermittently ill but she had fallen on hard times and was driven to earn money to feed her family. She carried the triple burden of domestic work, income-earning and child-rearing. Me'Mathabo had sold goods and brewed beer since 1992, when her husband was retrenched. She declared that she was now HIV-positive and not able to work as before. Her husband no longer lived with the family –

after being diagnosed with AIDS he had moved away to live with his parents. She lived with her younger daughter, as her older daughter was away trying to find a job. The household was in a precarious situation as no one there had secure work and growing vegetables was not regarded as sufficiently viable. A more effective strategy, which she advocated, was accessing food donations from local NGOs and from USAID.

Me'Mathabo said that Basotho workers were coming back to the country ill, largely afflicted by AIDS, and this was a challenge for wives who had to nurse their husbands and also take care of their households. She said that men do not willingly go for HIV tests, because they are in denial or see AIDS as a myth. Consequently, women tend to see them as the main carriers of infection, and themselves as vulnerable because of the transgressions of their husbands. The *fifth theme* that emerged was the destabilising impact of HIV/AIDS, which was depleting resources and increasing morbidity and mortality, but also creating a situation (given the declining strength of the husband) that enabled some women to rebel against marital constraints in order to find work and 'rescue' their families from extreme adversity.

While the ethnographic research mostly elicited a dismal narrative of illness and financial decline, there was one participant who described her returning migrant husband as making a 'democratic shift' and working with her on equal terms on a joint income-earning initiative. Although this was the exception, it offered the insight that rural relationships can be malleable and are ultimately not immune to being reconstituted. Most of the women, however, reported authoritarian husbands and confessed to having very little understanding of new policy and constitutional changes affecting their rights as women. Very little was being discussed in their wards and there was virtually no reporting on changes with regard to land rights and inheritance. The women tended to experience their domestic environments as pressurised, but did not want to engage in any actions that would antagonise or offend their husbands. Me'Mathabiso emphasised that the men who returned from the mines have few chances of finding any work in Lesotho, and this leaves them depressed and feeling demeaned. Furthermore, ex-mineworkers in Lesotho had been promised houses, but no progress in this regard was evident.

Me'Masechaba lamented that nothing felt positive any more – unlike in the past, when she was assured of regular remittances. Most of her time is spent washing clothes and seeing to her husband. Resting is also lately a preoccupation for her, once her daily chores are done. Similarly, Me'Mamelita spends her time doing household chores, and when she has finished she finds herself in limbo. Me'Mapule's situation is similar. After her housework is done she waits for visitors. Me'Mamosieoua said that the women have slowed down because they do not have the freedom to act as independent decision-makers or heads of households (see also Francis, 2002). Opportunities are in retreat and much time is consumed in catering for their husband's needs. All the women expressed the view that traditional gender ideologies (e.g. ideas about the married woman's homemaker duties, her deference, confinement to the home, and prioritising food preparation and care for her husband above all other things) had significantly affected their lives since the men had returned, relegating them to a more constricted private sphere. Thus, the *sixth theme*, which deserves careful consideration in future studies, is the progressive 'gendered backlash' that Mafeteng married women have experienced as their retrenched husbands return. This backlash has given rise to the phenomenon of men 'resting' – signifying huge structural and cultural barriers – which is having the effect of subduing the agency of married women and preventing them from actively seeking livelihood opportunities in the way that unencumbered women are currently doing.

In summary, the following are the themes that emerged from the fieldwork in Mafeteng:

Theme 1: Marriage puts an end to extra-household livelihood activities and this can lead to poverty, particularly in secure marriages.

Theme 2: In less secure marriages, women are driven to seek multiple livelihoods and they benefit in the long run.

Theme 3: Married women cover up for retrenched men's loss of esteem, saying they are 'resting', but the men resist women's becoming household heads, which impoverishes the household and curtails women's involvement in socially ameliorative, anti-poverty projects.

Theme 4: Married women's desire to earn independent income is being shaped by their declining confidence in male-dominated and acrimonious cooperative initiatives.

Theme 5: HIV/AIDS is depleting resources and increasing morbidity and mortality, but at the same time creating space for some women to rebel against marital constraints and go out to work to save their family.

Theme 6: Married women are experiencing a 'gendered backlash' as their retrenched husbands return home, and this is preventing them from going out to work as unencumbered women are doing.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This research note describes ethnographic work that investigated micro-level experiences of debilitation and decline in married women's positions as independent livelihood seekers in rural Lesotho. The men who have been retrenched from the mines have reasserted their gender roles, undermining women's positions as de facto heads. Women's livelihoods – remarkably vibrant in the 1980s and 1990s – have been set back in recent years. Rural Basotho men, socialised as familial heads and guardians, have had to contend with feelings of emasculation brought on by the retrenchments. The ex-mineworkers are now no longer primary earners for their families and collectively no longer the pillar of rural economies. Against this background, the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act of 2006, and new policies advocating gender equality and human rights for all, intervene further in the arena of personal politics and hold consequences for struggles over control of resources, the re-working of the gendered division of labour and shared decision-making in Mafeteng households.

The retrenchment of miners has happened alongside a decrease in farming and a general crisis in the Lesotho agricultural sector. What has increased, however, is the presence of groups, state-aided, independent or affiliated to international development organisations, seeking to empower women and indirectly help sustain their households. Set against a larger context of planning and development, the programmes of such groups, while valuable, will be inhibited by prevailing culturally embedded notions of 'appropriate' behaviour for men and women, and their associated marital duties. On the issue of gender ideologies, many projects have been set on bringing about changes in women's lives by encouraging their participation in entrepreneurial activities structured as equal opportunity models. According to this logic, it

is assumed that projects that offer women the basis for financial autonomy could trigger gender transformations at the macro-societal level (Goebel & Epprecht, 1995; MCC, 2010). However, such initiatives have been devised for women without seriously factoring in the various constraints, particularly the problem of overbearing husbands, that may make married women unwilling to leave their homes, migrate, or participate in initiatives at a distance from their homes. Rather than targeting women exclusively, more institutional efforts should be made to involve and engage both husband and wife and inspire cooperation and egalitarianism. These could serve as useful consciousness-raising interventions that would also help to undermine wider discriminatory practices in rural Lesotho.

From our fieldwork, and drawing on Moser (1993), we argue that since income-earning remains a high priority 'practical need' for married women, development projects should therefore deliberately seek to incorporate them. Ways to integrate and situate men's working efforts should also be consistently explored. Other practical needs the research brought to light were accessible health care services and affordable food. As a more long-term initiative, women's 'strategic' needs could be met by galvanising structures with democratic mandates that are present in Lesotho. These could help to transform what the Mafeteng women described as a rigid gender division of labour and firm patriarchal gender hierarchy nurtured through the ages. While Basotho women have won legal rights, these have not been sufficiently socialised amongst the rural people, and grounded in the communal spaces of their society. Driving a process to make married couples aware of the values of joint decision-making and the right to work as equal citizens represents an arduous and perhaps monumental mission, but it is a crucial one, nonetheless, in the interests of gender equality and social justice.

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