

Submission by the South African Institute of Race Relations on the draft white paper on families released by the Department of Social Development (DSD) in July 2012

Overall the white paper makes an important first step in acknowledging the problem of family breakdown in South Africa, its causes and some of its effects. However, the white paper lacks concrete proposals that can be implemented by various government departments to address the problems identified. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge the role individual responsibility, norms, and attitudes can play in building more stable families, albeit with assistance and incentives from the Government.

Promotion of healthy family life

The white paper contains three recommended key strategies to promote functioning families.

Under the first key strategy (promotion of healthy family life) it is recommended that the Government ‘foster stable sexual unions and partnerships’. Through such a recommendation, the white paper is acknowledging the fact that families built around stable sexual relationships are likely to be the strongest, and there is indeed a lot of research to suggest that children brought up with both of their biological parents in the household fare better than those with absent parents, particularly absent fathers. The white paper suggests that the DSD’s *Manual for Marriage Preparation and Marriage Enrichment* is one of the main resources that can be used to implement this strategy. On the one hand, the strategy does not explicitly cite marriage as the most stable form of sexual union, but on the other hand, marriage counselling is the only proposed action to foster stable sexual unions.

Firstly, therefore, it is not clear whether the department aims to promote marriage or not. This suggests that more research needs to be conducted on whether marriage is the most stable form of relationship, and whether children growing up with married parents fare better. Secondly, it seems that other means of promoting stable relationships have not been considered. These could include family planning programmes where people are encouraged to wait to have children until they are in a stable relationship. It also overlooks the practical fact that the most vulnerable or unstable couples may be the least likely to seek marriage guidance.

A significant cause of children growing up in single-parent families is the death of a parent. This is not acknowledged as one of the barriers to the 'promotion of healthy family life' or as a cause of unstable families. HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality, and death as a result of violence all need to be considered as causes of 'broken' families.

Key Strategy 1 also recommends encouraging fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing. Given that almost half of all children have absent but living fathers (compared to only 3% living in single-father households), it is right that the involvement of fathers is emphasised. Again, however, there could be more practical suggestions in the white paper as to how this could be done. Better enforcing maintenance payments by absent fathers, and ensuring that fathers are treated equally by the courts in custody decisions (which the law provides for but which anecdotal evidence suggests does not always happen), are two examples.

In this section of the white paper, there is also no mention of unemployment. Unemployment is likely to be playing a major role in the absence of fathers from families, either because they have migrated to other areas in search of scarce jobs, or because a lack of income puts men off taking responsibility for the children they father. A shortage of housing in cities and high crime levels in urban areas may also cause men to leave their families behind in rural areas. In 1994 the Government pledged to convert single-sex dormitory-style hostels into safe family accommodation, but complaints from the Inkatha Freedom Party and admissions from government officials over the last few years, suggest that in some areas this has not been done.

In general, not enough is known about why fathers are absent in the first place. There are a number of possible reasons, including labour migration, the high mortality rate of young men, male attitudes to women (including the prevalence of rape), and attitudes towards having multiple partners. The white paper could include proposals for more research to be done (most usefully a nationally representative field survey), as interventions may be ineffective if it is not understood what the prevailing causes of absent fatherhood are in the first place.

Family strengthening

Furthermore, in Key Strategy 2 (family strengthening), one of the recommended actions is to

ensure the income and basic social security of families. The recommendation mentions ‘social protection schemes’, ‘universal pensions’, ‘social- and micro-insurance schemes’. However, noticeably it does not mention employment, which is the best way of ensuring an income. The emphasis of the white paper should not be to encourage more dependency by families on minimum incomes in the form of social grants. Families and communities will be better off, both financially and socially, if more people are working.

Under Key Strategy 2, it is recommended that the Government promote ‘work-life balance’. Once again, apart from one example of reviewing paternity leave, there are no practical recommendations for how a better balance between work and family life might be promoted by the Government.

Early childhood development (ECD) centres, which have increased in number over the last few years, but which only a third of children attend, could be promoted and funded more by the Government, to provide an affordable means of childcare for working parents and basic education for young children.

School admission policy could also be reviewed. In many schools, preference is given to children who live near the school. Perhaps this could be extended to children whose parents work near a particular school.

Key Strategy 2 also recommends the provision of adequate primary healthcare, saying that all family members should ‘have access to adequate and affordable healthcare and nutrition services’. While this is an important goal, specifics on how the healthcare system can strengthen families are missing. One particularly important role the healthcare system can play is in providing broader family planning services to women and families. This does not only include making contraceptives more widely available, but also offering advice on when to start a family. The department of health could use public information campaigns to stress the financial and emotional responsibility of having children and to encourage the concept of planned parenthood. This can play a role in reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies and the number of families that are put under financial and emotional strain because of unplanned pregnancy.

Implementation

The white paper lists most government departments and the role they can play in implementing the Government's policy on families. Once again, however, the roles envisaged for the various departments are not fleshed out with concrete actions that they can undertake to support and strengthen families.

The Department of Basic Education has an important role to play in addressing the prevalence of broken families in the country. Missing from the white paper is any sense that the breakdown of families demonstrated by the data on orphans, absent fathers, and single parents, is part of a cycle that needs to be broken. Both international and local research suggests that children growing up in unstable families are more likely to grow up to have unstable relationships themselves. Schools can play a role in breaking this cycle, by not only teaching children the basic facts about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases, but also by teaching them about relationships and the emotional and financial responsibilities of having children. For children growing up in functioning families, this would be done by their parents, but in the absence of stable families, guidance provided at school may be one of the best means of reducing teenage pregnancy and, in the longer term, the prevalence of unstable families.

The Department of Health can also prioritise the provision of family planning services; the Department of Human Settlements can be responsible for reviewing housing and planning policies; and the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development can ensure that maintenance payments are enforced and that the courts treat mothers and fathers equally in custody decisions, all of which is discussed above.

Monitoring

The Institute has offered to provide the DSD with annual data on relevant indicators, such as orphans, child-headed households, absent fathers, and single parents. This will help the department monitor trends in families across the country.

However, while the white paper acknowledges that 'the co-ordination of different government policies that promote family life and the strengthening of the family will be dependent on a clearly defined and executed monitoring and evaluation process', it does not stipulate where the ultimate responsibility of ensuring the implementation of the white paper will lie. There is also no mention of the oversight role that could be played by Parliament in

ensuring that the various aspects of the white paper are implemented.

Conclusion

Apart from lacking enough practical proposals on how to address family breakdown, the white paper fails to deal with some of the most difficult but pertinent issues around family breakdown. Most particularly, it does not sufficiently deal with the role of attitudes, norms, and individual behaviour. Male attitudes towards women are not dealt with, despite the high incidence of sexual violence in the country – 181 incidents every day according to official police statistics. While these are difficult things for any government to change, the white paper can still acknowledge that they may be playing a role in the pattern of family breakdown in South Africa and at the very least, can propose that comprehensive research be conducted to establish the degree to which attitudes, of promiscuity and male chauvinism among others, are a factor in this cycle.

For instance, not enough is known about the extent to which women, particularly the most vulnerable from poorer and less-educated backgrounds, are empowered to refuse sex with their partners or to require their partners to use contraception.

In general, there is not enough emphasis on the concept of individual responsibility. Bringing a child into the world brings with it serious financial and emotional burdens for at least 18 years. Much of that burden is currently borne by single mothers, grandparents, and in the worst cases, the State. The white paper needs to emphasise that having a child is something individuals should do in a planned way, within a stable relationship, aware of and willing to take on all of those responsibilities.