Disobedient Daughters? Changing Women’s Roles in Rural Households in KwaZulu-Natal*

SARAH M. MATHIS
(School of International Studies, University of the Pacific)

High levels of unemployment in South Africa have shifted rural households away from a reliance on male migrant wages and towards a diversity of income-generating strategies. These economic changes have altered the role of women and the restrictions family members may try to place on their mobility and wage-earning capacity. In addition, the end of apartheid has lifted state sanctions on mobility and informal economic activity. This article examines the impact of these changes on rural women through a qualitative study of a rural community just outside the Durban municipality. One of the more visible changes has been the decline in marriage and the rise in numbers of children born outside marriage. High bridewealth payments have left many young people unable to achieve the markers of adult status, including establishing their own kitchen or household. Women’s mobility is also increasing as they move for months at a time between the households of parents and siblings in rural and urban locations while looking for employment and educational opportunities. Young women living with their parents find less restriction on their mobility than experienced by previous generations due to their potential to bring home income to their parents. Instead, there is more conflict over their child-bearing capacity and controlling the income that they bring home. Young women frequently use the language of rights to assert their independence from parents while parents frequently call on tradition and morality in their attempt to cope with the rising numbers of grandchildren being born to their unmarried daughters.

Introduction

The role and status of rural women in South Africa have been debated extensively in the post-apartheid period as new laws are being created to change existing systems of land tenure in the former Bantustans and improve gender equality. This article examines some of the changes in the creation and maintenance of households and the roles of women in two rural communities south of Durban. The increase in female mobility and migration after the end of apartheid in South Africa has been linked to more women working in temporary or informal jobs,1 a decline in marriage2 and an increase in the level of poverty experienced by

*This article is based on research funded by grants from The Wenner-Gren Foundation – Grant #7045, Fulbright-Hays’ Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Programme and Emory University’s Fund for Internationalisation. An early version of this research was presented at the History and African Studies Seminar at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am grateful to all those who read and commented on earlier drafts, including the anonymous reviewers, numerous colleagues, and former dissertation committee members.


2 M. Hunter, ‘The Changing Political Economy of Sex in South Africa: The Significance of Unemployment and Inequalities to the Scale of the AIDS Pandemic’, Social Science and Medicine, 64, 3 (February 2007), pp. 689–700.
female-headed households. The decline of marriage and the continued residence of adult children in the households of their parents while bearing and raising their own children have led to changing dynamics regarding child care and control of the money earned by young women engaged in temporary or informal work or receiving the child care grant from the state. With the spread of HIV/AIDS, many children are also losing their mothers and being left in the care of their grandparents.

Here, I present the results of ethnographic research suggesting uneven but sometimes positive changes regarding women’s ability to gain power within households and gain access to land and income. National discourses about gender equality are influencing local arbitration of land disputes and difficult economic circumstances are giving women a lot more de facto power within households than might be expected. In addition to these economic and political sources of power, women still gain some power through their role as mothers, particularly in claiming land under customary tenure, creating an incentive to bear children even in the absence of marriage.

The dramatic decline in marriage and in the establishment of new households has also created new points of tension and conflict in rural regions. Although rural households have always had many generations living together due to labour migration and virilocal residence patterns, what has changed in the last few decades is the tendency of adult women, in particular, to continue to reside in the household of their parents while bearing their children, rather than in the household of their in-laws. The conflicts created by this decline in marriage are often expressed in terms of fears over the lack of control over younger women. These fears are expressed not only by men but also by older women who have lived very different lives from those facing their daughters and granddaughters.

The composition of rural households in South Africa has long been severely affected by discriminatory laws that restricted the movements of black South Africans. These laws made land in the former Bantustans the only source of secure residence for Africans for much of the last century. Although these laws have been revoked, rural households have continued to play an important role as a source of security, largely due to high levels of unemployment and economic insecurity. The idea of a rural household that urban workers return to visit and consider themselves members of, both financially and in terms of participation in decision-making and rituals, has clearly endured despite the lifting of restrictions on mobility after the end of apartheid.

This article’s contribution lies primarily in its local detail – a case study adding to literature that shows regional variations in the composition of households and gendered control over mobility, reproduction, income and land. Most rural households now depend on a variety of strategies to survive, including lower levels of subsistence farming than in the past, government pensions, temporary jobs, small commercial farming, and engagement with the informal economy. This reliance on multiple strategies of making a living has been documented across South Africa for several decades and it is increasingly becoming the norm as the system of migrant labour collapses owing to high levels of unemployment.


4 For a comparative case study of gender and control over income in households, see J. Sharp and A. Spiegel, ‘Women and Wages: Gender and the Control of Income in Farm and Bantustan Households’, Journal of Southern African Studies [JSAS], 16, 3 (September 1990), pp. 527–49.

Control over women’s mobility, reproductive power and labour has been a central theme in the history of KwaZulu-Natal, particularly when looking at the consolidation of political and economic power, including the foundation of the Zulu state, the establishment of indirect rule, the rise of Zulu nationalism and the formation of a system of migrant labour. The region where this ethnographic study took place has been strongly influenced by this history due to its close location to Durban and its early incorporation into the colonial state. The people living in the region were originally part of a larger Mkhize chiefdom named eMbo that, according to Bryant, settled in its current location south of Durban in the 1830s after slowly migrating south over centuries.

In 1845, Natal’s Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, established one of the earlier forms of indirect rule on the continent, incorporating customary leaders, mainly chiefs and headmen, into the colonial government as administrators. That the co-operation built into a system of administration in which, by 1871, eleven magistrates ruled over an African population of 300,000, has also been explained by scholars as reliant on some form of common interest between the colonial state and African leaders.

Central to this co-operation was the maintenance of patriarchal structures through men’s continued control over land and also over the labour and reproductive power of African women.

While the colonial state ruled through customary leaders, settlers and missionaries also used the issue of gender to push the state to disband the chiefdoms to gain access to land, labourers and converts. Colonists and missionaries spoke against polygamy in the language of morality and the oppression of women, with an underlying concern for their inability to secure labourers for their farms and to compete with African farmers for whom polygamous families provided an important source of labour: ‘black women in Natal became the ground over which white men fought black men for control of their land and labour’.

Proletarianisation in the twentieth century did not mean the complete re-ordering of African societies but rather took the specific form of male migration into urban areas with

Footnote 5 continued

women largely remaining behind to look after rural households and maintain social structures. Marks and Bozzoli argue that the development of a system of male migration must be understood in terms of the continued strength of pre-capitalist social systems. Bozzoli writes that

the sudden imposition upon women, not ‘the family’ of full responsibility for the maintenance of a social system under increasing and devastating attack, must surely have involved some conflict, some vast social, moral and ideological reorganisation.

Therefore, it is the ‘struggle’ within the domestic economy over the subordination of women’s labour, according to Bozzoli, that we must look to in order to understand the evolution and sustenance of a system of male migration and the relative resilience of African social systems during this period. Movements such as Inkatha and the Zulu Cultural Society focused on the widespread concern of rural élites that they were losing control within the domestic sphere over the wages and labour of women and young men. For example, the charter of the Zulu Society, as paraphrased by Marks, expressed:

the fear that the ‘departure from wholesome Zulu traditions’ meant a lack of discipline in the home. Particularly ‘ alarming’ was the loss of control over women, as ‘mothers’ of ‘our leading men, chiefs and counsellors’, and over the young, who ‘by force of circumstances, leave their homes at an early age to work in towns and to attend schools’.

Among missionaries, the concern over ‘morality’ shifted from the previous focus on bridewealth and polygamy to new concerns over the morality of young women living in urban areas. Administrators such as James Stuart responded to the ‘growth of individualism and lawlessness’ with a call for ‘a return to traditional mores in relation to women, whose “universal immorality” was regarded as largely responsible for the current wave of lawlessness’. The Urban Areas Act of 1923 and its 1930 amendment required women to have permission from the state and their husbands or fathers before entering an urban area.

Attempts of African élites and state officials to control women’s mobility and sexuality through moral discourses in the twentieth century were not confined to KwaZulu-Natal. Jeater’s study of Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s, for example, showed how adultery became a moral issue subject to sanction by the state due to compromises and negotiations between rural élites and state officials. Jeater’s study also showed how women nonetheless found ways to work around this condemnation just as they must have in Natal, since the urban female population increased from just over 8,400 to 69,700 between 1921 and 1946. These figures give some sense of the immense social dislocation and change that occurred during this period. However, studies such as Barnes’s of mid-twentieth century Rhodesia suggested that these discourses of morality could still restrain women, as she found that a woman was only allowed to live freely in an urban area if ‘she ceaselessly demonstrated a dual willingness to behave as if she were in a rural area, and physically to return to a rural home’.

Under apartheid, the Bantustan system required a new consolidation of nationalism, which took the form of Inkatha in the province of Natal. Consider this contribution to a debate

15 Ibid., p. 146 (emphasis in original).
17 Ibid., p. 219.
in the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly (KLA) in 1981 about the repeal of a section of the Natal Codes that gave women the status of minors:

I want to say how grateful I am because this bill will not in any way bring about the situation where the women folk will override the men. . . . I wish to advise our womenfolk never to forget the Zulu tradition and culture that the man must always be respected by the women. . . . I am pleading with our womenfolk not to take things too fast once they realize that they now have these rights. 21

Waetjen argues that Inkatha leaders believed genuinely in the contributions of women and the need to recognise their power, but simultaneously tried to limit that power through the discourse of Zulu tradition. 22

These preoccupations with morality and discipline within the home have continued into the post-apartheid period and can be seen in debates over the child care grant and fears of the immorality of women having children while still unmarried. In recent years the government ordered an ‘urgent countrywide study of 14,000 households to find out if women – and teenage girls – are having babies specifically to cash in on child-support grants’. 23 Fears that the new constitution and focus on gender equality will further break down discipline within the home and lead to even more loss of control over women and a decline in morality continue to appear in public discourse and have some surprising parallels with the earlier debates in drawing on language of tradition and rights. In what follows, I examine the changes in how households and roles are structured in one region of KwaZulu-Natal, finishing with a discussion of how these discourses of tradition and rights are not just confined to politicians and élites, but are also being used within households in struggles over gender roles.

Location and Design of Study

The research for this article was conducted over two years between July 2003 and May 2005 in two adjacent places known as oGagwini and eZimwini which, due to their spread-out yet dense settlement patterns, are not easily described by terms such as village, town or rural area. They are a part of the eMbo-Timuni Traditional Authority (TA), and formerly a part of the KwaZulu Bantustan. Land has been held under the Ingonyama Trust system since the end of apartheid, a system of communal tenure where land is under the authority of the ubukhosi or traditional leadership. 24 The people are under the jurisdiction of an Inkosi Mkhize in addition to provincial government councillors.

Many residents have limited access to cash or saved income, but they usually meet the basic needs of all the family members living in the household due to their location close to the peri-urban periphery of the Durban metro region with its corresponding access to wage labour. There is a little economic differentiation in these communities, with those families that include wage-earners or are involved in the taxi business being somewhat wealthier. There is very little visible display of wealth as differentiation more often takes the form of wealth in people, expressed through larger families with more dependants. Data from the South African National Census of 2001 for Ward Seven indicates that 99 per cent of the residents of this region reported an income of less than R800 a month. Approximately 29 per cent of residents have some secondary school education and 45 per cent are under the

22 Ibid.
24 New tenure laws were enacted towards the end of this research but had not yet resulted in any on the ground changes.
The Changing Structures of Households

When Gluckman wrote about Zulu systems of kinship and marriage a half century ago, he described a system of patrilineal descent and virilocal residence.28 Patrilineal kinsmen preferred to live close together, while women, upon marriage, would move into the


households of their in-laws, sometimes quite far from the home of their birth. Married women were expected to provide labour within the household and their status was heavily dependent on their ability to produce children to carry on the lineage. Bridewealth determined the status of children as members of the patrilineage and unmarried women would remain in the household of their brothers and fathers. While many of these structures remain, the Zulu kinship system has undergone significant changes due to the development of a migrant labour system and its collapse in recent decades as unemployment has risen. Marriage remains central to the expected developmental cycle of households, being the point at which new households are established or previous ones are perpetuated. However, as the migrant labour system has been replaced by new patterns of economic activity and mobility, marriage has all but disappeared, leaving women living with their parents rather than their in-laws well into their child-bearing years. The concept of the developmental cycle of households is useful here primarily in understanding the frustrations of young people unable to establish themselves as adults in the way that they have grown up to expect, for as Murray notes, ‘household strategies through time reflect a conscious aspiration towards establishing an independent “house”, with all that this implies in material and ideological terms’.  

Memories of Migration

The stories recounted by older women from eZimwini suggest that the region had a well-developed system of migrant labour from the time of their earliest recollections in the 1930s through the 1970s when unemployment started to rise. Most women living today in eZimwini have memories of their fathers and husbands working as migrant labourers and employment opportunities for men as relatively easy to obtain. As noted by one interviewee born in the 1930s:

My father worked in Johannesburg and I do not know what kind of job he did. He used to send money through other people coming from the urban area. He died when we were still young. My father used to come back from work after maybe two or more months and he used to come with nice thing like sweets and other things that we were not familiar with.  

Women also recollect being actively discouraged and prevented from travelling to or working in urban areas by their fathers and husbands. Unlike Bozzoli’s informants in Phokeng, older women in eZimwini, with a few exceptions, did not tell of a time in their youth when they lived and worked in urban areas. Instead, they speak occasionally of female relatives still living in urban areas or of restrictions on their own movements from husbands or in-laws. The dramatic increase in urban female population from the 1920s to the 1940s suggests that some women escaped these restrictions but, with a few exceptions, they were not living out their final years back in their rural homes. For example, another interviewee, Mrs J, spoke of being prevented from going to town first by a strict grandmother and then by her boyfriend. She was sent to live with her grandmother at birth in order to be separated from her twin brother. Her father worked at a brewery in Durban but did not support her, especially after the death of her mother. After marriage, Mrs J lived with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law while her husband and his brother worked in Durban. After sixteen years of marriage, her husband died in unknown circumstances while in town and Mrs J continued to raise her children on her own. She told me that she gets her revenge now by going into town frequently after being prevented from doing so for so long.

29 Murray, ‘Class, Gender and the Household’, p. 245.
32 Interview, Mrs J, eZimwini, 29 September 2004.
Women also remember spending a good deal more time engaged in subsistence agriculture when they were younger than in current times. Population levels were lower, fields larger and rainfall greater, resulting in bigger harvests.

We ate *amasi* (sour milk) from the cows, as well as beans, mealies, pumpkins, taro, oranges, guavas, peaches and bananas. It was common practice locally to plant and grow these at home to feed us and even to feed strangers, but not for sale. You would also find cows, goats, sheep, chickens, pigs and even horses in many households around. During those days we ate fresh food and that is why we were fit and healthy. We ate samp milled from home mealies and it was very healthy and delicious especially with fat. Fats were available when the cows were slaughtered at home. We didn’t use oils from the shop like we do now. Now food is delicious but not healthy and nutritious like the food eaten in the olden days, such as *izinkobe* (beans and mealies). Now meat is available all the time, even during weekdays, rather than during earlier times when we only had meat after a cow or a goat was slaughtered at home or in the neighbourhood.33

Earning currency to supplement subsistence, however, was already important enough to pull women from the family fields and into wage labour when men were not available to provide income. With strong sanctions on female migration to the urban areas, the only wage labour open to women living in the region was in the sugarcane fields on the neighbouring white-owned farms where they were paid extremely low wages. When Mrs K’s father died, for example, her mother, herself and all her siblings went to work for the local farmers planting sugarcane in order to earn enough money to survive.

Control over women’s labour and movement during this earlier period seems to have occurred mostly through the practice of living with in-laws after marriage. Those women who stayed in the rural areas spoke of the early days of their marriages fondly as times when wage-earning husbands were supporting their wives and children, and family and kinship structures more closely followed the ideal sketched out by Gluckman in the 1940s. Women also remember having some independence in controlling their husband’s income with the expectation of some day establishing a separate household or kitchen on their in-laws’ land. Mrs K told me that after marriage her mother-in-law gave her the purse in which her husband’s wages were kept and told her that now she would take over from her mother-in-law in controlling her husband’s wages. While it has been well-documented that male migrants were often unreliable about sending home income, sometimes abandoning their rural families, nonetheless this image of the male breadwinner sustaining his traditional family in the rural areas was a powerful and compelling one for many of the women who did stay in rural locations and attempt to create families within this model.

For these women, the only opportunity to travel to urban areas seems to have been before they were married. After being established in the homes of their in-laws, they could seldom renegotiate the terms of their labour, at least while their husband was still living and contributing monetarily to the family. This was due to factors such as customary control by in-laws of children, state laws restricting female migration, and lack of access to education. As stated by Mrs D:

> When I was young my father would not let girls go to school because he said that they would find boyfriends there. Now the young people all go to school and come back with AIDS from there and then they all die and leave the older generation to take care of the children.34

In contrast to this, Ms P was allowed to finish school, but only under duress:

> Local men feared that if a woman went to town she would be taken by other men. I went to school but it caused considerable tension. My father’s brothers were complaining that I would become

---

33 Interview, Mrs N, eZimwini, 4 April 2005.
34 Interview, Mrs D, eZimwini, 15 October 2003.
isifebe (a loose woman). My family only approved of my brother going to school. My mother pressed my father hard to allow me to go to school. My father allowed me to go because of my mother. She is related to a famous woman in Umbumbulu named Sibusisiwe whom the school was named after.35 Her father was my mother’s cousin... and she helped me a lot – without her I would be nothing. My father’s eyes were opened when I started working and bringing home money. He became happy and started to realise that he nearly made a big mistake.36

Composition of Households

It is hard to say to what extent the ideal described by women of the male migrant husband contributing his wages to the household has ever been an accurate depiction of household economics, but it certainly does not hold true in current times. Out of the 113 households interviewed for this study, only 13 per cent had a male head of the household with long-term employment in the formal economy.37 Indeed, most households were characterised by the absence of older men. Census data for the region showed that for residents over 65 years of age there were more than three women for every man, and for residents between 35 and 64 there were more than two women for every man in 2001.38

Determining the head of the household was often a very difficult task. The developmental cycle of households allowed older sons to bring home their wives and take over the role of household head upon the death of their father, but with the decline in marriage, the developmental stage of households consisting of widowed women living with adult unmarried children was unclear. The usefulness of categorising household headship through self-reporting has been questioned;39 however, in this context it is helpful in highlighting the widespread absence of older male wage-earners throughout the community. In a ritual context, particularly when ancestors were communicated with regarding lineage matters, men were always given the senior role if they were available. However, in the day-to-day running of the household, women of senior generations often played a greater role.

Overall, 48 per cent of households interviewed for this study were headed by older women living with their adult (and primarily unmarried) children, many of whom had children of their own. These households were at a later stage in their developmental cycle but were often unable to produce new households due to declining marriage rates among adult children. The household heads tended to be older and 74 per cent of the women said that they were widows. Younger women living alone with very young children never constituted an entire household.

An additional 47 per cent of households had a man and a woman running the household. In these households the couples tended to be, on average, younger than the widowed or unmarried women running households without a partner. Despite this, 72 per cent of these households had three generations present, namely the couple, their children, and several grandchildren all residing together. Startlingly, only 9 per cent had adult children who were married, suggesting a dramatic increase in the number of children being born outside marriage and raised in the household of their maternal grandparents.

35 This is most likely a reference to Sibusisiwe Makhanya, who is featured in S. Marks (ed.), Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1987).
36 Interview, Ms P, eZimwini, 30 March 2005.
37 This figure excludes households that consisted of younger men living with their mothers who had jobs but were attempting to establish their own independent households and did not consider themselves the primary support for their mother’s household.
Finally, 2 per cent of households were headed by men with no wives and the remainder had other arrangements such as groups of unmarried siblings.

Residence Patterns and Access to Land

The patrilineal nature of the 47 per cent of households headed by a married couple was evident in the prevalence of unmarried members, particularly siblings, who were related to the male head of household rather than to the woman who married into the household. While many married women looked after and counted as their children those born to their husband by other women, there were no acknowledged cases in these households of children that were born to the women but from different fathers. When women did leave the household of their parents to be married, they usually left behind any children to whom they had previously given birth, who were fathered by different men. Overall, within this subset of households, the principles of patrilineal descent remain strong, but the decline in marriage threatened the establishment of new households, suggesting that this may not hold true for the next generation.

For example, one married woman whom I interviewed, Mrs NT, lived with her husband Mr P and 16 unmarried young adults including the children of Mr P by two other women and several children of Mr P’s sisters, who were deceased or married elsewhere. There were also eleven young children in the household belonging to a third generation within the lineage, all of them the grandchildren of Mr P or his siblings, but only some of them the grandchildren of Mrs NT. Two of Mr P’s siblings’ grandchildren and four of his own grandchildren lived part of the year in a related household in Isipingo where they went to school and were cared for by one of Mr P’s daughters. Schools in Isipingo were better than the ones in oGagwini, so the young children lived there during the school term in order to attend, but returned to the rural household during school breaks. One of Mr P’s sons who was the only formally employed member of the family, was responsible for supporting the household in Isipingo. The family also maintained another related household in Folweni from which individuals came and went while seeking employment. The rural household used to be supported primarily by a taxi business owned by Mr P. The other children occasionally contributed income from temporary jobs and five of the daughters received child support grants from the government for their young children. All were considered members of the rural household.40

By contrast, the 48 per cent of households that consisted of widowed or unmarried women living with their children and grandchildren showed considerably less inclination to follow the strict lines of patrilineal descent. Many widowed women had returned to the household of their birth and requested land from their male siblings to set up independent households. While much has been written about the inability of women to gain access to land under customary tenure or to inherit property, in practice women seem to have considerable ability to claim a part of their father’s land. Informants usually justified this as claiming land on behalf of their male sons, a justification which has been documented elsewhere. Preston-Whyte and Sibisi found,41 as did Reader,42 that in KwaZulu-Natal women were able to claim land from their own kin, and not just from their in-laws, under a variety of circumstances including divorce, widowhood, or if the married couple simply preferred to live with the woman’s kin due to the availability of land. As older widowed women returned

40 Interview, Mrs NT, oGagwini, 21 October 2003.
to their fathers’ land or became the head of their households with the death of their spouses, there was also an increase in the presence of widowed female siblings living together, somewhat disrupting virilocal residence patterns. Although women have always had the customary right to ask for land from their fathers and brothers, the extent to which this is occurring has been increasing due to the absence of older men from rural areas.

An example of a woman gaining land from her own kin rather than her affines in eZimwini was Mrs F who asked for land from her sister. Mrs F told the chief, who said that the land transfer was fine and that he might come look at the land at a later date. At the time of the interview, the chief had not yet looked at the land, but Mrs F had no desire to remind him of this since it would require paying him to witness the transfer. Many people lived for a decade or longer without having their land transfer officially witnessed by the chief. One of her neighbours, Mrs B, got her land from her brother, who was working on a farm and did not want to lose it. He later sent his own wife and children to live on the land, but Mrs B was confident that her brother would not kick her family off the land when he returned because they had since divided the land between them.

Murray found in Lesotho that a considerable number of households had a permanently resident senior wife or widow who formed the anchor of the household and that these widows were seen as entitled to land. However, he also suggested that these women were highly dependent on their sons to be able to hold onto their land. In eZimwini, most of the women heads of households simply did not speak of conflict over land, but rather spoke in terms of wanting to give land to their sons but being prevented either by land scarcity or lack of interest on the part of young men in settling in rural areas. The desirability of urban jobs in contrast to subsistence or small-scale commercial farming meant that women rarely seemed to be in competition with their male relatives for controlling and allocating household land.

My mother had five girls so my father’s land had to be occupied by a brother. All five girls were married and we couldn’t occupy the land so I came for it in 2001 with my husband, who died soon thereafter. Two of my children are sons, so I could get the land because I have sons . . . but even if we are all women, we have the right to our father’s land. I came here because there was no immediate next of kin on my father’s side.

The fact that women’s access to land is still spoken of as through their sons disadvantages women without children or those who have never been married. However, there is some evidence of change as seen in the story of Ms H who succeeded in claiming her father’s land. Never married, without any living children, and with only one grandchild living elsewhere, she attempted to claim a part of her father’s land upon his death but was opposed by her brother. Her appeals to the chief’s councillor, or induna, however, resulted in the division of the land between all of the siblings, male and female, and the induna’s statement that all children have a right to inherit their father’s property. This ruling did not go so far as to divide the land equally, but it did allow Ms H to claim a separate residence and fields from her brother. This incident also suggested a recognition on the part of the induna of changes at the national level, particularly as the induna was also an African National Congress-affiliated local government councillor. Most unmarried women, however, continued to live in the household of either their father or brother and did not have their own residences.

43 Interview, Mrs F, eZimwini, 26 January 2004.
46 Interview, Mrs T, eZimwini, 9 April 2004.
47 Interview, Ms H, eZimwini, 16 October 2003.
Marriage and Motherhood

Marriage is an important marker of adult status and the decline in marriage has left many young adults in a state of delayed transition. Marriage is also the moment under customary law when young men can claim land either from their lineage group or from the chief to set up an independent household or to claim fields for their wives to grow subsistence crops. Most people still spoke of gaining access to land through their customary roles as mothers and fathers claiming land for the perpetuation of the lineage rather than as rights-bearing individual citizens. In this context, marriage remained crucial to adult status within the community, and yet it was increasingly out of reach of most young people who remained in the homes of their parents well into their 30s while raising their own children. These young mothers and fathers considered themselves ‘youths’ rather than ‘adults’ because of their unmarried status.

Marriage has historically been characterised by an elaborate series of negotiations and the eventual exchange of money, gifts and livestock between the families of those to be wed. Iləbolo, or bridewealth, refers to the largest payment that is made by the groom’s family and is understood both as an acknowledgement of the role of the woman’s parents in raising her and as the basis for claiming any children born as members of their father’s lineage. When customary law was first codified by the colonial state in Natal in the second half of the nineteenth century, iləbolo was officially set at eleven cattle. While this number is still cited today, most bridewealth is paid in cash and the value of each cow is negotiated, yielding a broad price range. Rough estimates that were given to me ranged from R1,300 to R4,000 for each cow. In addition, izbizo, another exchange of gifts crucial to finalising marriage, was estimated at R6,000–R8,000 in eZimwini, although it was less in neighbouring peri-urban areas. Even with this space for negotiation, however, bridewealth was beyond the reach of most families in these economically insecure times. In group interviews, young women would complain about the cost of iləbolo while simultaneously arguing that it was very necessary.

Z: It is difficult to pay iləbolo because people expect a lot for their daughters. There is a girl whose family wants R11,000, even though she is not educated.

P: Last week in my family there was someone who paid iləbolo. They wanted R8,000 but they only paid R5,200. What is worse is that she has a child [from a different father]. R8,000 is okay if the man is the father of the child.

Z: A person who is not educated should not ask for a huge amount of money because at the end of the day she won’t produce a profit. It is very good to be educated and working together with your husband so that you can help each other buy everything that is needed at the house...

Z: Iləbolo should be continued.

T: It is good because your parents will get something out of you.

Marriages were also seen as an opportunity to display wealth and were considered competitive, which pushed the cost up. Verbal estimates by young women in the community suggested that fewer than half of the women living in the area were married, and one young woman who was trained as a schoolteacher estimated that perhaps 5 per cent of women were married by age 30. Despite this, most of the young women hoped that one day their families would receive iləbolo for them.

---

48 For a case study of the impact of the decline in marriage and delayed transition to adulthood on expressions of masculinity, see M. Hunter, ‘Cultural Politics and Masculinities: Multiple-Partners in Historical Perspective in KwaZulu-Natal’, Culture, Health & Sexuality, 7, 4 (July–August 2005), pp. 389–403.

49 Group Interview, four women aged 19–20, eZimwini, 30 September 2004.
Fulfilling all the obligations and exchanges was crucial to being considered married. For example, Ms H told of having been engaged to a man at 30 who had two other girlfriends. He subsequently married the other two but had not finished paying ilobolo for her when he died much later. In the meantime, she had lived with him and his other wives and borne him five children. As the children got older, she returned to her birth home but he visited her, supported her and continued to make ilobolo payments for her. Despite this, when he died, she was seen as never having married, both in her own mind and in the view of the community. Ms H also told me that even if you live with someone for decades, if you are not married your body will be returned after death to your birth home for burial.50

Young women frequently had children outside marriage and it was quite common to have one child while still a teenager and then practise birth control for many years afterwards, for reasons that may have to do with demonstrating fertility51 and the knowledge that children are a crucial part of a woman’s status. Yet, Walker observes,

what has persisted with remarkable tenacity from the precolonial period into the present is the importance that continues to be attached to women’s fertility, not just by patriarchs but by African women themselves: and this, I suggest, structures a certain continuity in feelings of self-worth, celebration and power in many African women’s social identity as mothers.52

Walker goes on to note that marriage and motherhood are increasingly becoming uncoupled in practice, reflecting the continued desire of young women to have children even if they are sceptical of the benefits of marriage.

When young women have children while still unmarried, inhlawulo is often paid by the family of the child’s father in order to give the child some legitimacy and introduce the child to the ancestors. A key part of inhlawulo is the payment of one of the eleven ilobolo cows that is intended for the mother of the bride and is paid only once. This cow is seen as accounting for the young woman’s virginity.

In one inhlawulo ceremony that I participated in, a young man from eZimwini paid inhlawulo for his one-and-a-half-year-old child with his 16-year-old girlfriend in the neighbouring township of Umlazi. He paid R2,000, symbolising the ‘cow’, as well as two goats, a basin, salt, a knife and an axe. Regional variation in the items requested was evident as his family thought the monetary payment and the goats were reasonable, but complained about the additional items, noting that this was ‘not how it was done here in eZimwini’. After appropriate consultations with family elders and the ancestors, the items were brought to the young mother’s family by a negotiator who attempted last-minute bargaining in a ritualised ceremony. The family of the young mother was from the Eastern Cape and there were no men living in the house at the time of the negotiations, so a senior woman from the household negotiated and eventually accepted the payment.

Inhlawulo payments and corresponding attitudes towards pregnancy outside marriage were studied in KwaZulu-Natal in the early 1990s by Preston-Whyte and Zondi.53 This study suggested that, once parents have accepted reparations for the loss of their daughter’s

---

50 Interview, Ms H, eZimwini, 16 October 2003.
virginity, they also ‘publicly as well as legally’\textsuperscript{54} accepted responsibility for their grandchild. Their study, which was carried out in peri-urban communities in Durban, implies a level of harmonious integration of these children into the household of their mother’s parents that was not as evident in my research in eZimwini and oGagwini. Although young children were expected to remain with their mothers, the \textit{inhlawulo} payments were considered to be not just reparations, but also an introduction of the children to their father’s lineage. When these children got sick, the mother and child would often temporarily live in the house of the child’s father in the hopes of gaining the protection of the child’s ancestors to aid with the healing. Once these children got older, disputes over which household they belonged to would arise. Young women expressed frequent concern over the implications for their control over their own children. Although most young women still expressed a keen desire to be married, one young woman stated that she would rather remain in her parents’ home so as not to be separated from her children from previous relationships.

\textbf{Women’s Wages and Mobility}

With few men holding permanent employment, and high levels of mobility among younger people seeking jobs, older women have become central in sustaining the household through a combination of subsistence agriculture, their own income from pensions and engagement in the informal economy, and their co-ordination of the bits and pieces contributed irregularly by their highly mobile children. In many female-headed households, older women are the only ones earning consistent income in the form of government pensions. In addition, the lessening of government restrictions over informal activities has meant an increase in women’s engagement with the informal economy.

While permanently resident widows or older women have been a feature of rural households throughout the period of rural reliance on migrant labour, a primary change is that these households are significantly less reliant on remittances from men. Women now contribute a higher proportion of a rural family’s total income.

When I was young, the boys did not stay at home. They would get jobs and work and the girls would all stay at home. Nowadays the girls are working. The boys only stay at home because there is no work \ldots{} In the past, more people were working but for a pittance. Now, there is less work.\textsuperscript{55}

Most women report that the pensions and income of mothers and grandparents are more likely to be used to sustain the household than the income generated by adult sons. Here is an example of a typical discussion of the income coming into the household among four young women from different households:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{P:} The one who contributes the most money is my mother but I don’t know where she gets it.
  \item \textbf{T:} It is my mother who contributes a lot at home.
  \item \textbf{A:} My grandmother supports the home. She gets a pension.
  \item \textbf{Z:} My grandfather gets a pension.
  \item \textbf{P:} I get the child support grant together with my older sister.
  \item \textbf{T:} My mother gets child support for one of the children.
  \item \textbf{Z:} My mother and grandfather both contribute money towards the groceries.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 230.
\textsuperscript{55} Interview, Mrs B, eZimwini, 19 January 2004.
P: My sister and myself when we go to get our child support grant we buy what we are running short of in the house.

T: When my grandmother gets her pension and when my mother gets money they both buy the groceries.56

While few of the unmarried young adults in eZimwini and oGagwini are employed, many of them have held temporary jobs or work in the informal economy. Without permanent employment, young job-seekers are unable to afford rent and services in urban areas, leading to a renewed commitment to rural households, particularly in areas with easy access to urban areas. Rural households have always been seen as a form of security in the context of the apartheid state’s laws on urban migration. Now, however, mobile youth see rural households as an important protection against periods of unemployment while rural households depend on occasional and intermittent contributions from far-flung members. Niehaus noted the presence in urban areas of sibling households, which he suggested are more harmonious and allowed for more flexibility in gender roles than households focused around conjugal unions.57 From the perspective of rural areas, however, these sibling households are seen as branches of the rural household, with strong ties between the two and the frequent movement of many other family members between these households.

Many of the younger people interviewed for this study were highly mobile, living for months at a time in different locations. It was very common in households with many young members for the composition to change considerably from month to month. While young women were more likely than men to be living predominantly with family in the rural areas, female mobility has nonetheless increased considerably, according to most residents. In past generations, young women’s mobility was controlled primarily through the institution of marriage, but as marriage has declined and women have remained living with their parents, fathers now have little incentive to stop the flow of money that comes into their house from the earnings of their mobile daughters.

Historically, controlling the wages of young men has been a point of contention within households while the focus with young women has been control over their domestic labour and mobility. As women’s mobility and education levels have increased, parents are beginning to see their daughters as potential sources of income and are increasingly concerned about their inability to work if they have children before they are married. Young women are also concerned that while their fathers do not mind if they travel to urban areas to work, their husbands and in-laws may try to prevent them from working after they are married. Men have at times turned to issues such as ilobolo to assert power over the wages of their daughters. One father attempted to include a payment within ilobolo negotiations for his daughter that would compensate him for the money he spent on educating her as a teacher. In response the prospective groom threatened to ensure that, once married, the daughter would no longer send any money to her parents, resulting in the father dropping his original request.

Female-headed households also rely on the income from daughters as they are more likely to contribute to the household than sons. The income generated by sons has a wider spectrum of demands upon it, and a high proportion goes to girlfriends and children or their own consumption. Daughters, however, never forget their mothers even after they are married and, as the saying goes, will even ‘steal’ money behind their husbands’ backs to send home to their mothers.

---
Debating Morality and Reconceptualising Households

As young women were still living with their parents into their child-bearing years, parents often expressed concern that the children born outside marriage would be a financial drain that would outweigh the benefits of working daughters.

What I can see now is only pregnant women. They get pregnant but they don’t get married. It is the negligence of us as women, the mothers, that the girls are not getting married. Our mothers beat us a lot but we don’t do that with our daughters. They even go anywhere and come back at any time . . . My children have no work and I don’t think I will ever wear any clothes bought for me by my daughter because my daughter doesn’t have a job and I don’t think she will ever get one.58

Older women often complained about the ‘rights’ given to young women by the government.

There is no respect these days. During our time people did not have children so young. Now young people have children while they are still at home. I think this is because of all of the freedom given to the children today. In my day if they told the children not to go somewhere, they wouldn’t go, but now the children go anyway because they have been given their freedom. It is the one we voted for, the ANC, who gave them this freedom.59

Parents often said that their daughters’ pregnancies were evidence of disrespect towards parental authority and the decline in cultural ideas of morality. Senior women frequently cited the dating behaviour of the youth as evidence of the decline of inhlonipho, the Zulu code of respect within families. This use of a discourse of Zulu tradition and morality in counteracting the discourse of rights was particularly interesting given that older women got much of their power from the pensions provided by the state. In addition, despite the concern over unwed mothers, older women never complained about their daughters receiving child support grants from the state.

Senior women would also point out that, when they were younger, women worked in the sugarcane farms and gave all of their wages to their parents because there was nothing to buy, while daughters today are tempted by the availability of consumer goods. Despite this, many young women felt they had a close relationship with their mothers and would contribute to the household. Most of the young women interviewed got money from the child support grant and used it on themselves, their children, and the needs of their parents’ household.

L: I use the child support money to buy something for the curries because foods like rice or flour are too much money.

K: Also the same, but only if I don’t have any problems. Sometimes I am supposed to buy stuff for the children, in which case I don’t buy anything at home.

N: I buy the braai pack (chicken pieces) only if I want to. If I don’t, there is no one who will ask why.

T: I also buy some things for home. Sometimes I buy something for the house using ‘lay-by’. If I have a lot of money I don’t give it to anyone, but I buy something that is needed.

N: I don’t give it to anyone.

L: The money is not so much that it is worth giving to someone, so I usually spend it immediately.60

Younger women were more likely to speak of themselves as rights-bearing individuals in an attempt to limit their obligations to their parents. Most definitions of rights focused on the freedom of youth from forms of authority.

58 Interview, Mrs H, eZimwini, 16 October 2003.
59 Interview, Mrs S, eZimwini, 26 January 2004.
60 Group interview, five women aged 20–26, eZimwini, 22 September 2004.
K: Children now have rights and are disrespectful.

N: Some of the time you see children standing with their boyfriends. If you scold them they say that it is their right, the government has given them rights.

K: I don’t have rights. I don’t have rights because if my father says I shouldn’t do something, I don’t. If I had rights, I wouldn’t be here, I would be with my boyfriend.

N: I don’t have rights because my boyfriend is not allowed to go out through the main gate at home.61

Young women were also beginning to see themselves as having the right to set up independent households outside the structures of marriage. Facing few marriage prospects, women talked of claiming land from their brothers in the household of their birth or of setting up households in urban areas if they become employed.

K: I will be able to get a piece of land if I ask it of my home.

L: I can get it if I can talk with my father or if I have money I can ask the neighbours and buy land from them.

N: I can also talk with the neighbours and ask for land.

T: My siblings and I will get together and figure out how to divide our parents’ land.62

While younger women, facing few marriage prospects, turn to the concept of rights to claim independence from parental authority, elders have responded through a revival of tradition that emphasises their roles as fathers and mothers. Newly instituted virginity-testing ceremonies in eMbo were initiated primarily by senior women attempting to re-establish their role as the guardians of young women’s virginity. While virginity-testing was also a response to the spread of HIV/AIDS, discussions of the disease were still highly taboo. Although many young people would admit that HIV/AIDS was a problem more generally, they were highly reluctant to get tested or to say that anyone in the community had the disease out of fear of being stigmatised.

Parents also complained that, if they disciplined their daughters, they would be arrested. This was not an idle fear as young women did talk of going to the magistrate to deal with abuse within the household. One 30-year-old woman told me of an incident where she took her father to court over a beating that he gave her. After the death of her mother five years earlier, her father, who was employed, requested that she take over buying the groceries and keep the receipts. When the totals did not add up, her father whipped her. The next day she went to the Magistrate’s Court and a month or so later she and her father were summoned. While being questioned in court, it emerged that her father was angry at her primarily because she had recently been pregnant without being married or even engaged, a topic that her father had not previously discussed with her. The father told the judge that his daughter did not respect him and he was going to throw her out of the house. The judge, however, told him that he could not kick out his daughter or whip her again and informed the daughter that, if her father threatened her further, she should return to the court. As a result of this case, her brother now buys the family groceries and her father has not beaten her again. Many neighbours who heard of this case were angry at the daughter for going against the authority of her father, particularly because he was employed and supporting his family.

Historically, the law has often been the space where domestic disputes are played out.63 Civil court cases throughout the last century and a half overwhelmingly focused on disputes over parental authority and marriage. With the codification of customary law during the

---

colonial period under indirect rule, tradition and culture were defined and fought out within the legal system. As the Comaroffs have recently noted, this trend of debating and defining culture and tradition within the courts has continued within post-colonial states. While rights are a relatively new concept in rural areas, they have entered local discourse quickly, in part due to their connection with debates occurring within national politics and also because of the connection to the courts.

**Conclusion**

Localised struggles over women’s access to income and land and their migration into urban areas have long reflected national debates over tradition and morality. However, these gender roles and national debates are changing once again as the system of migrant labour collapses. In current times, parents are less likely to restrict the mobility of young women as their higher levels of income and longer residence in their parents’ home make them sources of income for their parents’ household. However, as women bear children outside marriage in greater numbers, their residence in their parents’ household is increasingly becoming a source of conflict as they strive for some measure of independence. The AIDS epidemic exacerbates this tension as young adults are the hardest-hit and older members of the community often find themselves caring for their grandchildren. Most young women still strongly desire to be married, but more immediate needs of caring for their children and developing an independent lifestyle have led to an emphasis on themselves as rights-bearing individuals as a means of controlling their income and raising their children in the face of parental restrictions.

In seeking to understand the impact of policies aimed at empowering rural women, it is crucial to recognise the changes that have already occurred as a result of recent political and economic shifts. Older women may be heading the most impoverished households, particularly when looking at access to cash, but pensions and their *de facto* roles as heads of households co-ordinating large groups of affiliated mobile household members have granted them some measure of security, at least in regions such as eZimwini and oGagwini. This has often put them in conflict with their increasingly mobile daughters, who find themselves in need of reconceptualising their own transitions to adulthood, particularly as the scourge of AIDS and long-term unemployment undermine their hopes of marriage.

**Sarah M. Mathis**

*School of International Studies, University of the Pacific, 3601 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95211, USA. E-mail: smathis@pacific.edu*

---