




Gender role changes in African households: A challenge to theology and psychology



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Women empowerment is growing in South African communities and workplaces. More women are in executive positions which often require time away from home with the implication that their conversations with family and relatives are limited. As time change, the role of men changes in the family context especially in Africa. Gone are the days when women were told that they belong in the kitchen. More women step forward in the corporate world by taking up key leadership roles. The purpose of the *Employment Equity Act* (EEA) is to protect employees from unfair treatment. However, the implementation of affirmative action aims at measuring whether the challenges faced by the previously disadvantaged groups, and factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and disability regarding basic employment conditions are still questionable. Some women earn more than their husbands, compared to the past when men were the breadwinners of the household, particularly in black communities. In this article is discussed the factors contributing to black men's gender role changing in the household from a theological and psychological perspective.

Contribution: The contextual perspective of this research is contributed by the African men's concern regarding cultural beliefs and practices relating to gender role changes in households. The contribution of this article is to inform people about factors, which African men experience in gender role changes in households from both a theological and psychological perspective. This research is done using a literature review; thus, a multi-disciplinary approach, which seeks to provide knowledge and encourage African black men to embrace gender transformation roles in households.

Keywords: households; psychology; theology; men; women; gender; roles; community; culture.

Introduction

Before 1994, women's employment was a challenge in South Africa, and it remains predominant in present day South Africa (Chapman 2015). Women in leadership positions find themselves having to work twice as hard as men in the same position to prove themselves worthy of their positions. This has become a concern due to the increase in the abuse of women in society and especially in the workplace. Elizabeth Landis, an activist and author as cited by Chapman (2015) summarised oppression faced by women during apartheid, and these are what women in South Africa have faced during their journey of emancipation. Women in leadership positions find themselves working long hours, and this can be a concern as to their mental and psychological well-being. The foundation of decent employment is equal opportunity and equitable treatment in the labour market. Unfortunately, there are also further barriers that prevent women from gaining jobs in South Africa and around the world. This is mainly because women are viewed as being less competent than men. Employers prefer employing men, as they are viewed as more rational than emotional.

Men are viewed as being able to make sound decisions and are less affected by matters such as family responsibility. Once women are employed, appointment in positions of authority and occupations in specific industries or with specific qualities remain elusive. The South African labour market is more favourable towards males than it is to women, according to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the second quarter of 2021. Employment opportunities in South Africa are essentially influenced by one's race and gender. This means that black females are the most disadvantaged in the corporate world. According to the Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996:1) of the supreme law, everyone has a right to work in a safe, healthy and conducive environment.

Gender inequality is condemned not only in the South African constitution, but also in Jesus' teachings, especially his new law of love, justice and equality (see Gl 3:28). In support, the *Employment Equity Act* (EEA), No 55 of 1998 makes it clear that the law aims to promote equity in the workplace. It is still a concern whether EEA ensures that all employees receive equal opportunity and are treated fairly by employers without any form of discrimination. The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development goals, which was signed by countries as an economic blueprint for economic growth and development, aims to do this through eradication of forced labour, slavery and human trafficking, as well as all forms of discrimination which include sexual discrimination. According to Lammers et al. (2011:1191), powerful people such as politicians and industrialists serve as important models and set descriptive norms for the general population to follow. This includes women in powerful leadership positions even though they are ignored by many. This has changed the roles in households, as there are wives who earn more than their husbands so different than in the past. In the black communities, there is also a myth that the more a woman earns or the more educated she gets, the slighter her chances of finding herself a husband, because men would not want to marry women who earn more than they do or who are more educated than themselves. The other belief among African men is that the more a woman earns, the more defying they become towards their husbands as they practise dominant behaviour both at work and home. Another view is that a woman's utmost goal is to find a man who will take care of her (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin 1998:272). This view has been debated by other scholars from a biblical perspective according to which the Apostle Paul prohibits women to teach in church or take pastoral positions in church (1 Tim 2:11–12). Male believers of the Apostle Paul's view have placed their wives in positions that restrict them to being housewives, as opposed to women that go to work and do the same jobs than men.

Research problem

According to Mint (2004:62), leadership positions typically require frequent business trips and attendance at other social events. That may cause an excess of social contact away from one's partner and make extramarital partners more accessible. This result in drastic changes in households' social norms in Africa which lead to broken relationships and strongly influence the spread of HIV infection, poor parental care and divorces. Whether being male or female in certain societies shapes the opportunities offered, the roles one plays and the types of relationships one develops with other people. Perceived challenges can be reflected, for example, in an individual's inability to meet changes in gender roles and responsibilities in households due to structural inequalities. Therefore, it is critical to consider the effect of such macro-level influences on intimate ties and understand how these influences shape relationship experiences differently for men and women (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin 1998:272). This leads us to investigate the question of how the theological and

psychological perspectives on the gender role are changing among black couples and its impact on family lives.

Research objectives and methodology

According to Dawson (2002:56), research objectives are a means by which the researcher intends to achieve the aim. To achieve the goals of this study, the following research objectives were proposed by the researchers:

- To investigate the Christian perspective on the change of household roles
- To determine factors contributing to the change of role
- To identify the coping strategies that come with role changing in households
- To identify any psychological impact on the change in household roles
- To help develop theories that can help black men embrace these role changes in households.

The methodology offers researchers a theoretical and philosophical foundation which, in turn, will then influence the methods that should be employed to 'collect the information and data' (Carey 2012:84). Based on the purpose of the outlined research methods, the researcher will be reviewing available literature relevant to the field of study to collect documented data on the headings to be covered and analysed as part of the theoretical framework.

Impact of gender role changes in black households

Family life has shifted significantly in modern society with the concept of 'family' being defined and constructed through interactions between partners rather than finding definition in restrictive gender roles. Family as a dynamic entity is influenced not only by the constructed interactions between partners at microlevel, but also influenced by political and economic macrostructures. The influence of both micro- and macro-level spheres on family life has seen greater engagement of men and women both in the economy through increased earnings which has resulted in more economic independence for women (Oláh, Kotowska & Richter 2018:42). According to the World Bank (2011:9), there is a significant increase in the number of women who are engaging in the labour market. The increase in the number of women in the labour market is a positive sign for attaining the 5th Goal of the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by the year 2030 (United Nations 2015; 2019).

While women are increasingly taking on the economic responsibilities of the household, there has been limited distribution of domestic responsibilities resulting in women bearing the load for both economic and domestic tasks and care work (Oláh et al. 2018:48). In emphasising the inequitable distribution of responsibilities in the home, Peacock and Barker (2014:579) argue that women and girls still have two

to ten times more responsibilities than men for household activities. This lack of equity in the distribution of domestic responsibilities has been shown to increase tension between work and family life. Therefore, scholars call for a redefinition of men's roles within a family to provide for more equitable family roles (Minguez 2012:275; Oláh et al. 2018:58; Peacock & Barker 2014:592). This also points to the observation made by Brooks (2017:330) that some men have successfully adapted to the cultural shift in understanding gender roles within the household while many have failed to make the necessary transition. Traditional norms of masculinity require men to be the breadwinners, the head of the household and the ultimate decision-maker. Therefore, it is necessary to engage men to identify strategies that come with role change. As suggested by Minguez (2012:287), this is a necessary endeavour, as men's limited participation in care work in the home is not only a major barrier to gender equality, but also carries negative consequences for men, women and society.

Heineken (2016:216) stated that gender mainstreaming includes bringing the experience, knowledge and interests of women and men to operations and is a means of re-conceptualising the policy, implementation and evaluation process. This research aims to examine in a practical and theoretical way the challenges that black men face in accepting the change of role in households. Nadar (2009:552) continues to suggest that this dialogue about power is a daily language which preserves twofold opposition such as men are strong and women are weak. This dialogue continues to suggest that women are emotional, while men are rational. This study, however, is not aimed at comparing emotional strength between men and women, but rather contributes to the lives of young black couples.

Psychologically men and women are created differently and at times their needs might also differ. According to Norcross et al. (1998:609), pastoral counselling has distinguished itself from other applied professional psychology specialists by embracing multicultural diversity and social justice as core values that define the discipline. Having made that distinction, pastoral counselling needs to offer training to young black professionals. In order to promote healing and progress, pastoral counselling employs both psychological knowledge and spiritual resources. Pearline (1989:242) argues that many successful experiences occur within the context of systems of social stratification such as socioeconomic status, race and gender, and that stressors are often related to a person's place within that structure. 'Although stressful events occur daily for most individuals and traumatic experiences situations that overwhelm people's ability to cope, leaving them powerless' (Clark et al. 1999:810). The literature revealed proof that there is a policy such as EEA that aimed at addressing the past imbalance that includes addressing the challenges faced by women in the workplace and affirmative gender equality; however, the effect of past imbalance still leaves much to be desired with regards to family life.

In South Africa under the petition of patriarchal culture or leadership and religious misinterpretations, women's rights are

taken for granted. Counselling have started to develop training programs for explicit incorporative social justice advocacy and this training reflects a fundamental valuing of fairness and equity in resource rights and treatment of marginalised individuals or groups. According to Harmon et al. (1978), gender identity is energised with the recognition of gender categories, awareness of genital sex differences, and awareness of masculine-feminine stereotypes, which are the products of ideology:

Social and cultural differences are possibly more apt to the extent some influence on the overt behaviour with which different women respond to the persistent, passionate debate over what women should be and how they are expected to behave. (Harmon et al. 1978:135, 137)

Therefore, counselling psychologists need to endlessly integrate information in the corporate environment about the acceptance of women leadership and educate women leaders about their well-being as they continue to prove themselves.

Gender roles in the African context

Addressing gender roles in Christian marriages requires an interrogation of the perceptions around how manhood is achieved, especially in the African context. The distribution of resources, roles and responsibility between men and women is mostly governed by ideological, ethno-religious, economic and socio-cultural variables, which also influence gender roles (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] 2011). According to Barker and Ricardo (2005:5) and Ratele (2015:149), manhood in Africa is achieved through gaining financial independence, having a job and starting a family. In studying black men working in the mining industry, Botha and Ratele (2014:16) state that money is central to how these men define who they are. As such, they argue that the struggle of the black man for a higher salary should not be separated from his sense of manhood. A man who is unemployed and not earning any income would be forced to perform rudimentary tasks at home such as laundry and cooking which they previously denied, while their female companions go to work to provide for the family. This situation would force men to dampen their resolve for gender equality by restricting their wives going to work. African culture discourages women from engaging in economic activities necessary for survival; instead, the men are supposed to support their families (Eniola & Akinola 2019). Women are not expected to possess property or claim its produce, as they are viewed as the husbands' adjuncts. Practices such as *lobola* (bride price) directly link family formation with income or property. Moreover, Barker and Ricardo (2005:9) argue that practices such as *ulwaluko* (rites of passage for men) which are intended to create cultural and collective identities, are found to often reinforce patriarchal gender norms and gender inequalities. As such these practices need to be addressed to create a more equitable society. In parts of Southern Africa where men migrate for work, the high rates of female-headed household has been cast into a negative light (Barker & Ricardo 2005:18). When these men reintegrate with their families, they resume the key

leadership roles and tend to be at odds with their wives. Among Xhosa men, some would say *andinotsalwa ngempumlo ngumfazi* [I cannot be sniffed by a woman].¹ For example, some African men believe that the kitchen is for women only. They alone provide food or money to purchase groceries. However, these theories are gradually changing as time goes by with intercultural relationships, the education system, new technologies and scientific development. Findings from other studies, which have mainly focused on gender-based violence, indicate increased shared decision-making among couples, application of communication skills to both sexual and non-sexual issues and behaviour changes concerning more equitable income distribution. All this leads to a decrease in gender-based violence and increased safer sex (Barker & Ricardo 2005:77).

Psychological understanding of gender roles

The discipline of psychology offers numerous frameworks from which we can understand gender roles, as much of the theoretical work on gender has been drawn from both psychology and sociology (Wharton 2005:33). For this research, we draw insights from several psychological theories to gain a better understanding of how gender roles are constructed. From a gender schema theory, psychologists understand male gender roles as being socially constructed and maintained through cognitive organisation and interpretation (Abrams, Maxwell & Belgrave 2018:151; O'Neil et al. 2017:89). A gender schema is a mental system of associations that categorises and guides gendered beliefs, expectations and behaviours. This mental system is acquired from one's cultural environment such as observational learning and parental teachings. Gender schemas provide culturally specific behavioural guidelines for responding and adapting to mental and environmental stimuli resulting in associating certain roles to be strictly for women and others for men (Abrams et al. 2018:151). Similarly, the social role theory presupposes that men and women behave differently because of societal expectations. These expectations and their associated behaviours originate in the home, the workplace and other social situations. Individuals thus modify their behaviour to blend in with culturally acceptable gender norms and expectations (Abrams et al. 2018:152).

The two theories to consider in understanding gender roles are the gender role conflict (GRC) theory developed by O'Neil in 1981 and the gender role strain theory developed by Pleck in 1981. Gender role conflict is firmly rooted in feminist approaches that seek to deconstruct gender roles and demonstrate the negative consequences that these roles have on men, women and society. Gender role conflict challenges the socio-cultural norms that constrain men's choices the same way they constrain women's choices. The basic assumption of GRC is that society's culturally embedded gender roles are restrictive and prevent

individuals from charting their path, as well as selecting activities, behaviours and values congruent with who they are (O'Neil et al. 2017:76).

A theological understanding of gender roles

Human society is afflicted with gender issues wherever men and women interact, whether in church, in politics, religions, socio-cultural or within families. It is assumed that notions of gender roles and responsibilities would have developed from traditions communicated from and within a faith-based institution (based on specific theologies), integrated into a specific culture and extended to gender operations within the familial home and, at times, the workplace (Meyer 2020:5). Gender-related issues have affected the activities and relationship between males and females since biblical times. For a very long time, it has been seen as an acceptable way of life in the church and in the society at large with biblical backing, even though it seems to be inimical to the teaching of Christ, his person, mission and the church that evolved after his death and resurrection (Okoli & Okwuosa 2020:1). The Early Church fathers used texts from the Bible to legitimate the marginalisation and subordination of women. Texts such as Genesis 2:20–23 and 3:1–24 in the Old Testament, and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 1 Corinthians 11:7–9 in the New Testament were regularly cited and used to oppress women. Contrary, in the New Testament, for example, we find examples of women present as leaders, followers and mothers who contributed to the development of Christian theology and praxis (Remedios 2016:8). De Conick (2011:147) states that it is even more disturbing that 'authentic memories of women in the early church were intentionally replaced with misogynist narratives' and that 'misogynist narratives were made sacred or holy'.

Any African woman is well aware of the influence of religion on family, gender roles and responsibilities, but the consequences of this have never been addressed adequately (Meyer 2020:7). As a result, scholars concluded that the general society and specific communities (such as religious communities) might influence the discourses around what it means to be a man in Africa, and what is expected from men to be regarded as 'real men' in the house (Chitando 2013:665). In Africa, there is a social construct among traditional men.

The three dominant religions of Africa (African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam) construct masculinities in such a manner that men are expected to be the leaders of the household (women and children); therefore, projecting men as having dominion over women (Meyer 2020:8). In response to the aggressive masculinity that these expectations have created in Africa, African activists have contended that religious dogma supports the discourse of male authority and that it has resulted in the justification of 'disciplining' women in the name of Scripture (Meyer 2020:8). If women resist the abuse of such power, then this often results in domestic violence (Chitando 2013:665).

¹This literally means a woman should not pull a man by his nose. The rationale behind the term is that men should not be controlled or be directed by the women in the household above all in any other matter.

The Bible, as one of the important sources of the Christian faith, is interpreted by many people in different ways – including gender inequality and stereotyping. Women are portrayed in the Bible as playing a secondary role in God’s plan for humanity, as background figures, as being destructive and harmful to men and as not made in the image or character of God (Hadebe 2018). However, this study avers that women and men are human beings created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*). Biblically, gender equality is rooted in the fact that men and women are equally made in God’s image. God said, ‘let us make (the human) in our image, in the likeness of ourselves’ (Gn 1:26). God’s image is not only male, but also female (Berman 2015:131); thus, one does not mean to argue that femaleness is perfect as opposed to maleness, but holds that an equally shared participation in humanity and the God-image can lead to a healthier state of God’s creation.

Egalitarianism and complementarianism are the two main ways to comprehend the Bible’s teaching on the roles of men and women (Burk 2019:30). In late modernity, particularly in the aftermath of the sexual revolution in the West, Christian discourse on the Bible’s teaching on men and women took a new turn. The way that many people see what it means to be male or female has completely changed as a result of feminism and expressive individuality. Nowadays, it’s customary to think of gender as a social construct unrelated to how the body is built for reproduction. Feminists have argued that women should be liberated from the conventional rules of family and home. Egalitarianism, in contrast to liberal theology, asserts that Scripture is infallible and embraces a feminist interpretation of gender equality. Men and women are equally represented in the divine image, and the Bible does not assign leadership in any area of life based on gender. This includes duties in the family, the church and other places. Complementarity between the sexes is acknowledged by egalitarians. They do dispute the significance of hierarchy in biblical complementarity.

According to egalitarian readings of Genesis 1–3, the Fall rather than God’s first wonderful creation is the source of male supremacy. Accordingly, Genesis 1:26–27 teaches that both men and women were made in the image of God equally that God assigns the role of ruling over God’s creation to both genders equally. Egalitarians dispute that Eve’s designation as ‘helper’ in Genesis 2 implies a subservient position and that the sequence of creation puts Adam as the head of the first marriage. Other passages in the Bible refer to God as a ‘helper’ (Gn 49:25; Ex 18:4; Dt 33:7, 26, 29); therefore, the phrase cannot be used to suggest subordination. According to this interpretation, hierarchy first occurs as a result of God’s curse on humanity after the Fall: ‘To the woman He said ... “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall reign over you”’ (Gn 3:16). So, one of the things wrong with the world that has to be fixed is the man’s dominance over the woman. The issue of society’s expectancy of men being providers is also highlighted. This was because God appointed Adam to working tirelessly in the fields for

his family. Eve, on the other hand, was cursed with fierce labour pains. This highlights the gender roles that are instigated by Christianity. This has influenced how present-day society is structured. Women are expected to be the nurturers who produce children, while men provide for the family. These strangling societal injustices are intended to be eliminated through redemption in Christ. Galatians 3:28 is a key verse for equality because of this. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free man, male or female, according to Paul’s declaration in this verse, ‘because you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28). The gospel dismantles social hierarchies between men and women in the same way as it dismantles societal hostility between slave and free man, Jew and Gentile.

The word *complementarianism* was first used in 1988 to describe the Danvers Statement’s tenet that, despite the fact that both men and women have the same value and dignity as being equally formed in the image of God, they have distinct, complementary callings in marriage and the church (Burk 2019). God designates the husband as the ‘head’ of his wife in marriage (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23), demanding from him selfless leadership, security and provision for his wife and family (Eph 5:21–33). Men and women have various roles to play in the family and the church, and these roles are based on God’s excellent creation plan rather than on the effects of sin or the Fall.

Therapeutic modalities to solve social ills

It is widely acknowledged that ‘masculine standards’ or the conduct that is required of males in society are the reason why men avoid psychotherapy and are generally less likely than women to seek help for emotional and physical problems (Mahalik 2005b:234–247; Tucker et al. 2013:243; Vandello & Basson 2013:109). Factors such as stigma, men’s social networks, unhealthy perceptions of manhood and institutional restrictions cause men to characteristically avoid seeking help (Tucker et al. 2013:235; Vandello & Basson 2013:107). Over the years psychologists have utilised various therapeutic modalities such as cognitive-behavioural, interpersonal, and existential or Gestalt therapies in assisting men to deal with gender role conflict and toxic constructions of manhood. Cognitive-behavioural therapeutic modalities have focused on discovering men’s basic cognitive schemas and showing any inconsistencies and illogical thinking about manhood (Brooks 2017:321; Mahalik 2005a:217). Similarly, interpersonal modalities have focused on helping men unlearn unhealthy messaging about interpersonal relations and assisting them to clear interpersonal deficits such as social isolation or involvement in unfulfilling relationships. It will also help patients to manage unresolved grief, difficult life transitions such as retirement, retrenchments and divorce to mention just a few. It also deals with interpersonal disputes that emanate from conflicting expectations between partners and family members (Wilfley & Shore 2015).

It is important to note that patriarchal behaviour is learned behaviour. We are taught from an early age that women and men are expected to take on certain roles. Men are generally expected to be providers while women stay at home. This perspective of society was also taught to people by previous generations. Thus, unless this is changed, they will continue to be predominant. This is how future generations could essentially solve the predominance of gender roles. Girls may be taught from a young age that they do not have to take up the role of a child bearer, but instead they may pursue their career aspirations. This will allow women to be able to take up important roles in society without facing unnecessary criticism. Gender roles are essentially a learned mechanism that can be changed over time.

Conclusion and recommendations

Wharton (2005:34) argues that all frameworks in understanding gender are partial and restrictive. For this reason, there is a need to draw understanding, not just from different frameworks, but also from different disciplines to gain a broader understanding of gender and its effects on black married couples. The expectation is that this study would expand the existing scholarly work on gender issues in South Africa. This research study aims at contributing both in a practical and theoretical way to finding solutions for challenges faced by black men in accepting the change of role in households. Throughout the literature review, this article has provided factors contributing to gender role changes in the traditional African black household and how these changes challenge both culture and religion to embrace these changes. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

- For the church to redefine and reinterpret biblical scripts that are often used to measure a man's strength, based on his ability to 'provide' for his family, and societal norms that a man should always be better educated than his spouse, earn more than his spouse and contribute more than his spouse towards household expenditure.
- For culture to take into consideration factors contributing to gender role changes in African black households and redefine roles and responsibilities in a domestic partnership.
- Culture must also take a different approach when discussing what it means for a man to be the head of the family. It is often defined by how much a man can do for his family; hence, when a man is not able to provide more than his spouse, it affects him psychologically.
- Both culture and religion develop programmes and seminaries for couples to embrace changes that both culture and church cannot ignore, are recommended.
- Another recommendation is that programmes aimed at redefining gender roles should work through the psychological resistance often displayed by men in efforts towards gender equality in the home. This entails moving psychological services from the office to communities where the men are.
- In conclusion, a multi-disciplinary approach that considers the role of psychology, culture and the church in addressing gender equality in the home and society is recommended.

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H.P.K.-N., W.B. and N.M. contributed equally to the article.

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