Paying your way and playing with the girls

Township men and meaning of manhood

What does it mean to be a man? **Grace Khunou** looks at how young men in South African townships understand masculinity. She argues that access to money, and later the role as providers for women and children, crucially underpins the idea of manhood.

I have been asking questions about manhood and masculinity for years, since my father told my brothers "Monna ke passa" – you are not a man until you get your identity document. An ID book meant a man could work, pay lobola and, therefore, support a family. That's what masculinity primarily meant to my father and his peers, and most black men still think that way.

This notion of masculinity, being a provider and a 'playa', is a very limited one. Is being a man so uncomplicated? My research over the past five years suggests otherwise.

GENDER AND RESEARCH

Most men live with women and define who they are in relation to women. As a result, my gender as a researcher also affected the responses of the men I interviewed. It was testing to convince them to open up about their experiences, particularly such experiences as arrest and unemployment. Most men, for example, did not enjoy appearing before maintenance courts. One man I spoke to kept quiet about the fact that he had been sent to the court by two women, only revealing this to me long after we had completed our initial interview and he needed advice.

I kept wondering why it was so difficult to share these experiences. Did sharing them challenge their masculinity? I came to the conclusion that their avoidance and silence stemmed from shame over the fact that they were unable to support their children. At one level, being able to 'play' the maintenance system is applauded. But not when a woman is asking the questions.

The gender factor also affected what the men were willing to share with me. They were hesitant about more personal details of their experiences. Percy, a father from Soweto who was supporting his first child only after the intervention of the maintenance courts, hesitated to speak about the uncertain paternity of his child.

He complained, "She took me to court and they told me... there, they just tell you that you have to maintain the child. It's your child. They do not talk about DNA tests, which is expensive. If I had money I would do the test. So I ended up maintaining that child." I asked him if he did not take the test because it was expensive. He answered, "It is expensive to do it. And you know if a girl comes and tells you that you are the one who impregnated her, you cannot say it is not me blah, blah, blah. You have to accept everything that she tells you. She knows because it is the mother who knows who impregnated her."

This suggests that because he was talking to a woman, he was cautious about accusing the mother of the child of lying about the identity of the real father.

BECOMING A MAN

Ideas of what it means to be a man are generally influenced by traditional notions of masculinity, which portray men as brave, strong, powerful, intelligent, mature, healthy, heterosexual and carefree. For most of the men I interviewed, notions of masculinity focused primarily on the provider and protector roles. There was a finality about how this was communicated, indicating that they thought men's position in society and in relation to women and children was not to be questioned.

For, Sipho, a man in his early thirties whom I interviewed in 2004, becoming a man was shaped by the typical attitudes of township boys who avoid what one might call 'violent masculinity' – involvement in gang conflict and crime. His experiences were similar to those of Lele, another father in his thirties whom I interviewed. Lele, unlike Sipho, was unemployed, but both were living in their mother's house at the time of the

interview.

For both men, their twenties represented a time of intense 'jolling' and sexual encounters with as many beautiful women as possible. Although their life experiences were different with regard to access to resources and education, they had quite similar experiences – they were 'playas'. The township notion of a 'playa' is linked to partying, sex and money. Their transition from boyhood to manhood was influenced by hegemonic ideas of masculinity, which emphasised sexual activity and drinking as part of the ritual of achieving manhood.

Sipho had a bright future ahead of him, with prospects of a university degree. He also worked weekends. This meant he had access to money, which placed him in a better position to 'perform' in a masculine way. On the other hand, Lele became a successful businessman in his early twenties, with a booming hair salon. This meant access to money on a daily basis which, combined with his good looks and other attributes, brought him unlimited access to attractive women.

N Fuller in *Work and Masculinity among Peruvian Urban Men*, and other researchers, have argued that having money at an early age is often a ticket to belonging: young men can buy beer and influence others. It is a way of winning acceptance as 'one of the boys'. This suggests a strong association between masculine identity formation and wage-earning. Having money gave these teenagers the ability to become a man.

Fuller also argues that earning money allows young men to court women and to brag about their sexual or romantic exploits to their friends. For Sipho, having access to money on a weekly basis impacted on the kind of 'playa' life he was able to lead. He explained, "I was sort of hooked into this life [clubbing and womanising]. But it became quiet at the end. Oh! ya, and we used to get paid on a weekly basis, and that is another thing that made it extra-difficult. Because you get paid every week, even if you can blow all the money you are going to get paid again next Friday, so why bother? So you just splash it on girls, booze and everything."

At this stage Sipho was living with friends and his job gave him "too much free time". They would become bored, find women and begin partying. He described the process, "One of my friends would bring back a couple of women, for example, and then obviously, you know us guys, we like to have fun. We would start choosing and dividing the girls among ourselves. You take that one and I will take that other one, things like that. But it was quite a corrupt lifestyle. Some of the things I have done – scary stuff."

Women, drinking and access to money and free time were fundamental in shaping the lives of these men. The discourse of gender had clearly shaped their ideas about what it means to be a man; they were based on the understanding of 'manhood' as a sexual condition. They felt the need to prove their sexual prowess, even when they risked negative consequences for them and their partners. At that point in their lives, their bodies and sexuality shaped their masculine identities.

But by the time I interviewed them, they aspired to a different kind of masculinity, where responsibility for their children had influenced who they wanted to be. They had learned a lesson from the risky experiences and profligate spending of their teenage years, and did not want to make the same mistakes. Critically, they did not want other men to laugh at them. They felt that their earlier experiences were transitory and did not represent who they were meant to be.

UNDERSTANDING MANHOOD

Sipho believes that being able to pay rent and having the means to pay when you take "your woman" to a restaurant is essential. Such ideas are central in influencing most men's ideas about what it means to be a man.

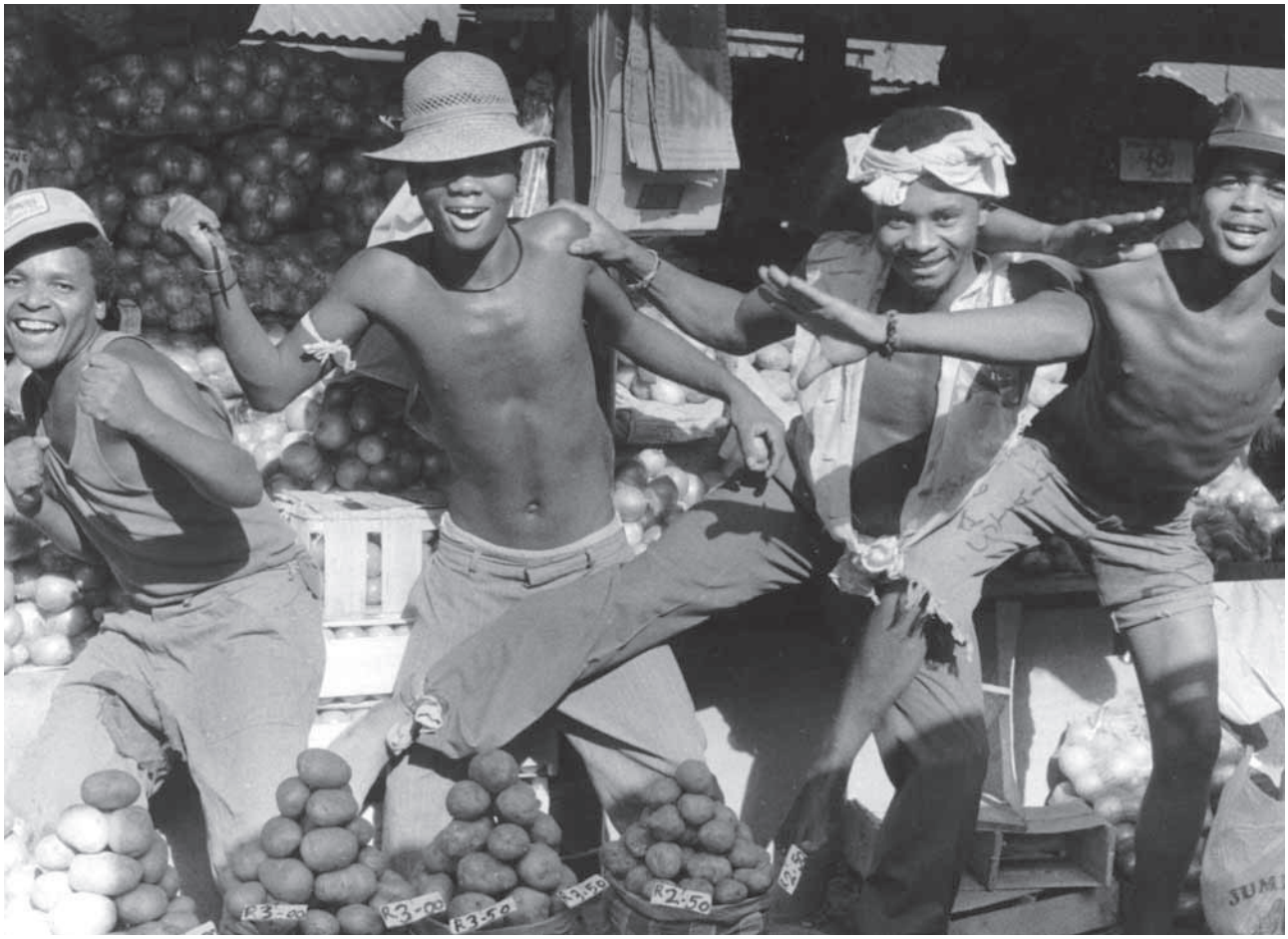
Traditional ideas about masculinity still have influence, even when the men could do with the financial support of the woman they lived with. Said Sipho, "I imagine someone buying a man a house! I mean, there are traditional rules that men or fathers have to play. We are meant to be providers.

I grew up with my mother... so I am very sympathetic towards women. But when it comes to certain things I believe that – I mean, clearly imagine a woman buying a house for a guy. I mean, if a woman is like very comfortable [has her own money], there would always be that tension that whenever maybe a guy is unhappy about something or with whatever, he would most probably express it... But if maybe he is contributing, not equally but contributing something... then he would always have a say: no I don't like the way you did this, or I don't like what you are doing or whatever.

If everything is being provided for by the person you are married to and that person is a female, it tends to [create problems for men]. And I know that those perceptions would change... but it would take some time."

Sipho's accounts of what it means to be a man, husband and father is limited to the traditional provider role. This is the only way a man can

William Matlala



ensure that he has a say in the running of the household.

But this takes no account of the precarious nature of employment in the modern era. What kind of a man would he be if he became unemployed? Could we still call him husband and father? How would he see himself? As I listened to him these were the questions that raced through my head. And what does he and his sister being raised by a woman mean to him?

Despite Sipho's views on who the breadwinner should be, his sister contributes substantially to the care of his child. He does not attach much importance to this; it is just 'helping out'. Other research has found that most men see such contributions by women in this way. They view the main responsibility for providing for the household as theirs, whatever the reality.

N Gwagwa in *Money as a Source of Tension* asserts that this remains so even when men are unemployed and the woman has sole responsibility for supporting the family.

Deborah Posel in her article 'Women's powers, men's authority' asserts that women also play a role in sustaining such illusions. Men expect to be providers, and society prescribes this as what it means to be a good or just man. Men throughout the world continue to constitute and affirm their gender identity through wage work. Having money and being the 'head of the household' also suggests that men should be 'in control'. They try to maintain their power in the household even when they do not really have it.

CONCLUSION

Masculine identity is complex and context-bound, and hegemonic concepts of masculinity persist even when men's lived experiences suggest otherwise. Conceived in sexual terms, it is heavily dependent on access to money and wage work. In understanding gender relations, it is important to acknowledge the very different experiences of men and of women and how these influence each other. This does not preclude the fact that identity formation is influenced by race, class and other factors. LB

This is an edited extract of Grace Khunou's PhD on gender identities and the maintenance system, completed at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2006.