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Childcare support for low-income employed mothers found wanting in SA



Dr Nonzuzo Mbokazi

Photo: Dr Nonzuzo Mbokazi

Women have had to simultaneously wear the titles of mother, caregiver and breadwinner for many years in South Africa without any recognition. But how do low-income employed mothers navigate care strategies for their young children?

A study by University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD graduate Dr Nonzuzo Mbokazi found that women in both urban and rural KwaZulu-Natal find difficulty navigating care provision for their children in the midst of the legacy of apartheid – which disadvantaged many black women in educational attainment and consequently socio-economic opportunities.

Mbokazi shared: “The attempts to understand the realities of low-income employed mothers was important to unveil the realities and the intricacies of childcare faced by the

mothers in their households. This allowed for the understanding of current care strategies and the lived experiences of being low-income employed mothers and all that this entails”.

Her research found that these mothers cannot exercise much choice in determining how to provide care for their children. Institutional options relating to childcare through the market and state are constrained by the mothers’ inability to pay for better and ideal childcare services. Mothers also have expectations and an understanding of the mother they want to be and this influences childcare options.

The findings of Mbokazi’s research showed that there is inadequate support from the state, the market and kin in providing care for the children of low-income employed mothers.

She makes recommendations on how social policy can be better tailored to cater to the needs of women in South Africa, and more broadly Africa who are usually the primary caregivers for children.

“I will intentionally borrow two points from Lawson’s (1985) recommendations made over 30 years ago, in order to stress how far we have come and how far we have not come as a country in terms of prioritising employed women’s needs.

“Firstly, employers should appreciate that women do a triple shift of work: paid, unpaid and cognitive work (as well as new forms of work found in this thesis, such as the work of chasing father and kin involvement in childcare). Herein, women are continually torn and balancing their private and public lives, between family and employer. Secondly, quality childcare preschools or nurseries are needed, to ensure quality care for children. Yes, South Africa does have the Early Childhood Development programme; however, as deduced from the interviews in this study, the quality of Early Development Centres needs attention in South Africa,” shared Mbokazi.

Her study reflected that low-income employed mothers need reliable and quality childcare provision and that employers and the government should accept collective responsibility for providing facilities for childcare.

Mbokazi’s doctoral thesis recently placed as second runner up in the Institute of African and Diaspora Studies Rahamon Bello Award competition which looks for the “best PhD thesis in African and Diaspora Studies”.

On her journey Mbokazi shared: “My PhD journey had its trials and tribulations, but I am extremely happy and proud of what myself and supervisors, Professor Elena Moore and Professor Jeremy Seekings, have been able to achieve.”

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