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Who Cares? Gender Differences in Social Reproduction and Well-Being in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines women's responsibility for social reproduction in South Africa. Drawing from a range of studies that analyze quantitative data, it considers how distinctive characteristics of South Africa's socio-economic landscape shape the nature of this responsibility. These characteristics include rates of paternal coresidence and marriage that are amongst the lowest in the world, unemployment and inequality rates that are amongst the highest, and continuing patterns of individual labor migration with race remaining a significant socio-economic stratifier. Given these features, women are not only most often the providers of caring labor in the household they are often also the financial providers. Women are responsible for social reproduction even when they are not wives or mothers, and this responsibility limits their access and returns to paid work. Gender asymmetries in who carries the economic costs of social reproduction are highlighted by evidence of both a motherhood earnings penalty and a male marital earnings premium in the South African labor market. In addition to economic measures, the paper reviews research on the noneconomic costs of social reproduction including life satisfaction and depression, and it highlights the importance of recognizing intersectionality in the well-being of women.

1 | Introduction

Social reproduction, or the social provisioning for human life (Benería, Berik, and Floro 2016; Bakker 2007), is a feature of every private household. This labor includes care of children, the elderly, and the infirm as well as all the activities of housework, and it is integral to the functioning of the monetized economy. Housework and caring labor are also everywhere provided most often by women, even as societies adopt more progressive gender norms and gender laws, as gender gaps in educational attainment narrow, and as more women enter the labor market (Barker, Beregon, and Feiner 2021). However, as the early feminist economists emphasized, reproductive labor historically has been invisible in "mainstream" economic analysis. Rather, the responsibility for this labor and who carries the costs have been relegated to the realm of the "private" and the "personal" (Waring 1988; Elson 1993; Folbre 1994).

This paper explores social reproduction in postapartheid South Africa, drawing from a range of (mostly quantitative) studies that have been conducted on the gender division of labor since the democratic transition in 1994. The objectives are three-fold. The first is to review the different ways in which studies document women's responsibility for social reproduction. The second is to highlight the specific features of social reproduction in the South Africa context, and to reflect on how these affect the nature and costs of reproductive labor. Specific features include rates of child–parent coresidence (specifically paternal coresidence) and marriage that are amongst the lowest in the world; unemployment and inequality rates that are amongst the highest globally; continuing patterns of individual labor

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migration that separate parents and children; and complex households that often have fluid household boundaries. The third objective is to review whether policy initiatives in the postapartheid period have recognized both the value and importance of unpaid work in the home, and women's responsibility for this work.

In the next section, I briefly outline the conceptual framework that informs this overview of social reproduction in South Africa as well as the empirical data that have been used in quantitative studies to document and analyze the gender division of labor. In Section 3, I show how these data describe the gendered nature of reproductive labor, and Section 4 details the distinctive characteristics of the South African context that influence the shape and character of the care economy. Section 5 then considers how these specific features affect the costs of social reproduction, and who carries these costs. In conclusion, I reflect on some of the interventions that have been introduced in recent decades, and whether these contribute to a more equitable sharing of the costs (and benefits) of social reproduction.

2 | Conceptual Framework and Data

The framing of this paper reflects the approach of a pluralistic feminist economics that emphasizes social reproduction and reproductive labor as a "determining factor in women's lives" (Benería and Sen 2021, 26), and as central to an analysis of gender inequality (Berik and Kongar 2021). The approach goes beyond measuring outcomes only in terms of material goods or income and considers human well-being more generally (including life satisfaction or happiness, and time poverty) (Berik and Kongar 2021). It also recognizes differences among women (and men) and the importance of an intersectional understanding (Crenshaw 1989) to explain the nature of female disadvantage and "intracategorical complexity" (McCall 2005). This is particularly apposite in the South African context which has a long history of racial oppression and exclusion but where apartheid restrictions also intersected with patriarchal systems of control to disadvantage women of color more than men (Walker 1990).

The recognition of reproductive labor has informed the feminist critique of how mainstream economics conceptualizes work (Benería and Sen 2021). It has also highlighted the importance of collecting quantitative data that can measure and value social reproduction as well as detail women's responsibility for this labor and the implications of this responsibility for gender differences in well-being (Folbre 1994, 2021; Barker, Beregon, and Feiner 2021). Many of the studies which are cited in this paper draw from an array of nationally representative household surveys that have been undertaken regularly in South Africa since the transition to democracy in the mid-1990s, and typically by the official statistical agency in South Africa (Statistics South Africa).

The national household surveys collect detailed information on individuals and the households in which they live. The data from these surveys are all publicly available,[1] and they provide the primary microdata that are used in the calculation of official poverty, inequality, and labor market statistics. They are also a key source of quantitative data used in academic and policy research over the last 3 decades on South African households, labor markets, health status, and living conditions, and how these vary by gender and the intersection of gender with other social identifiers.

Before the postapartheid transition, social science research in South Africa was mostly very critical of the use of quantitative data. This is partly because the empirical data available during the apartheid era were not seen as credible or representative of the population (Standing, Sender, and Weeks 1996; Wilson and Horner 1996; Christopher 2011; Posel 2017); and partly because of the influence of Marxist scholarship at the time, which largely rejected the need for quantitative data in its analysis of capitalism in the South African context (Seekings 2001). However, with a dramatic increase in the availability and quality of quantitative data (and particularly household survey data), and a decline in the influence of Marxism, the past 30 years have witnessed a "microdata revolution" in research (Posel 2017), including on the gendered nature and consequences of paid and unpaid work.

In addition to many national household surveys, South Africa is also among only a handful of countries in Africa to have conducted Time Use Surveys. These surveys collect detailed information on how people allocate their time both inside and outside the home over a 24-h cycle, and they have also been integral to feminist scholarship, in South Africa and globally, which has documented gender differences in the allocation of labor within households.

3 | Women's Primary Responsibility for Social Reproduction in South Africa

There is considerable evidence from the national microdata that women in South Africa are the primary providers of reproductive labor. First, household surveys typically collect information on the activities of adults, and almost all adults (approximately 98%), who report not being in paid employment because they are full-time homemakers, are women (Posel and Bruce-Brand 2021). In recent decades, more women have entered the paid labor force and the share of women who are full-time homemakers in South Africa has fallen, from an estimated 16% in 1995 to below 7% in the last 5 years (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021). However, even when women participate in paid employment, they still retain primary responsibility for household and caring labor.

This is revealed in time use data that show that the most common activity among women (after time spent on sleeping, eating and personal hygiene) is "household maintenance" (which includes household shopping and housework). According to the most recent Time Use Survey, conducted in 2010, women (15–65 years) in South Africa spent an average of 256 min a day on household maintenance and caring labor, compared to 102 min spent by men (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021). Even when women had paid work, they still

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spent more than twice as much time on household maintenance and caring labor as did men on average, and consequently, they spent significantly less time on leisure (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021; see also Budlender, Ntebaleng, and Yandiswa 2001; Charmes 2006; Rubiano-Matulevich and Mariana 2019). The time use data reveal further that women's responsibility for household maintenance and caring labor persists beyond retirement age. In other words, even when men are retired from paid work, elderly women still spend far more time on social reproduction than do elderly men (Grapsa and Posel 2016).

A third piece of evidence comes from the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), a national household survey which is distinctive because it collects information on who provides primary care to each child in the household[2] as well as who is responsible for paying for the child's educational expenses.[3] The NIDS data show that over 90% of children in South Africa in 2008 received their primary physical care from women, with the percentage even higher among very young children (aged 0–3). Women in South Africa are not only the primary care providers to children. For many children, women are responsible for their financial support (Hatch and Posel 2018).

These aggregate patterns of care, however, conceal significant variation among children, where race remains an important source of difference in the postapartheid period. Similar to all household surveys in the country, as well as the population census, NIDS asks respondents to self-report their race. Almost all respondents self-identify as one of four race groups: Black African (henceforth African), the majority population, accounting for more than 80% of the total population; “Colored” (of mixed race) (a population share below 10%); “Indian” (of Asian descent) (below 5%); and White (below 10%). Disaggregating childcare by race shows that although only a minority of all children receive primary physical care from their father, the share is substantially lower among African children compared to other children (Hatch and Posel 2018). In 2008, for example, only 5% of African children aged 4–6 years were reported to have received their primary physical care from men, in contrast to almost 14% of other children in the same age cohort.

Differences in who pays for children's educational expenses are even starker. In 2008, the costs of education for most African children were reported to have been paid by women (72%), whereas this was the case for only approximately half of other children, whose educational expenses were also far more likely to have been carried by more than one person (Hatch and Posel 2018). This variation in the provision of childcare which is explored further in the next section, highlights the importance of intersectional analysis that recognizes within-group differences and that some women are disadvantaged far more than others.

The most recent evidence of women's responsibility for social reproduction comes from the effects of the COVID crisis during 2020. In the initial phases of the government's response to the crisis, a series of “lockdowns” were implemented, resulting in the closure of schools and childcare centers, and the suspension of the employment of paid domestic workers and childminders. The implication was a dramatic increase in the amount of time spent on childcare in the home. Although national microdata collected during the first year of the crisis[4] describe an increase for both women and men who were coresident with children, the rise was considerably larger for women, even when women retained paid employment (Casale and Posel 2021; Casale and Shepherd 2022).

4 | Social Reproduction in South Africa: Some Distinguishing Characteristics

The gendered nature of social reproduction in South Africa is not unique. Several changes have been wrought particularly in countries in the Global North, which have seen more men participate in social reproduction, and which have encouraged the active engagement of fathers in childcare (Lamb 2013). Nonetheless, global patterns still show that women remain the primary providers of household labor including the care of children, the elderly, and those who are ill; and this responsibility typically persists even when women enter the labor market, and beyond retirement age (Rubiano-Matulevich and Mariana 2019; Gomis et al. 2023).

However, there are also several distinguishing characteristics of South African society that differentiate the nature of social reproduction and the costs of this labor. These characteristics partly reflect the legacy of apartheid, a system which restricted where people could live and work based on their race, and which reinforced a socio-economic inequality that was strongly racialized (Branson et al. 2024). They also derive from the intersection of socio-cultural differences and the limited economic opportunities that have accompanied the democratic transition. In postapartheid South Africa, Africans remain overrepresented among the economically marginalized, notwithstanding the growing share of the middle class that is African (Branson et al. 2024).

The first distinguishing characteristic concerns the living arrangements of children. Globally, there have been clear changes in family formation but children are still most likely to live in a household with two parents (Child Trends 2015). This is not the case in South Africa: most children do not live with both their biological parents (Posel and Devey 2006; Posel and Hall 2021). In fact, a recent study of family formation in 77 countries found that South Africa ranked lowest in parent–child coresidence rates, among all the countries surveyed (Child Trends 2015). Over the last decade, a greater share of children in South Africa now lives in a household with only their mother (over 40%) than the share who lives in a household with both their parents (about one third) (Posel and Hall 2021).

These aggregate patterns and trends are driven by the living arrangements of African children. In 2002, for example, 34% of African children lived in a household with both their parents, whereas 42% lived with only their mother, and 21% lived with neither parent. By 2018, the share living with both parents had fallen further to 29%, the share living with only their mother had increased to 46%, whereas 22% of African children lived with neither parent. In contrast, over three quarters of Indian and White children were living with both their parents over the

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same period and less than a fifth lived with only their mother (Posel and Hall 2021). It is therefore not surprising as detailed in the previous section, that African children are considerably less likely than other children to receive primary care from their father.

Some part of parental, and particularly paternal, absence from the households of African children is accounted for by high rates of mortality particularly in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Child orphaning rates reached their peak in the late 2000s, and children were more likely to lose their father than their mother (Hall 2017). In addition, when children lost their father, they were most likely to live with their mother but the reverse was not the case: maternal orphans did not typically live with their father (Hall 2017). Rather, in the absence of their mother, children would most often receive care from other women in the household, and particularly their grandmother or aunt (Schatz and Ogunmefun 2007; Hatch and Posel 2018).

However, in most cases, parents who are not part of a child's household are still alive; they are just not living with their children (Posel and Devey 2006). Historically, an important reason for the absence of particularly fathers concerned the migrant labor system. Having consigned Africans to rural areas or the so-called "homelands, where there were few employment opportunities, the migrant labor system was a way of securing a cheap supply of African labor for the mining industry, and later for manufacturing (Platzky and Walker 1985). During the apartheid era, influx control regulation prevented Africans migrants from settling at their destination where they were employed, typically in urban areas, and they were also prevented from migrating with their families. Labor migration therefore was associated with patterns of circular solo migration. Most labor migrants historically were men, who would migrate from rural areas but given apartheid restrictions, they continued to see the rural household as their permanent home. The migrant labor system therefore resulted in many children growing up without their father for much of the year, and it was associated with the "destruction of family life" (Budlender and Lund 2011, 926).

In the postapartheid period, restrictions on where Africans can settle, and with whom, have been lifted. Family migration is possible, and growing shares of Africans are settling in urban areas. In more recent years, patterns of individual labor migration have declined but they have not disappeared: adults continue to migrate from rural areas to urban or surrounding areas for employment reasons and some continue to leave their families behind (Posel and Casale 2003; Camlin, Snow, and Hosegood 2014; Posel 2020). This is because even though there are no formal legal restrictions on where people can live and with whom people's choices remain restricted by insecurity in the labor market and by limited access to affordable family housing in destination areas (Posel 2020). Although historically most individual labor migrants in South Africa were men, who left wives, or prospective wives, and children behind, in recent decades, more women have been migrating, leaving children in the care of other female relatives (typically the woman's mother or sister) (Posel and Casale 2003; Collinson, Tollman, and Kahn 2007; Hall and Posel 2019).

The persistence of individual labor migration is therefore another reason explaining why children grow up in households without their parents. But the most important explanation for the absence of particularly fathers from the households of children in contemporary South Africa likely concerns trends in union formation. Marriage rates have been falling in South Africa since at least the 1960s, and they have continued to fall in the postapartheid period (Hunter 2010; Posel and Rudwick 2014). Marriage rates in South Africa are now amongst the lowest in the world (Child Trends 2015) and falling marriage rates have not been offset by rising cohabitation rates (Posel and Rudwick 2013). However, marriages rates are very low specifically among African women and men who are now more likely to be not married than to be married (Posel and Hall 2021).

The very large variation in union formation by race is illustrated by comparing African and White women who are older than 50 (thereby controlling for possible differences in the age at which marriage occurs). In 2003, 13% of African women older than 50 had never been married (not currently married, separated or divorced, or widowed) and were not cohabiting with a partner, compared to only 3% of White women (Posel and Casale 2013). An examination of recent data captured in the 2021 General Household Survey indicates that these differences in union rates have widened even further over the last 2 decades. In 2021, 23% of older African women, and 2% of older White women, had never married and were not cohabiting with a partner.[5]

As rates of union formation have declined, marriage has been increasingly separated from having children (Posel and Rudwick 2013). Consequently, despite large differences in marriage rates, similar shares of African and White women are mothers. Household survey data from 2008, for example, show that 83% of African women aged 20 to 50 were mothers, compared to 80% of White women in the same age cohort (Posel and Rudwick 2013). The implication of low marriage rates, however, is that in the absence of a union between parents, children almost always live with their mother and not their father. Consequently, African children are far more likely to coreside with their mother than their father, and this helps to explain the high share of African children who are cared for not only physically but also financially by their mothers.

This is not to suggest that there are not fathers who actively participate in the lives of their children. Qualitative research highlights how nonresident fathers contribute to the care of their children in ways that quantitative surveys may not capture, and how fathers would like to be more involved, particularly in situations where they are not married to the mother of their child (see e.g., Montgomery et al. 2006; Madhavan, Townsend, and Garey 2008; Clark, Cotton, and Marteleto 2015). But the overall national picture points to children living with and receiving physical and financial care far more often from women, and typically the child's mother, a view which is also captured in many case studies (see e.g., Moore 2013; Jaga et al. 2018).

With low rates of union formation, persistent labor migration and relatively high mortality rates, households in South Africa are often complex and sometimes fluid entities. Most

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households do not include a coresident couple, and households with adults of only one gender are now even more common than households that contain a coresident heterosexual couple. In 2021, for example, over 40% of households included adults who were either only women or only men, whereas less than 40% included a coresident heterosexual couple (Posel, Hall, and Goagoses 2023).

In addition, with very high rates of unemployment and poverty in South Africa, household formation is often an important livelihood strategy: who people live with helps them to survive and subsist. For example, adults who are unemployed have been found to join households of kin who are employed or who receive social grants (Klasen and Woolard 2009); or people live together and share meager resources to realize economies of scale in household consumption (Posel and Casale 2021). The implication for the nature of social reproduction is that women who provide this labor are often not married: in the South African context of complex households, almost all "housewives" are women but a sizable share are not wives. A gender division of labor therefore persists in households even in the absence of marriage or cohabitation.

However, given considerable racial variation in household formation and access to economic resources, the overall gender division of labor conceals large differences among women. South Africa has been identified recently as the country with the highest rate of inequality among the 164 countries tracked by the World Bank (World Bank 2022, 1). Much of this inequality is driven by inequality in the labor market—in access to employment and in type of employment (Leibbrandt et al. 2010). Historically for many women in South Africa, and particularly women of color, their employment options were severely restricted, and a main source of paid employment was as paid domestic workers (or maids) in households (Cock 1980; Gaitskell et al. 1983). In the early 2000s, for example, approximately one million women were employed as maids, the overwhelming majority of whom were African (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021). This translated into one in four employed African women working as a domestic worker during this period.

The corollary to the wide-scale employment of maids in more affluent households is that this has reduced the extent of unpaid social reproduction in these households, thereby freeing women to enter the labor market (Cock 1980). At the same time, domestic workers are very likely performing the labor of social reproduction not only in their employer's household but also in their own household. Although women's responsibility for care work therefore affects all women, it affects some groups of women more than others.

Nonetheless, not all social reproduction can be, or is, "outsourced" or purchased through the market. For example, the national microdata collected in NIDS indicate that in almost all cases, women in South Africa remain the primary care providers to children, even when a maid is employed in the household (Hatch and Posel 2018). As feminist economists have pointed out, social reproduction fulfills the third-person criterion of work, proposed by Reid (1934), in that a third person could be paid to undertake much of this labor. However, the emotional aspects of (or the motives behind) caring labor cannot be directly contracted for, making it difficult to substitute purchased commodities and services for all types of social reproduction (Ironmonger 1996; Folbre 2001).

5 | What Are the Costs of Women's Responsibility for Social Reproduction?

Mainstream economists typically assume that paid employment is associated with the disutility of effort (Spencer 2003) but psychologists have long recognized that working for pay fulfills several roles in addition to providing a source of income. For example, employment also provides a structure of time, contact with others, a collective purpose, an activity, and a measure of status (Jahoda 1982). In contrast to paid work, and as feminists in the 1960s and 1970s argued, unpaid reproductive labor is often routine work that can be unremitting, and being a full-time homemaker offers no opportunities for career progression. Friedan (1963), for example, described how women's lack of identity and status, beyond that of wives and mothers, contributed to the widespread unhappiness and dissatisfaction of (White middle-class) women in the US at the time. Contrary to what women were expected to feel, specializing in household labor and the care of children did not lead to a life of "domestic bliss" for many women, but rather to "the problem with no name" (Friedan 1963).

Although the share of women who are full-time homemakers has declined considerably in South Africa (mirroring trends more globally) (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021), an analysis of recent national microdata suggests that a negative association between life satisfaction and full-time homemaking persists. Among African women in South Africa (aged 15 to 49 in 2008), those who were full-time homemakers reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than women who were employed or studying (Posel and Bruce-Brand 2021). However, in the context of very high rates of unemployment, full-time homemakers reported significantly greater levels of life satisfaction than women who were unemployed or without any activity at all. This means that being a homemaker is not as fulfilling as having paid employment, and particularly regular (as opposed to casual) employment, but it is more satisfying than doing nothing, or wanting paid work and not finding it. The relationship between homemaking and happiness in South Africa is further moderated by marriage: with very low marriage rates, married women who were full-time homemakers reported significantly more life satisfaction, on average, than full-time homemakers who were not married (Posel and Bruce-Brand 2021).

However, even when women do not specialize in household labor, their care responsibilities are still correlated with their subjective well-being. For example, among married or cohabiting couples in South Africa, women who live with children reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than other women, whereas no relationship was found between living with children and men's life satisfaction (Posel and Casale 2015). Similarly, marriage and employment are associated with a far higher vulnerability to depression among women than among men (Posel and Oyenubi 2023), findings which point to the

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contribution of "role strain" to gender differences in depression symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema 2009). The struggle to "balance" work and family is not unique to South Africa: it is attested globally in a recent (2016) Gallup World Poll of 142 countries, where this was identified as one of the "toughest challenges," if not the toughest, experienced by women in paid employment across all the countries surveyed (ILO 2017, 39).

Women's responsibility for social reproduction also influences the type and nature of employment that they access. To combine both paid work and unpaid care work, for example, women may take on part-time employment, leading to their over-representation among the part-time employed, while some women may exit the labor market altogether during child-bearing episodes. In South Africa, women are twice as likely as men to work part-time (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021), and longitudinal microdata describe considerable movement into and out of full-time homemaking over time (Posel and Bruce-Brand 2021). Jobs that are "extensions" of women's care work in the household—such as paid domestic work and nursing—are also highly feminized but typically not highly valued in the monetized economy (Budlender 2019). This gender-typing of work, together with working part-time or reduced job tenure because of labor market discontinuity, contributes to the globally documented gender gap in earnings.

In recent decades, women's educational attainment in South Africa has increased considerably, and now exceeds that of men's on average (Spaull and Makaluza 2019). But average earnings among men remain significantly higher than among women, although the ratio of average monthly earnings for women and men has increased from an estimated 0.62 in 1994 to 0.73 in 2017 (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021). The increase has been driven particularly by changes in earnings at the bottom of the earnings distribution, and likely reflects the effects of minimum wage legislation for low-wage workers among whom women predominate (in paid domestic work and as contract cleaners) (Mosomi 2019). Nonetheless, the gender gap in earnings remains persistent at more than 20%. Among women and men with comparable observable characteristics (including age and education), women who are married, who live with children, and who live in larger households are found to be among those who experience the largest gender difference in earnings (Posel et al. 2024). The likely explanation is that women with these characteristics spend more time on social reproduction which undermines their earnings potential.

Feminist economists describe the earnings implications for women of childcare responsibilities as the "motherhood earnings penalty" (Waldfogel 1997, 1998). This is the widespread finding that women who are mothers earn significantly less than women who are nonmothers. The penalty derives partly from the need for women to combine childcare responsibilities with paid work but it also reflects employers' choices about employing women whose labor market commitment is assumed to be tenuous. Aguero, Marks, and Raykar (2020) find evidence of a sizable earnings penalty for women living with children, and particularly young children across 21 developing countries including South Africa (see also Magadla, Leibbrandt, and Mlatsheni 2019).[6]

In contrast to a motherhood earnings penalty, labor economists have identified a "marital earnings premium" for employed men. This is the well-documented finding that men who are married earn significantly more than men who are similar across a range of observable characteristics, except that they are not married (e.g., Nakosteen and Zimmer 1987; Korenman and Neumark 1991; Stratton 2002). In South Africa, analysis of national microdata from 2001 to 2004 estimated a sizable marital earnings premium particularly to African men of almost 25% (Casale and Posel 2010).

There are two main hypotheses for this premium. The first concerns the effects of selection, where higher earning men are more likely to marry (or be selected into marriage) than men with lower earnings (Nakosteen and Zimmer 1987). This is especially relevant in the South African context, where higher-earning African men can better afford the costs of marriage including bridewealth payments that are often a socio-cultural requirement for marriage (Posel and Rudwick 2014; Yarbrough 2018). These payments are made to the family of the prospective bride, and because they are typically substantial, higher-earning African men are more able to marry than men with lower earnings (Casale and Posel 2010). Statistical methods that control for these selection effects substantially reduce the size of the estimated male marital earnings premium in the South African analysis; but they do not eliminate it (Casale and Posel 2010).

The second hypothesis, which would explain the persistence of the male marital earnings premium after selection, refers to the causal effects of marriage on men's productivity: married men's higher earnings partly derive from the gains to a specialization of labor in the household (Korenman and Neumark 1991). By women assuming responsibility for social reproduction, married men have more opportunities, and incentives, to acquire human capital in market activities, for example, thereby increasing their earnings potential (Stratton 2002; Ahituv and Lerman 2007).

The juxtaposition of the "motherhood earnings penalty" with the "male marital earnings premium" highlights the gender asymmetry in who carries the economic costs of social reproduction. Where women and men are married or in stable unions, then men may share the economic gains to specialization, although there are no formal mechanisms that compel them to do so. However, women experience a motherhood penalty also in the absence of marriage.

In South Africa, where women are more likely to be not married than married, women not only earn less than men; they are also often the primary income providers or breadwinners in their household. As children are far more likely to live with their mother than their father, gender differences in the labor market, together with low rates of union formation, are key to understanding why women and children are considerably more likely than men to live in poverty (Posel and Rogan 2012; Posel, Hall, and Goagoses 2023), and they underpin the intergenerational transfer of poverty in South Africa, from mothers to children.

Among women, African women remain the most economically disadvantaged: they are far less likely to be married, although

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they are just as likely to have children; they face higher rates of unemployment; they are more concentrated in low-paying jobs such as paid domestic work or contract cleaning; and on average, they receive lower earnings (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021). African women are therefore far more likely than other women to live in poor households and national poverty statistics show that the gender gap in poverty rates and in economic status more generally, is highest for African women, who are also the most likely to be primary financial providers to children (Posel and Hall 2021).

6 | Concluding Comments: What Has Been Done to Share the Costs of Social Reproduction?

In her influential text, Waring (1988, 4) argued that "the system cannot respond to values it refuses to recognize". For feminist economists, an integral part of recognizing the importance and costs of social reproduction has been to make this labor statistically visible. In this regard, South Africa has made significant progress. The collection of national microdata through household and time use surveys since 1993 has made it possible to measure both the extent of social reproduction and the gender divisions in this work. In turn, these measures have been used to estimate the monetary value of this labor, or what this work would contribute to gross domestic product (GDP) were it to be monetized.

Measuring the value of unpaid work is part of what is known globally among feminist economists as the accounting project (Benería, Berik, and Floro 2016). Unpaid work is typically priced by valuing the labor time spent on this work; or by valuing the goods and services produced by this labor (such as clean clothes and cooked meals) (Ironmonger 1996; Benería, Berik, and Floro 2016). Depending on the method used, the estimated value of unpaid work globally ranges from 10% to 80% of GDP (Budlender 2010; Benería, Berik, and Floro 2016), and in South Africa specifically, from 10% to 55% of GDP (Budlender and Brathaug 2002; Budlender 2010).

The accounting project is intended to inform the design of more effective policies that recognize and support the work of social reproduction (Esquivel 2011). In this regard, South Africa has been less successful. In recent decades, the government has made numerous formal commitments to reducing gender inequality, for example, as a signatory to various regional and international gender protocols, including the Beijing Platform of Action to advance the goal of gender equality; the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

The government has also promulgated a range of protective labor and equal opportunity legislation early in the postapartheid period, primarily to address race but also gender, inequality. This includes the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997) and the Employment Equity Act (1998). More recently, minimum wage legislation was introduced, which has afforded some protection to low-wage employment in which women predominate (specifically as contract cleaners and domestic workers), and which has contributed to reducing the gender wage gap at the bottom tail of the earnings distribution (Casale, Posel, and Mosomi 2021).

In some respects, then, South Africa "has made great strides toward addressing gender inequality" (Bosch and Barit 2020, 5). However, most legislative changes and political commitments do not directly address gender asymmetries in social reproduction, both in terms of the value or importance of this labor, and in terms of the cost, which is privately borne, and almost always by women (Hassim 2021). A potentially very significant exception is the 2024 judgment by the High Court of South Africa, that parents with wage employment are entitled to four months of parental leave (whether for a biological or adopted child) which can be apportioned between both parents if they are part of a couple. However, this ruling still requires confirmation by the Constitutional Court before it can be enacted.

The social grant program is also a policy intervention that has offered some support to caregivers. The program was reformed and expanded after the democratic transition, extending the reach to all South Africans and not only to Whites. Between 1993 and 2018, for example, the number of recipients of noncontributory social grants grew from about 7.9 to 17.5 million (SASSA 2018/2019). This increase reflects particularly the growth in recipients of the older persons grant (or social pension), paid to women and men aged 60 years or older,[7] and the child support grant (CSG), paid to the caregivers of children. Most welfare recipients are women—women live longer than men and so receive the social pension for longer; most caregivers to children, and therefore recipients of the CSG, are women; and given higher unemployment rates, women are more likely than men to be means-eligible for the grant receipt (although there is no specific social grant for the unemployed) (Posel 2014).

Social grants are generally well-targeted, and they have been important in reducing the severity of poverty. However, the value of the child support grant lies far below the individual poverty line—in 2022, the CSG per child was 480 rands, compared to the upper bound per capita income poverty line of 1417 rands—and although the social pension is among the most generous of the social grants (1980 rands in 2022), it typically is shared among several members of the household (Schatz and Ogunmefun 2007; Moore 2013). Consequently, social grants have not been effective in reducing the gender gap in poverty rates (Posel and Rogan 2012).

In their critique of social policy more generally, Button, Moore, and Seekings (2018) also note that the public provision of care (e.g., through old-age homes, child-care facilities, rehabilitation centers, and special needs schools) remains limited. Consequently, for people who cannot afford to source care through the market, the care of the elderly, children, and the infirm continues to be left largely to kin and therefore to women (see also Seekings and Moore 2014).

The expansion of early childhood development (ECD) programs offers significant opportunities for the human capital and social development of young children (Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk, and Atmore 2019). The enrollment of children younger than

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6 years in these programs also has the potential to reduce some of the childcare constraints experienced by women. Although the number of ECD centers in South Africa is estimated to have expanded by over 25% from 2000 to 2016, only about 22% of young children in 2016 were estimated to be enrolled at one of these centers (Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk, and Atmore 2019). Moreover, ECD provision remains "fraught with inequalities" (Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk, and Atmore 2019, 92), with access to, and the quality of, programs varying considerably by income, race, and geography (Hall et al. 2017; Ashley-Cooper, van Niekerk, and Atmore 2019).

Although not typically cited as a reason for infrastructure provision, increasing access to running water and electricity increases productivity in the home, making social reproduction less labor intensive and therefore less costly of women's labor time. At the start of the democratic transition in South Africa, less than 60% of the population had access to electricity; by 2014, this had increased to 86% overall, although 30% of the population in rural areas remained without electricity (Rathi and Vermaak 2018). Studies for South Africa have shown that electrification has increased rural female employment (Dinkelman 2011) and is associated with positive effects for female earnings (Rathi and Vermaak 2018).

In addition to social, economic, and public policies that recognize, and provide greater support of, social reproduction, attitudes, and expectations across society need to change so that gender norms became less entrenched. Norms about the appropriate work for women and men to undertake are often reinforced through advertising and in the media (e.g., by advertising washing machines for women on "Mother's Day") but attitudes and expectations are also shaped in the home and in formal education, where children learn from adults in their household and from teachers at school. At universities, students of economics typically study the monetized economy, and are not encouraged to recognize the labor of social reproduction, or to think critically about gender asymmetries in the costs of this labor. This is something that as academics, we can challenge and change, not only in our research, which describes and analyzes patterns and trends but also in the lecture theater and the seminar room.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, the data repository at www.datafirst.uct.ac.za.

[2] Respondents were asked: "Who is the main person responsible for making sure that this child is fed, bathed, goes to school if of school-going age, helped with homework, taken care of when the child is ill, etc.?" (see e.g., Question E1 of the 2008 NIDS Child Questionnaire); and "how is this person related to the child?" (Question E2).

[3] Respondents were asked who paid for the child's educational expenses and the person's relationship to the child (see e.g., Question C14 of the 2008 NIDS Child Questionnaire).

[4] These data were collected in a rapid response survey, the National Income Dynamics Study—Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM).

[5] Own calculations. The statistics have been estimated using the weights provided with the General Household Survey (2021) data, to generate population estimates from the survey of approximately 35,000 individuals.

[6] There is also evidence of a negative effect of fertility on women's labor force participation and employment in South Africa (Ardington et al. 2015).

[7] Until 2007, men were only eligible for the grant at age 65, and thereafter, differences in the age criterion for women and men were abolished.

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