

Chapter 10

Young Mothers, Labour Migration and Social Security in South Africa



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10.1 Introduction

Due to the conditions of apartheid and social engineering, internal labour migration played an important role in shaping the dynamic roles and relationships of South African families. In a recent study on internal labour migration in South Africa, Mokoene (2017) found that even though men remain the main migrants in households, young women are increasingly becoming prominent migrants as well. This finding echoes other existing findings on national and international migration which illustrate that women continue to migrate in large numbers within and across borders to find employment (Xulu-Gama, 2017; Kihato, 2013; Walker, 1990). Studies also show that labour migration presents both benefits and costs for migrant sending families (Mokoene & Khunou, 2019; see also Yao & Treiman, 2011). Thus in this chapter we take a closer look at experiences of the families of young women who migrate from the rural parts of Madibeng in the North West Province of South Africa, to neighboring cities in search of employment. This is from a study by Mokoene (2017) which found that the migration of these young women come with a cost including, non-remittance, parental absence and poverty (struggle for survival) to the families they leave behind.

South African women have long been part of internal migration even before the advent of democracy. The early migrant labour system was complex, and thus impacted communal lives and survival of these women as they remained at home with children, the old and frail (Walker, 1990). There's agreement that benefits of migration include its positive contribution to the well-being of families who

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P. Rugunanan, N. Xulu-Gama (eds.), *Migration in Southern Africa*, IMISCOE Research Series, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92114-9_10

receive(d) remittances from labour-migrant family members (Mokoene & Khunou, 2019; Yao & Treiman, 2011). But not all families have the positive experience when it comes to receiving remittances from their migrant labourers, as it is the case in this study's migrant families. Also, in Mokoene's (2017) study, (2019) these young migrant women were mothers to young children. Thus, one of the costs of migration to these households is the creation of parental absence (Mokoene & Khunou, 2019), and in particular maternal absence. These absences have a negative impact when those left behind are unable to provide appropriate care because of continuing experiences of poverty. The migration of these young women to cities for work evokes the significance of familial relationships, in particular the significance of the grandmother in migrants' households (Mokoene, 2017).

Research on social security has rightfully noted that grandmothers play an important role in families as they continue to provide financial support and care for young children who, in most cases, are left in their custody by migrant mothers and fathers (Makiwane, 2014). With regard to grandmothers, research notes that the old age grant (OAG) and chronic illness grant (CIG) facilitate their ability to provide for children left behind by migrant parents. Studies further highlight fact that the child support grant (CSG) also facilitates the ability of young mothers to migrate to find suitable employment (Wright et al., 2014). The role of the CSG in the lives of mothers and families is captured in detail by Wright et al. (2014), who indicate that, although the CSG is seen as providing various protections for the child, it also invariably protects recipients' dignity. One of the ways it enhances recipients' dignity is through the possibilities it provides regarding their endeavours to find employment.

This chapter, therefore, intends to illustrate that the social security system, as in the CSG and the OAG, are significant for maintaining familial relationships and facilitating the development and work-seeking possibilities of young migrant mothers. The chapter also makes the argument for a reconsidering of comprehensive social security with a call for a rethinking of the basic income grant (BIG) and the provision of a comprehensive social security system for the support of the vulnerable, in this case young South African mothers who migrate for purposes of finding work. To illustrate the significance of social security and the need to enhance the current notion of a comprehensive social security system, the findings are presented in four sections: (1) unemployment and internal labour migration; (2) how the roles and responsibilities in households of labour migrants are reconstituted and grandmothers signified; (3) the role of social grants in labour migrant households; (4) whether South Africa's comprehensive social security is really comprehensive. These sections are preceded by a brief review of the literature and a brief methodological section that foregrounds broader discussions of gender, social grants and migration in the chapter. The data for this chapter was drawn from a bigger study which focused on internal labour migration and its impact on households left behind.

10.2 Gender, Skills and Migration

One of the biggest challenges experienced in rural areas and semi-urban areas is the availability of appropriate employment for residents. Another important challenge in these areas and in South Africa generally has been the provision of skills for its young people (Kane-Berman, 2013). Research on skills and young people in South Africa illustrates that the education and skills levels of job seekers under the age of 35 are not high enough to meet the current skills requirements of employers (Yu et al., 2016). According to the South African National Youth Policy 2015–2020, young people are defined as people who fall within the age group of 14 to 35 years. In this study, the young women, as described by the families they left behind were above 18 years old and below 35.

The majority of the South African population which should be economically active – that is, aged between 15 and 64 years – are either unemployed or not in permanent employment, and are mostly located in the rural areas and in poor provinces; North West province has been identified as one of them (Mosoetsa, 2011: 4; see also Statistics SA 2014). The youth desk also argues that the skills pipeline is riddled with obstacles that undermine equitable access to opportunities in the labour market; thus unemployment rates among South African youth are extremely high not only by global standards but also by those of sub-Saharan Africa (Kane-Berman, 2015: 1). Furthermore, Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the second quarter of 2014 found that unemployment rates were higher among younger people, and notably higher among Africans and women (Kane-Berman, 2015: 9). Using a stricter definition, unemployment among individuals of working age who were born after 1994 (aged 15 to 24 years at the time of the survey) was running at 53% at that time and, among women in that age group, at 61% (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

As a result of skills challenges and high unemployment, especially for young women, internal labour migration for African women is steadily increasing (Posel, 2004). The increase in migration for work purposes happens in a context where women are said to experience poverty disproportionately and are increasingly seen as heads of households (Chant, 2006). The deepening of poverty experienced by women stems from the historically gendered nature of access to resources and opportunities. Chant (2003) further indicates that the feminisation of poverty is also seen in the disproportionate tendency for women to occupy informal, low paying positions. The feminisation of poverty resulting from the gendering of means also implicates the reach of the South African social security system.

The new generation of internal migrants continue to emerge from geographical areas that historically depended on the mining migrant labour system due to lack of skills, challenges with access to higher education, lack of training opportunities for youth, unemployment and poverty (Ngonini, 2007; Ramphela, 1993; Webster et al., 1997; Wolpe, 1972). Even with the improvement in the welfare system, poverty in rural areas remains high. Poverty affects access to education, skills and other life chances. According to Kane-Berman (2015: 13), levels of education and skills have

a material impact on job prospects. With the rise of unemployment, more and more young skilled and unskilled women are migrating to the big cities, leaving their young children behind with their aged parents. The question raised in this chapter, then, is how those left behind make ends meet when income from the migrant does not reach them.

10.3 Methodology

The study informing this chapter was based on a review of literature and interviews with 13 individuals from 11 households with migrants. Of these households, five indicated that the migrants in their households were young women who had left children behind with grandmothers and other family members. This chapter focuses on the experiences of the five households with young women migrants who left children behind.

The study used a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews. The data was collected between March and April 2016 in Madibeng in the North West province. Madibeng is a local municipality that comprises 43 villages, 9000 farm portions and the small towns of Brits, Hartbeespoor and Skeerpoort. Its location is roughly 40 km from Pretoria, 55 km from Johannesburg and 50 km from Rustenburg. Because of its proximity to bigger towns and the city, and its history of internal labour migration, Madibeng was an appropriate site for accessing internal-labour-migrant households. Three of Madibeng's villages were selected for the study – Oskraal, Rabokala and Madinyane – as well as one semi-urban area named Letlhabile. The interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. They were conducted in Setswana and then translated into English by the first author during transcribing (Mokoene, 2017). Once translation and transcription were completed, the interviews were transcribed in detail before analysis started.

The data was then analysed through thematic content analysis, as described by Smith et al. (2014): the transcripts were read and reread to identify emergent themes. However, as indicated by Bazeley (2009: 6), thematic content analysis is not only about themes. The analysis process also involves “a more comprehensive model of what [we] have found, that is an attempt to illustrate how themes relate to each other”.

The study received ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg's Humanities Research Ethics Committee. The study methodology is discussed in more detail in Mokoene (2017).

10.4 Unemployment and Internal Labour Migration

Households that participated in this study had labour migrants because they were unable to find employment in their home town or closer to their households. The majority of these labour migrants were reported to be unskilled with low levels of

education, some with only grade 12¹ as their highest qualification. Thus, the unavailability of either skilled or unskilled employment opportunities in Madibeng was the main reason for increasing internal labour migration in the area. For example, Tshenolo, one of the mothers left behind by a labour migrant, shared that her daughter obtained a grade 12 certificate as her highest level of education. When asked about her daughter's employment, Tshenolo had this to say:

The time she had a baby she was not working. Only after my sister's child came to fetch her and took her with to Johannesburg to help her look for a job at Wimpy... she works there now. (Interview, Tshenolo, 2016)

On the national scale, according to the 2016 first quarter Labour Force Survey (Statistics South Africa, 2016: iv), the unemployment of South Africans who are of a working age was reported to have increased for the period January to March 2016 and stood at 26.7%. In the same breath, there are reports that employment in both the formal and informal sectors decreased from 44.2% in the last quarter of 2015 to 43.0% during the first quarter of 2016. This speaks directly to the lack of employment for these labour migrants in the cities. During the interviews with participating households, it was established that the majority of the labour migrants who had left home to seek employment in Gauteng had not confirmed whether they were employed or not. The majority of these households are characterised by young labour migrant women who are between the ages of 18 and 35.

Further, Statistics SA (2016: x) illustrates that the Gauteng province was among the seven provinces which was hit by unemployment increases and a decrease in employment opportunities for both informal and formal sectors. This is a clear indicator of the challenges young migrants face when they arrive in Johannesburg. Dinah is a mother to a young woman aged 32, who left two young children with her when she migrated to Johannesburg to look for employment. Dinah shared the following about her daughter's employment:

I don't know where she is working or whether she found employment or not. I don't even know where she is currently staying because when she left here, she was going to join her friend who was already in Johannesburg and try and look for work while there. (Interview, Dinah, 2016)

Dinah's daughter, like the other young women interviewed for this study, is a descendant of labour migrants. She, like Dinah, grew up in the then rural reserves, and thus did not have access to education and skills to allow her to find work easily in the city. This predicament impacts directly on whether labour migrants get employment when they get to the cities and on the kind of employment they get; added to their lack of skill is the growing national unemployment rate. Meanwhile these labour migrants have no choice but to stick it out in the city because back at home there are no prospects of employment. According to Dinah, even though her daughter left intending to look for work, nothing shows her that she has found work. She said the following about her daughter's whereabouts:

¹Ten years of schooling rather than the 12 years considered as completing school.

A friend of hers from here at home who lives in Johannesburg invited her to come and join her to look for work instead of just sitting here at home. She has not informed me that she has a job, but I heard from her friend's mother that they get piece jobs from time to time. The problem is that she has not said anything to me; therefore, I don't know what is happening. I am in the dark and we need her assistance, especially with food. (Interview, Dinah, 2016)

The fact that Dinah daughter is reported to be doing piece jobs in the city suggests to her mother that she should be helping with food. However, from existing research, it is known that piece jobs do not allow one to make enough money to support two households. One of the central tenets of apartheid engineering was the deliberate under-skilling and under-education of black youth in general and specifically of rural-based youth (Marias, 2011: 331). The democratic South African government's attempts to provide better education have not impacted on the rural areas positively, as there are still a lot of access challenges as a result of the multi-faceted nature of the socio-economic challenges. This lack of impact is echoed by business and trade unions, as they voice their desire for a more utilitarian education system that produces marketable skills that will feed into the economy and reduce unemployment (Marias, 2011). Education is more widely available in the democratic South Africa, but the quality of schooling is poor, and also the level and variety of skills being taught is low, thus perpetuating youth unemployment and reduced access to the mainstream economy. Meanwhile, glaring racial and gender polarisation persist in the schooling system. For example, in poorly resourced, mainly African schools, female learners consistently perform worse than their male counterparts (Marias, 2011: 326).

10.5 Grandmothers in the Context of Young Migrant Mothers

Living arrangements in African households have often been fluid and characterised by spatial mobility of domestic units over annual cycles, especially during the apartheid period (Townsend et al., 2002: 215). This has been because of historical long-term economic insecurity, employment instability and land dispossession that added migration for wage labour to the picture (Townsend et al., 2002: 215). The extended family structure of these households facilitated and made migration possible. African families have never distinguished between nuclear and extended families; thus, in rural African communities, two to three generations can be found living in the same household (Amoateng & Kalule-Sabiti, 2008: 76). This was true in households that participated in the study informing this chapter.

Another possible contributing factor to multigenerational households could be that the female labour migrants from this study were between the ages of 18 and 35 and unmarried, and the majority of them had children. These households were characterised by first, second and third generations. Therefore, migration is made possible by the fact that there are caregivers who can take care of their children. Ipeleng said the following on household membership:

I have four children and six grandchildren. The first daughter is the one that is working, so here at home I live with my other two daughters, my last-born son and my grandchildren. (Interview, Ipeleng, 2016)

Ipeleng had three generations in her household. Although this situation makes migration for young mothers possible as it allows a familial safety net for the children left behind, research has found that, with regard to the sharing of scarce resources, it leads to complications (Mosoetsa, 2011). Again, the challenge experienced in these households is the shift of care-giving responsibility for the children left behind, and how these children experience the absence of their biological parent.

Lulama, another grandmother left with young children, also mentioned that she stays with her granddaughter while her daughter is working in Kuruman, and her grandson joins them on weekends and school holidays. Tshenolo, on the other hand, said:

I stay with my granddaughter while her mother is in Johannesburg for work. My mother also stays with us, so I take care of both of them. (Interview, Tshenolo, 2016)

For Dinah, the biggest challenge is that she is forced to take care of her grandchildren without their mother's assistance. She said:

I have not received any money from her since she left here to go look for work. I am not sure if she is working or not. But what confuses me is, as a mother, does she ever think about the survival of her children? (Interview, Dinah 2016)

Grandmothers play an important role in the internal labour migration process which involves young mothers having to migrate to go look for employment. These young labour migrants are able to migrate with the knowledge that there is support from their mothers and siblings to care for their children. This puts pressure on the unemployed, under-resourced and, in some instances, chronically ill grandmothers to provide for their grandchildren. Although these grandmothers facilitate mobility for their daughters, it does not bring the expected rewards as the young migrants struggle to find suitable work. Again, the grandmothers are negatively affected in cases where they have to care for these children without financial and familial support from their migrant daughters.

10.6 The Social Role of Social Grants in Labour Migrant Households

The CSG is highly contested in rural labour migrant households which participated in this study. The study found that the CSG is regarded by rural households as a family income, as money for the upkeep of children but also as a fund to sustain labour migrants as they seek employment in cities. The majority of the heads of labour migrant households reported that the labour migrants, who are mothers, regard the CSG as their own, meaning that it is a fund that can facilitate their ability to find work and also to distribute to their households. On the other hand, the heads

of the households, who are caregivers of young migrants' children, were strong in their views that the CSG should be their responsibility to collect and distribute in accordance with the needs of the household and the children. Moreover, the children also demanded the grant, claiming that it is theirs.

According to the Department of Social Development (DSD), the CSG is paid to the primary caregiver, who must be sixteen years or older, to provide for the child's basic needs. The Social Assistance Act of 2004 also states that the primary caregiver of the child should be responsible for collecting the grant and ensuring that it benefits the child as required by the law, meaning that the grant must follow the child where he or she is based. There is, however, a misalignment, because the CSG does not necessarily follow the child, as it is mostly used as a family grant (Wright et al., 2014). In the case of this study, the CSG was used as a survival strategy for young mothers in the cities. The DSD has also argued that social welfare plays an important role in the alleviation of poverty for children, women, the elderly, people with disabilities and their families (Manicom & Pillay, 2003: 94). The key finding of this study is that the CSG is highly contested by three parties: the heads of the households, the young labour migrant mothers, and their older children who strongly believe that the grant is theirs to manage.

For example, Ipeleng, who is looking after her labour migrant daughter's children, gave details as to who gets the CSG and how it is used in their household:

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

In Ipeleng's household, the labour migrant is the only one working. The entire household survives mainly through Ipeleng's chronic illness grant and a minimal contribution from the CSG. Her other daughters are unemployed and have no skills or higher education. According to Ipeleng, her labour migrant daughter collects and keeps the CSG meant for her three children, then only sends monthly groceries home. To Ipeleng this was not enough, all the more so because her daughter does not live with them; therefore she does not comprehend the suffering that the household goes through to survive. Now, after her mother threatened to involve the social workers, the labour migrant has given the responsibility of collecting the grant to her children. Ipeleng shared the following:

Ipeleng: Since that threat she has given the grant cards to her young children [between the ages of six and twelve] who misuse the money instead of buying food. I would have preferred if she gave the cards to me so that I can buy food for everyone, food that can last us the whole month.

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

Ipeleng: I don't think she had much of a choice either because these kids were being violent demanding their grant money. Especially this boy... the second born... he doesn't like it when there's no food... he gets very frustrated and violent... the other day I heard him shouting at his mother saying he is dying of hunger, but he gets a grant... so you see... (Interview, Ipeleng, 2016)

Ipeleng also said that she has since decided to take a step back and not be part of the CSG fight anymore because of fear of her grandson, who has since become aggressive when it comes to matters concerning his grant. She also presents herself as being sympathetic and understanding towards her grandson, as, she added, her grandson is older now and he requires enough food, and that because of his fast-growing pace there's often a need to replace clothes and shoes. Ipeleng also added that the money is meant for him in any case; that is why she has taken the resolution to abstain from that struggle.

Lulama, Tshenolo and Dinah also alluded to the same experience of being left behind with their grandchildren but without the CSG that is supposed to ease the financial burden of taking care of the children. But, interestingly, they were also conflicted as they acknowledged that their daughters also needed the money to survive in the city as they are looking for employment, and for those who are employed, the money assists them in addition to the little money they make. This sentiment is an acknowledgement of the reality that migrant labour, lack of skill and the types of labour available do not pay enough for the young labour migrant to remit; instead, she needs the CSG for her upkeep in the city.

Evidence derived from this study shows that the CSG represents a crucial financial resource. The social grants are a significant financial resource that most young unemployed women in rural South Africa use (Compion & Cook, 2006: 99). But the assumption made by the DSD is that the grant should be an addition to existing income. This assumption does not make sense in cases where options for another income are unavailable. The households that participated in this study are evidence that the CSG is, at times, the only household income.

The "existing income" in the cases of households which participated in the study included CIG, OAG, the CSG and piece jobs. For instance, Lulama looks after two toddlers from the neighbourhood during the day while the young mothers are at work. This gives Lulama extra income as she is not a pensioner yet. Tshenolo is in the same boat as Lulama: she is unemployed and too young to receive the OAG; thus she relies on her mother's OAG to provide for her and her grandchild. Ipeleng relies on her CIG to take care of her unemployed children and grandchildren. She augments it with the little bits she occasionally gets from her unemployed daughters who get the CSG. The question that becomes significant here is whether the comprehensive social security system is really comprehensive.

10.7 Is SA's Comprehensive Social Security Really Comprehensive?

The findings presented above suggest that young women without skills and proper jobs are not adequately covered by the social security system. As a result, we ask: What would it mean to have a wide-ranging social security system? Research on children indicates that a lot of children live in poor-income households (Hall and Sambu cited in Delany et al., 2016), and when this is coupled with the vulnerable position of women and young women, in particular, it is important to consider

alternative ways of support apart from the CSG. This is because, even though the CSG is useful for improving the position of children and families, it is usually contested as its uses range across providing the needs of the child and those of the family and those of mothers who are looking for employment.

On the same note, it has been suggested that, given the significant role of the CSG in improving children's well-being, there might be a need to increase the amount of the grant (Delany et al., 2016). Although this call is commendable and supported, the increase of the CSG will not cater for the particular needs of young people, especially those of young mothers who migrate to cities for work. We would therefore like to put on the table the issue of the provision of a comprehensive social security system. This idea was put forward after 1994 in the form of the Basic Income Grant (BIG). In the early 2000s, through the initiative of labour movements, the notion of the BIG was introduced, discussed and thrown out. What is at stake here is the fact that young people are left out of the economy due to poverty and lack of skills.

The notion of the youth grant is a noble one; like the BIG it acknowledges those who are not covered by the current social security system. The challenge, though, is how it will improve access to skills and jobs. Research on social grants indicates that those accessing the grants want jobs, as there is dignity in work. The recent calls for decolonisation also indicate the need for interlinked interventions for the well-being of the youth. This would include free access to higher education, protection of families through the provision of a family grant, improvement in how the skills fund operates, and most importantly the protection of young women from the vulnerabilities that are a result of the "feminisation of poverty" and its predecessor, the "feminisation of migration".

10.8 Conclusion

Youth unemployment has to be one of the biggest challenges that affect mostly the poor. To add to the problem, those who exit secondary education and cannot afford tertiary education are not in a position to easily get employment and thus they are unable to sustain themselves and their families; they end up underemployed while some resort to informal employment. In South Africa, the sight of a graduate looking for a job on the street corner is becoming a familiar sight due to rising unemployment. This problem impacts directly on the South African social security system. According to this study, the CSG has become the most targeted as it is easily accessible to the young mothers who migrate to cities to look for employment.

The CSG helps these mothers in the city, as some struggle to find employment. Since these young labour migrant mothers are unskilled, there is a heavy reliance on the CSG because employment is not easy to find, and those who do find employment may earn only enough to sustain themselves in the city and not enough to remit money back home. Thus the CSG becomes a reliable income to help them and at other times to assist the family back home.

Thus, the question of whether the South African “comprehensive” social security is really comprehensive becomes a significant one. This study challenges the current social security policies. A lot of research done on the CSG concedes that this grant is income for households, while for some it is the only income. According to this study’s findings, the CSG facilitates migration for the young mothers of the recipients. This leaves the children who the money was meant for economically and socially vulnerable. It also opens up the conversation around the BIG and youth grants concerning other processes of empowering the youth. This chapter concludes by arguing that, even though the employment of the youth is significant, it is important to think about the kinds of jobs they enter into and how these help them to contribute to their own development and the development of their families and communities.

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