

When is a choice not a choice?: Experiences of individual agency and autonomy by South African female breadwinners

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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger Master's study, this paper focuses on the individual experiences of agency and autonomy communicated by a group of South African women who have overcome traditional notions of gender through their role as primary financial provider for their families. Using data collected from in-depth, unstructured interviews, and reading these through a phenomenological feminist perspective, I shed some light on the perceptions of ten female breadwinners (FBW) in this paper. It is the aim of this research to represent these women's voices in order to understand how they make meaning of and negotiate their spaces and roles as breadwinners. In the course of the interviews and analyses, the realities faced by these FBW stemming from the Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces expose the hegemonic and heteronormative prescriptions of gender that still exist within our society, often concealed behind constructions of reform advocating gender equality.

Keywords: Female Breadwinner, South Africa, Gender Roles, Feminism, Psychology, Phenomenology.

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Introduction

The women of South Africa have consistently played an integral part in the development of the country's democratic social order as it stands today (Jaffee 1988). Mass organisation and mobilisation in the struggle for liberation during the apartheid era was advanced by organisations such as the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) in the 1950s. In recent times, women have demanded gender specific social reform regarding the emancipation of women (Puleng 2015). Building on the political and social actions of female activists and women's organisations that opposed the policies and positions of the ruling apartheid government, South Africa has made significant progress within a relatively short period of time regarding the development of a constitution that advocates gender equality in society (Frenkel 2008). Since the disbandment of apartheid, there have been numerous examples of actions that have resulted in the equal inclusion and involvement of women in South African society. To name a few, the country has instated the largest percentage of women in parliament in the world, experienced an increase in the number of women gaining access to education and, subsequently, a rise in the number of women entering the workplace (Ndinda & Okeke-Uzodike 2012). These achievements seem to support a feminist ideal of advancement in women's contributions and of gender equality in the new South Africa.

Having said this, the country also has some of the highest levels of rape and violence against women in the world – contradictory indicators that highlight possible gender disparities in the advancement of women in South African society (Mills *et al.* 2015). Transcending the scope of these policy changes in the inherent patriarchal structures that pervade their lives (Hassim 2005), South African women have managed to play an important role in public life and contribute as a part of the economically active population. In certain cases, women have also overcome the traditional notions of prescribed gender roles by becoming primary or sole breadwinners in their homes. When considering the reasons for women providing for their families as breadwinners, the scarcity of research literature pertaining to the personal perceptions and lived experiences of female breadwinners (FBW) in South Africa motivated this study's exploration of these lived experiences, specifically from the point of view of the women involved.

Methodology

Using a phenomenological feminist framework, the study took a purposive sampling approach to select ten FBW who had dependants to support. These women are all

aged between 20 and 50 years and as Table 1 shows, stem from a variety of ethnic, racial and socio-economic populations within South African rural and urban areas. Through the course of the primary and secondary in-depth, unstructured, interviews with participants, a contextual understanding was developed, revealing the culturally given and experientially acquired meanings that South African FBW ascribe to their experiences within their lived environments. Phenomenology’s qualitative orientation and flexibility allowed for a focus on both individual lived experiences, and collaboration with feminist perspectives. The resulting data, composed through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, presented an open perception of the phenomenon of breadwinning and the women whose perspectives shaped it, providing a platform where their explanations of “person” and “world” could be understood (Fine 2002). The exposition of the collected data provides individualised, multiple and varied perspectives on FBW. Furthermore, the atypical yet gendered and non-traditional roles of these FBW shed light on the social expectations placed on women in general within the predominately patriarchal society of South Africa.

Table 1: Participant Demographics										
Pseudonym:	Linda	Caroline	Sarah	Martha	Aaminah	Rose	Sunette	Ela	Ronel	Nombuso
Race:	White English	White English	White English	White English	Indian Hindi	African Zulu	White Afrikaans	African Sotho	White Afrikaans	African Xhosa
Marital status:	Divorced Co-habiting	Separated Co-habiting	Married	Divorced Single	Divorced Single	Divorced Single	Married	Single	Co-habiting	Single
Region:	Mpumalanga	Mpumalanga	Gauteng	Gauteng	Gauteng	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	Mpumalanga	Mpumalanga	Mpumalanga
Education level:	Matric	Tertiary	Tertiary	Tertiary	Matric	Matric	Tertiary	Matric	Tertiary	Matric
Employment sector:	Formal	Formal	Formal	Formal	Unemployed	Formal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
Dependants:	Two children	Two children	One child	Two children	Two children	Three children	One child	One child	Partner's child	One child

TABLE

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Demographic information for each participant of this study. Compiled by the author.

A brief overview

The global recognition of female breadwinners

The role of “breadwinner” is characterised as providing primary financial support in a household and was, in the past, considered a traditionally male role (Meisenbach 2009). A recent report on gender equality, released in 2012 by the World Bank (2011), reveals significant fluctuations in terms of the status of the male breadwinner role worldwide. This is in large part owing to economic pressures that foster the evolution of gender roles. The report, based on research conducted across all the continents, found that men have been required to adapt to new demands, new expectations and new roles, but have not been able to adapt as fast as women have in changing their views and ways, ‘[w]hile women are gaining power and freedom, men are resisting change’ (World Bank 2011:194). Steadfast adherence to traditional, heteronormative gender roles means that men access their identity mostly through these hegemonic narratives and that the empowerment of women is often seen as a threat to such traditionally masculine positions.

As a result of the decrease of male breadwinner homes, the recognition of FBW is on the rise – a phenomenon that has not escaped the South African society (World Bank 2011; Lambert & Webster 2010). The occurrence and causes of this potential reformation of traditional gender roles has been noted in many studies conducted worldwide, in both developed and developing countries (Grbich 1994; Buzzanell *et al.* 2007; Yodanis & Lauer 2007; Cunningham 2008). Amanda Diekmann and Wind Goodfriend’s (2006) study conducted in the United States (US) with 244 male and female participants found that increases in women’s equal access to education and employment since the mid-twentieth century has led to them undertaking traditionally male-dominated roles in the paid labour force. Within the South African context, this increase is unsurprising as ‘women in post-apartheid South Africa have better career opportunities than their mothers had in the apartheid era and they can pursue various careers’ (Carrim 2016:445). These changes have resulted in a situation where the household breadwinner role is shifting away from the traditional sole male breadwinner, and the numbers of women acting as the primary or sole earners in their families are increasing drastically (Meisenbach 2009).

The female breadwinner: Pragmatic choice or economic necessity?

Most of the research on FBW is informed by studies conducted in the US, Australia and Europe, where there is a significant focus on the effects of the declining male

breadwinner role on white, middle class men. In particular, these studies address issues such as the crisis of masculine identity and the challenges faced by men who have assumed the primary care-taking role (Pfau-Effinger 2004). Of those researchers who have focused their studies on the experiences of the female partners and thus engaged in non-traditional roles as the primary earners in their families, the majority tend to be of an economic nature - such as those conducted by Gcabo (2003) in South Africa; Burgoyne (2004) in the United Kingdom; and Meisenbach (2009) in the US. The few studies that include mainstream academic understandings of gender roles and their function/s within societies around the world are predominantly focused on white, married, middle class FBW from developed countries that constitute the population samples (see for example Brescoll & Uhlmann 2005; Diekmann & Goodfriend 2006). Of the scant studies that include a diverse sample of women, Sarah Winslow-Bowe's (2006) longitudinal study on FBW comprises the experiences of Black, Hispanic and Caucasian women in the US, while Patrice Buzzanell *et al.* (2007) consider the discourses of Asian, Hispanic, and African American women. On the topic of FBW generated earning, the research of Winslow-Bowe (2006) finds that African American women are more likely than White American women to earn more than their husbands for a period of five consecutive years. 'These results suggest that many women earn more than their husbands not because their earnings are high in an absolute sense, as is suggested in popular discourse, but because their husbands' earnings are low' (Winslow-Bowe 2006:838). Therefore, and contrary to popular images in western media that depict women who earn more than their husbands as high status, generally white and "career women", it would seem that some FBW positions are a result of economic vulnerability and marginalisation (Winslow-Bowe 2006). Research conducted by Rebecca Meisenbach in 2009 with 15 FBW from the Eastern and Midwestern US, and the 2011 study by Marianne Dunn *et al.* with 54 FBW from across the US, corroborate this, stating that most FBW households in the US were created owing to economic limitations and opportunities, rather than a desire for equity among partners.

The feminisation of poverty

Placed in the South African context where 'the vast majority of households remain poverty stricken' (Mosoetsa 2011:1), Statistics South Africa (2018) reports that the unemployment rate of the economically active population is a staggering 27.2 per cent. Of these homes, female-headed households comprise the majority. The 'Report on the Status of Women in the South African Economy' (2015:10) states that '[w]hile poverty has declined since the end of apartheid, females remain more likely to be poor than males. Additionally, poor females tend to live further below the poverty

line than their male counterparts, suggesting greater vulnerability'. These differences are more prominent in black female-headed households, where women dominate in the informal sector, part-time employment and domestic work – the most exploitative categories of work (Bower 2014). It is not surprising then to learn that Statistics South Africa states in their 'Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa' report in 2015 that women, on average, earn 23 percent less than men do. They estimate that men earn a median income of R3,500.00 per month, while women earn R2,700.00 per month (Stats SA 2015). This wage gap is particularly onerous for female-headed households that are, by their very nature, more likely to exist in lower-income households that are more vulnerable to extreme poverty. In these circumstances, economic independence for women often comes in the form of social grants offered by the government, such as the childcare grant, which subsidise their wages and elevate them to the position of primary breadwinner within the family (Mosoetsa 2011). The feminisation of poverty means that women, particularly in female-headed households, are generally much poorer than men, and that women are over-represented in low-skilled, low-paying jobs (Bhorat *et al.* 2009). The commonalities in these situations faced by FBW in South Africa and abroad, namely poverty and the responsibilities created by the economic importance of the role of breadwinner, are unambiguous (Posel & Muller 2008).

The gendered division of labour

Despite South African women's contributions to the country's economy, research evidences that for women, returns to education are lower, the gender-based wage gap endures, and occupational exclusion positioning them in gendered trades further exacerbate the existing inequalities (see for example Hall 2012; Stats SA 2013). Here, the undervaluation of the female labour force contributions go hand in hand with society's lack of recognition of unpaid work, which is seen as an inclination naturally arising in the female disposition and not requiring any skills. This unpaid work includes all non-remunerated work activities occurring in the household, with the average woman in South Africa devoting 180 minutes of her day to these tasks versus the 80 minutes men spend daily on these tasks (Geldenhuys 2011). This also includes unpaid care work, which is any activity devoted to those who cannot care for themselves, such as childcare, or care for the elderly and infirm (Antonopoulos 2009). In her research study conducted for the International Labour Office (ILO), Rania Antonopoulos (2009) presented similar findings, which revealed that disparities in the division of labour along gendered lines and between paid and unpaid work had persisted, with men spending more of their work time in remunerative employment and women performing the majority of unpaid work. This dominant influence of traditional gender norms challenges the existence of FBW, who are primary or sole

providers in their homes. It is also a pervasive and an ever-present reality of their daily experiences, meaning that although some women have been able to transcend traditional cultural barriers and rise to the challenges presented by primary breadwinners' positions, true gender role reversal is relatively rare (Bittman *et al.* 2003). It is for these reasons that the discussion to follow focuses on particular findings contained in this Master's research study's results, which are those concerning the agency and autonomy of South African FBW role choice, and their perceptions of heteronormative gender practices.

Results

Finding autonomy in the FBW role

Each dialogue began with the participant explaining what being a breadwinner meant to her personally. There were many similarities of meaning expressed by the group of FBW, such as the feeling of independence that the role of primary breadwinner brings, as well as a sense of security in being able to provide for yourself and your family. Nombuso, an attendant in a restaurant and a single mother of one, who also helps to support her mother and four siblings, expressed how important those experiences are to her,

[y]ou know, all these people, I mean like my brothers, when they need something, they can just come to me. They don't go out, looking for help from the outside, they know that they must come to me. It makes me feel special ...

Sunette, a general physician who is married to an auto-repairman, said that she was thankful for her role as it was her independent nature that was attractive to her husband in the first place. Furthermore, Sunette stated how much she enjoys spoiling her husband,

I think for him, if we didn't get married ... he would have been worse off ... Because I bought him his [car model], I bought him his motor bike ... so, all those things he never had as a child, um ... I could buy for him, so that makes me very happy.

Other women were grateful for the opportunity their role provided them in terms of being a better parent. Martha, a divorcee, mother of two and accountant, asserted her belief that her role as breadwinner had allowed her to grow as a person and parent, and that she had lived a fuller life as a result. As an unemployed creative writer, artist and single mom, Ela also expressed fulfilment in providing for herself and her child – the sense that she was doing 'something worthy with her life'.

The duality of the feeling of independence and control that the role of breadwinner affords was also discussed, with all ten of the women experiencing feelings of pressure and responsibility for others in their care. In some instances, as with Ela, these responsibilities imparted a notion of pride and strength of character, a feeling echoed by Rose, a divorced mother of two and executive administrative assistant,

[f]or me ... I would put the word tough ... raise the kids, being a mom alone, you need a lot of strength ... I wanted to take care of my kids, I wanted to give them a good education and so I wanted to work.

At the same time, the pressures and responsibilities of being the provider can be overwhelming. Nombuso said that at times she felt 'like running away', but that her religious faith kept her strong. Others have had to sacrifice their own aspirations, like Rose, who has had to put her studies on hold. At times, the boundaries of responsibilities associated with the role of primary breadwinner are extended, as in the case of Caroline, a small business owner and mother of two, who is separated from her husband. Caroline and her estranged husband have lived apart for a number of years, and subsequently chose to live with new partners, but Caroline still supports her husband financially, while also taking care of her own household. She explains her reasons for doing so,

I do, because my children go there. And although my children are grown up, I do feel a sense of responsibility towards what their home is like when they're with ... [her husband] ... so, um, and I get a lot of criticism for this, but it is the only way that I feel comfortable, knowing that my children are comfortable.

The pressure to lessen the financial difficulties that result from trying to support their families on one salary meant FBW had to increase the time spent on paid work, which, coupled with time spent on home and caregiver responsibilities, meant that they had to give up on opportunities for furthering their careers. Nombuso explained that she was unable to go for her driver's licence,

... I've got my learners [licence] already, its expiring in November – so I must fight to get that license. It's not easy, every time I plan of doing that, something comes up.

For Rose, these imbalanced demands on her capabilities meant that she had to give up on advancing her education,

[a]t this stage I don't know if I will be able to change careers, though I am studying, but I've chosen to put those studies on hold due to my finances and taking care of the kids.

This conscious expression of meaning that these women attach to their identities and experiences, while realising the non-traditional role of primary breadwinner, seem,

at first to endorse a sense of personal achievement and autonomy in their day-to-day lives. However, by focussing on further communication by the FBW with regards to their lived experiences, these meanings are revealed to be more complex, skewed by gendered roles, and at times contradictory.

Agency in the role adoption of South African FBW

During the review of the literature concerning FBW, it was revealed that contrary to the stereotypical FBW portrayed by the media, which are that of successful white female executives in top corporate positions, most FBW households evolve owing to economic limitations rather than gender equality. This finding was substantiated through the shared experiences of the participants interviewed for this study, where eight of the ten women apportioned their role as breadwinner owing to the necessity to take care of their family, either because they were single with no support from their children's fathers, or because their partner earned too little to sustain the family. In Martha's situation, it was a case of both,

I'm not saying that necessarily I was entirely the breadwinner, but I was certainly the better of the cash or finance managers in the relationship. Um, but that wasn't a choice and it wasn't a necessity, it was simply the way it was, at that time. And then when we got divorced it was a necessity, umm ... it's a case of needing to keep the show on the road and even when he was supporting, there were often times when for six months the money just didn't arrive ...

Some of the women felt that the increase of FBW was owing to the emancipation of women, but specifically, the enforced emancipation via Employment Equity policies in South Africa, where the government incentivises companies to employ previously disadvantaged groups, which are women in this case. Others like Aaminah, a divorced and unemployed mother of two, and Martha attributed the new opportunities and roles undertaken by women not to emancipation of their gender, but rather to the increased cost of living, our increased standard of living, and society's materialism in general. As Martha described,

[s]o, insomuch as women have had, um, have more choices, I think lifestyle changes and the way people live these days, necessitates that shift, more than women's [liberation] ... there seems to be a lot more pressure for the trappings of success ...

Only Sarah, a small business owner and mom of one, who was married to a stay-at-home dad, and Caroline, felt that they had been provided the choice to undertake their role as breadwinner, owing to their qualifications and support from their partners. Neither felt that they would have been happy as stay-at-home mothers, and had strived from an early age to build successful careers. Sarah expressed her gratitude for her husband's support in enabling her to advance in her career,

I've got such huge respect for single moms, I mean I think it's so hard for them to do what they do and most of them do it so well and dedicate so much of themselves ... I'm sure my life would have been different without [my husband] taking the role he did. I never really worried about anything at home ...

She also stated that she felt as though she was in a minority group of white women who could afford to choose their role as breadwinner,

I think a lot of women who are breadwinners are breadwinners out of necessity, whether they are single moms or divorcees or their husbands can't get jobs ... And I think a lot of women who are breadwinners aren't necessarily in senior positions or earning a lot of money ... I think it is really hard ... I think women who choose to be breadwinners are probably most often privileged ...

Sunette also noted how the experiences of FBW in South African society varied to her own, along the lines of race, with regards to her fellow FBW colleagues and their living arrangements,

I think it's much more difficult for them because most of them have two houses. They've got their houses in the townships, which is far away ... they have flats close by [the workplace] ... so then they don't see their family ...

The other women also recognised that the lived experiences of FBW differed to their own and attributed it to the race and class structure in South African society, with white middle class complacency making those women more submissive and traditional and therefore less likely to become breadwinners, whereas poorer women have no choice but to provide to survive. Ela explained:

Look, we are not talking about middle class here, we are talking about ... situations where you have people living below the average. So in those situations they are very [poor] ... the men ... they earn too little money and a lot of women are breadwinners even though they are married.

Eight of the ten women responded that their role of breadwinner was a result of the necessity to take care of their families. None of the women in this group believed that they had been provided the opportunity to choose the role of breadwinner, but had undertaken the responsibility owing to circumstances of necessity. This is of some concern, considering the over representation of South African women in informal work, and formal work mostly in social or service industries, indicating that the majority of women in the country are poorly paid owing to a lack of formal training and are engaging in forms of income earning that can accommodate their obligatory family and care-taking responsibilities (Geldenhuys 2011). It would then seem that similar

to the experiences of FBW overseas, the role of breadwinner that is undertaken by women in South Africa is as a result of economic necessity rather than the reversal of prescribed gender roles through the emancipation of women.

The lived experiences of FBW are gendered experiences

Often in culturally traditional societies such as South Africa, men and women are 'socialised into accepting a social hierarchy according to which males are in positions of power and authority as breadwinners and females are in subservient positions as homemakers' (Carrim 2016:446). This could be seen where the FBW's shared experiences unveiled how these women's identities remain gendered through their fulfilment of their family's needs and demands, or for those FBW who were married, their partner's identities. The systems of gender hierarchy operating in and through divisions of unpaid labour in the home could be seen in this study, as eight of the ten women were responsible for all tasks related to the home and care giving, even though three of these women had partners. Aaminah attributed this to cultural traditions,

[I]ike the boys, at home, you know it's still those orthodox ways. The boys at home mustn't pick up a cup and go leave it in the sink, the woman or the girl in the house must do it. And supper must be laid out for them and all these things ... and I feel it's mainly in the Indian culture.

Sarah commented on how, although she and her husband had made sense of their new roles and division of household labour, within the context of a FBW home, their neighbours could not,

[u]mm, well whenever we met people, like the neighbours for example, before they came and met us, to speak to us, I mean obviously word spreads about the new neighbours and new people etcetera and the way they viewed the situation is they thought that I worked and [my husband] was retired. So they couldn't really get their [laughs] head around the fact that [husband], that we chose, for me to go out and work and for [my husband] to look after [our son].

Unlike Aaminah and Sarah, Ronel, a clinical nurse manager of a hospital emergency ward, did not believe that the division of domestic labour was a symptom of gender equity issues,

I don't know – it's just – I think, also not everything has to do with the fact that I am the breadwinner. I think some things is just being female and male, because being male – him being the husband, he focuses more on his own needs, and I think that's also normal ...

She went on to explain that when gendered roles are not maintained, the outcomes can be detrimental,

[w]e see so many white male suicides because they don't feel any worth, they don't feel worth it anymore. So I think we need to realise that we have a very important psychological role in not taking their power away ... still trying to be the humble one, the supportive one ...

Linda, a divorced mother of two and construction equipment manager, was reluctant to use the term “breadwinner” while describing the non-traditional role she fulfilled, so much so that she seemed unable to even verbalise the term during the interview. She said that it was best that she kept her role as breadwinner quiet ‘[a]nd never brag or show it or let anybody else know, it's got to be kept very low key’. Similar to Ronel, she made every effort to make her partner feel as though he was playing the part of breadwinner to prevent tension in the home.

Nombuso, however, agreed with Aaminah, and felt that the gendered organisation of everyday household life, enforced by male partners, came at the cost of freedom of movement and career progression. For her the freedoms were numerous,

I'm very happy being single ... I need my time, my me time ... I will have to focus on him ... it's too much time ... you have to think of what he is going to eat tonight, you have to think what are you gonna use to like, get him, um, cleaned and to get him dressed ... it's not easy.

Overall, the majority of the FBW were uncomfortable with the evolution of gender roles seen in contemporary South African society. As stated by Ela,

[m]en are really supposed to be the sole providers. I always go back to that ... I think feminists would kill me ... [But] I really believe that somehow, in the kind patriarchal society, not kind! I really [believe] it works better!

It should be noted that of the four FBW who were in the minority and expressed belief that gender roles should have evolved, three were single, with two of them having been through a divorce. For Martha, her husband's acceptance of the traditional male gendered role, with regards to childcare, had led to a lack of involvement and support that had directly resulted in the breakdown of her marriage,

[m]y husband didn't really get involved with the children ... He was very hands off ... the less he became involved, the more I compensated, and the more I compensated, the more pushed out he felt and less interested, perhaps, he became.

However, if her dialogue is scrutinised further, it can be seen that Martha had internalised gendered beliefs regarding men, women and caregiving. Her prescription to the unyielding commitment of an intensive parenting style, so sanctioned by society, disproportionately disadvantaged her and other FBW ‘because widely shared cultural beliefs about gender (often implicitly) prescribe caregiving as a woman's responsibility,

regardless of her income or career status' (Pedullaa & Thébaudb 2015:118). Martha's devoted acceptance of her role as mother, while apportioning the blame of her husband's lack of interest in raising their children to herself, is indicative of the idea that women need to bear the burdens of others without complaint, in the ultimate service of family (Carrim 2016). That said, each of these FBW, Sarah, Martha, Caroline and Rose, expressed a desire to teach their children, especially their sons, to do chores around the home and be independent, so that one day their sons could be men who were capable of taking care of themselves, and for their daughters to become successful and self-sufficient women.

Understandings and conclusions

The experiences of the FBW interviewed were multifarious and therefore representing the diversity of opinions, identities and intellectual constructions of the women involved was challenging. Researchers often grapple with this when reporting on phenomenological research, as its focus on representing individual voices and experiences means it is not often generalisable; 'how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others' (Patton 2002:104). However, certain core themes did emerge from the shared stories that clearly demonstrate the dominant influence of traditional gender roles imposed by society on a group of women who were either cognisant of said influence challenging aspects of their lives, or were otherwise not. All of the women inferred positive emotions to the perception of being independent and having control afforded by the role of FBW. They did, however, differ in relation to where these positive emotional constructions were encountered in their lives. Half of the women explained that their experience of independence and control in their lives had stemmed from within themselves, derived from favourable feelings of self-fulfilment, pride, personal achievement and growth, which they attached to their role as breadwinner. It is interesting to note that most of these women did not believe that they had chosen to adopt the role of breadwinner, but had had it thrust upon them owing to circumstances beyond their control. Despite this, they still attributed their lived experiences of being FBW to personal cognitive states. These women internalised their experiences as a breadwinner, finding a form of personal autonomy despite their lack of agency in becoming an FBW. For them, it is a state of personal being, a self or identity formed, that extends beyond the necessity of taking care of their loved ones. All of these five women were single, making up the majority of the eight single FBW interviewed, and explained that this relationship status was one of their own choosing, citing romantic relationships as a threat to their ability to be sole or primary

breadwinners for their dependants. It would seem that the limitations of traditional role boundaries and the slow acceptance of changes in society with regards to the evolution of gender roles have had far reaching effects on the relationships between men and women.

For the remaining five of the FBW, their sense of independence and control was a result of experiences relational to those around them. None of the women in this group believed that they had been allowed the opportunity to choose the role of breadwinner, but had undertaken the responsibility owing to circumstances of necessity and felt that the role had improved their lives. This group of women, however, believed in traditional gender roles as an organising principle within their behaviour and responsibilities as an FBW. They sanguinely noted how the breadwinning role meant that they could provide financial security for their families, safety from violence for their children, and support in general for their dependants. Yet, these women did not view the challenges they faced as societal restrictions placed on their non-traditional role within gendered spaces, confining them to the places deemed respectable by femininity. Their idea of external localisation of personal experiences attributed to the breadwinning role differs significantly from the internalised experiences of the aforementioned FBW.

The progressive and complex undertakings involved in the role espoused by FBW revealed a lack of balance in everyday life that challenged their relationships with others, both at home and in the workplace. During their dialogues, it became apparent that all the women faced challenges as a result of their role, the most common of which was attempts to strike a balance between the duality of their homemaker and provider responsibilities presented to them by their position. Whether or not the women agreed to the allocation of responsibilities in the home, they all experienced these stresses, coupled with the demands made of them in their work environment. The resulting exhaustion and tensions often led to neglect of interpersonal relationships, with the most likely casualty being the intimate relationship with their significant others. These tensions arose as a result of the FBW's partners' feeling that their position and contributions were denigrated, and the FBW's perception that their partners did not perform enough tasks of value in the home environment. Additional research that delves into the division of unpaid labour prescribed by traditional gender roles, and the acceptability thereof by the members of a household, could do much to advance our understanding of the psychology of gender in the settings of South African homes.

In the course of interviews and analysis, the realities faced by FBW revealed experiences, individual and communal, shared and unique, that expose archaic

divisions and discriminations of gender within our society that have been hiding behind constructions of reform advocating equality among the sexes. In actuality, the emancipation and empowerment of these women has proffered many opportunities and progressions that are incongruent with the outdated conventions and policies still practised in various areas of society today. These discrete forms of discrimination masquerade as socially constructed values that are accepted by women with the belief that they emphasise an egalitarian ideal. These hegemonic practises, revealed via the erudite discourse of the FBW's lived identities, manipulates these women into believing that the challenges that they experience are consequential self-sacrifices necessitated by their role, rather than resulting penalties of obsolescent systems used today that are based on previous prejudiced and repressive heteronormative gender prescriptions. The FBW's dialogues reveal distinctly unequal power dynamics between men and women within South African social systems, a dynamic that is legitimised on an interpersonal level by assigned gender roles, which continue to be internalised and played out by these "non-traditional" women.

The central role that FBW play within their households has not shifted the balance of power in relation to the traditional, patriarchal home model that is the dominant domestic setting, which often results in the dissolution of the FBW's relationships and their wariness of forming new unions – a telling sign that reveals that true gender role reversal is rare. Explorations of masculine values and norms as the overriding practise in homes that are experiencing counter shifts in economic benefactor dynamics may provide unique explanations of the large number of single parent households headed by women in South Africa, whose existence, despite their increasing presence, are still kept marginalised by larger societal forces (Kiamba 2008). The same could be said for other alternative family arrangements, as even less is known of the division of household labour along gendered lines in the homes of gay or lesbian families.

The understanding of the global issues faced by FBW, in South Africa and abroad, can be achieved by analysing intimate experiences, and in the process expose the fallacy that these issues are a result of individual inadequacies. Hopefully this generated knowledge of the unheard can bring about revised comprehension of ourselves and our communities and generate new opinions that recognise both male and female breadwinners, their differences and contributions. The consideration and analysis of the experiences of the women involved in this study should be seen as a crucial engine for an increased understanding of women in South Africa in general, and to note that what needs to be done in order to bring about social change and gender equality is not only to pass legislation, but through education, inculcate change in people's attitudes, mind-sets and values, and encourage true gender equality within our society for all.

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