Eating from One Pot: The Dynamics of Survival in Poor South African Households, by Sarah Mosoetsa

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In her book, Sarah Mosoetsa examines the micro-politics of poverty, unemployment, inequality and the dynamics of survival strategies adopted in the Enhlalakahle and Mpumalanga townships in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This follows the mass retrenchment of people from textile and clothing factories in the late twentieth century, when households and communities at large adopted multiple strategies for dealing with poverty. The author argues that individuals carry a burden of poverty and that households have become a place of survival. I recommend this book for those interested in critically assessing the dynamics and impact of poverty, unemployment and labour on gender roles and inequality in the household. Moreover, as a social construct, gender roles are contested and renegotiated in households and communities (Butler 1990; Salo 2003). Meanwhile, domestic violence and alcohol abuse are used by men in asserting and emphasising their power and manhood.

The book sets a scene in which the author uses sociological imagination to critically examine the dynamics of poverty and the failure of the post-apartheid state in ensuring social and economic improvement. Although the state is commended for initiatives such as social grants to eradicate poverty, these efforts are considered insufficient owing to the number of people in households who solely depend on these grants. Individuals and communities are not passive in poverty, and sharing resources through communal living and participating in the informal sector has become a survival strategy for them. The book, however, highlights that poverty and unemployment lead to conflict in households owing to limited resources and space. The map of the two townships (Mosoetsa 2011, xiv) is useful to illustrate where each township is located.

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Households Adopted as a Site of Survival

Chapter one is focused on strategies adopted when responding to the issues of unemployment and poverty in both townships in KwaZulu-Natal. After being retrenched, it is argued, a way of surviving shifted from factories to households and communities as individuals had no stable income. For instance, unemployment demanded the clustering of families to share basic needs and it is interlinked with the African notion of a family; clustering became a way of sharing the few resources available. This shift led to increased respect for women, who were seen as the pillars of strength in caring for their households and extended family members. However, the author argues, clustering also had negative consequences associated with overcrowding, which resulted in the need for more necessities such as food, electricity and water for survival.

The reliance on a state pension or social grant is another way of surviving after being retrenched and losing a stable income. However, owing to the clustering of families, which often leads to overcrowding, social grants are insufficient. In the book, it is noted that individuals prioritise purchasing food with their unstable income (from pensions and social grants), which forces them to neglect other aspects of human life such as education and health. Depriving children of an education accelerated the poverty cycle. With little investment in health, there was an increase in diseases such as HIV and AIDS in communities. One can therefore argue that poverty and unemployment have a negative impact on various aspects of human life and created intersectional issues in post-apartheid South Africa.

The changing nature of the labour market in South Africa led to the expansion of the informal sector as a way of survival (Mosoetsa 2011, 40). Households became sources of income regarding social, subsistence, and petty commodity production. First, under social production, it is argued that unemployment caused women to accept their roles within the household. This is associated with the unequal division of labour as women invested more time in household chores and providing for their families than men. It therefore shows that gender discrimination, or rather oppression, is shaped by various factors at play, reflecting intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). However, young women renegotiated their roles in relation to men after women started engaging in the informal sector (petty commodity production) to gain an income, which gave them power. This illustrates that gender is relational and renegotiated based on context and the positionality of the individual (Salo 2003). It is also linked to men feeling threatened by women and declaring that they are not respected. Ultimately, gender roles are also based on economic ability. Men's gender superiority fell away owing to being unable to provide economically for their families. Similarly, gender roles are socially constructed and assigned to individuals; hence it is argued that gender should be reconceptualised (Butler 1990; Oyewumi 1997).

The chapter illustrates how households are more than a living space; they became an economic survival area once retrenchment forced people, especially women, into

subsistence production and the informal sector to secure an income. The sharing of resources and limited space was crucial in dealing with poverty and unemployment in both communities. Individuals were therefore not passive towards poverty and unemployment but retaliated by finding alternative ways of survival – for example, the clustering of families to share what little each household had. However, clustering led to overcrowding, which triggered diseases and the need for additional resources. Households and communities are carrying the burden of survival, rather than the state. The state's social grant became insufficient for the number of individuals relying on it in each household. Also, it is argued that women's involvement in caregiving, the informal sector and income contribution led to conflict in households because (practically) women became the "head of the household". This is a practical example of indirect gender contestation within a household; as Oyewumi (1997) argued, gender imbalance started from the Western concept of a nuclear family.

Reconfiguring Gender Roles in Households and Communities

Chapter two, titled "My Wife Does Not Respect Me Anymore", focuses on the impact of unemployment on gender roles in households of Enhlalakahle and Mpumalanga. The main argument is that gender roles are reconceptualised and renegotiated as they are associated with income and time allocation in a household. For example, gender roles are traced back to the notion of men as breadwinners while women took care of the children. However, unemployment had a negative impact on the structure of gender roles, especially men's role in households. Women started engaging in informal sectors and became providers for their families, yet gender inequality and discrimination persist. Women's struggles and work did not lead to an elevation in their status nor respect; rather, it resulted in men defending their roles through traditional values. It is argued that men felt threatened by women's involvement in providing for their families, resulting in an increase in domestic abuse, violence and alcohol abuse. These acts are considered men's way of re-emphasising their manhood in households and communities.

The unequal allocation of time and income also led to conflict and questioning of gender roles. Women are spending more time taking care of children and their households, yet their status and role are continuously undermined. Men spend their time consuming alcohol but consider themselves the heads of their households. Out of this inequality grew the adoption of tradition as a scapegoat to maintain manhood, as men were threatened by women's contribution in the house and their altered role as men. In the book, for example, the author writes: "Traditionally, I am a man of the house and I will not be questioned by my wife on how to spend my money, finally I expect the house to be clean at all time and food ready for me" (Mosoetsa 2011, 67). Mosoetsa (2014), in her talk at the International Sociological Association, mentioned that men's identity is established through a factory floor.

The chapter, therefore, aimed to intersectionally show the impact of unemployment on households, gender roles and identity as it is associated with the way in which gendered

roles are performed daily (De Beauvoir 1953). The author essentially argues that poverty and unemployment led to the questioning of gender roles as women contributed more to the household regarding income and time than men. This threatened men, their manhood and identity in the community and household, since their power is linked to their economic capability to provide for their families. The book therefore linked the retrenchment and unemployment of men to the rise of domestic violence and alcohol abuse in retaliation of men losing power over their wives and families.

The Conflict between State, Communities and Political Parties

Chapter three focuses on the role of the community, political organisations and associations in the direct incursion of poverty and unemployment. The role of the state, with the African National Congress as the leading party, and conflict between the state and society are discussed. The conflict was caused after people from both township communities expressed negative views and complaints about the state owing to their lack of basic necessities. However, several community organisations assisted in dealing with poverty and unemployment by providing shelter for HIV and AIDS patients. Church organisations and associations played a significant role in tackling the poverty caused by unemployment following the closure of textile and clothing factories, by providing shelter and basic needs for poor people.

It is noted that during the transition to democracy, the state made promises to eradicate poverty and to improve social security, yet these challenges remain. This led to individuals from different households forming non-monetary organisations, which helped to provide for their basic needs in times of crisis. For example, community organisations grew out of a system of reciprocity as they aimed to help households in times of need. It is argued that people are losing faith in the state since it failed to provide basic necessities to communities and to eradicate poverty. The state is therefore blamed for poverty and unemployment because of its insufficient aid in meeting communities' basic needs. It is argued that the state engages in "self-serving" through corruption, as it benefits the elite and middle-class individuals from political organisations and not the poor and working-class people in typical households and communities.

Trade unions are also blamed for their failure to protect workers. This failure was similarly linked to corruption, as mentioned by individuals from different households. Perhaps households and communities are the starting point when dealing with poverty and unemployment; the household is a place where people receive help based on the principle of reciprocity, which benefits everyone.

Chapter four offers closing remarks on the narratives in chapters one, two and three, accompanied by the author's arguments. Initially, the livelihood approach is used to examine the survival strategies adopted in urban communities, including Enhlalakahle and Mpumalanga. Primarily, the livelihood approach is defined as an approach focused on material, social and political survival activities of poor people (Mosoetsa 2011, 117). It is stated that the livelihood approach is a comprehensive approach focusing on

understanding the way in which communities and households deal with poverty and unemployment. According to the livelihood approach, individuals use available resources when dealing with poverty and unemployment. However, it is criticised in that not all rural and urban areas have resources that can be used for survival. In addition, Mosoetsa (2011) argues against the livelihood approach in relation to labour and calls for a broad definition of labour that includes unremunerated work or reproductive work performed at home. The definition will include unpaid work by women rather than focusing merely on men's paid work. Redefining labour in households will likely lead to the reconceptualisation of gender roles, since gender roles are based on and related to labour or work in a household, to some extent. Gender inequality is comprehensively shaped by income, as traditionally men were the breadwinners, while women cared for the house and children.

Neutrality in households and a revised definition of work are required. Households should consider all types of work performed, along with that of the breadwinner and economic contributions, because reproduction tasks are also work. The livelihood approach is criticised for its limited approach to the informal economy and activities for survival. As Mosoetsa (2011) argues, the informal economy and sector is problematic in surviving poverty and unemployment as it is associated with income insecurity. It is suggested that the increment of participation in the informal sector leads to an increase in poverty, as it is used for survival. Yet, in both studied communities, people were complaining about the informal sector not helping to alleviate poverty. To some extent, I disagree with this claim because engaging in the informal sector is one way of reducing a rise in crime because individuals sell products to secure an income instead of stealing.

In the conclusion of this chapter, the book criticises the state for making things worse for poor households and communities by integrating the country's economy into the global economy. This is linked with the livelihood framework, assuming that all poor households have assets and capital for survival. Mosoetsa (2011) therefore argues against the livelihood framework in analysing poor households and communities. Finally, other studies have been conducted and point out how such conditions have existing and related identified issues such as restructuring work, food price inflation and HIV and AIDS that are being problematic in KwaZulu-Natal (Fakier and Cock 2009).

The Crust of Eating from One Pot

The main argument of the book is that various strategies are applied to surviving poverty in Enhlalakahle and Mpumalanga in KwaZulu-Natal, as poverty was caused by unemployment and retrenchment of workers in factories. In poverty and unemployment there is a contestation of gender roles in households based on individuals' contribution towards the household's survival. It is noted that households have become a stable place, characterised by clustering people to share the few resources available. However, there was a lack of resources such as water and electricity in those households and clustering was associated with illnesses such as HIV and AIDS. It is also noted that women's engagement in caregiving roles and income contribution to households did not lead to a

re-evaluation of gender roles nor to ending patriarchy; rather, gender inequality remained. This shows that patriarchy persists in these communities even when gender roles are challenged. It is further noted that women were still occupied with more responsibilities than men and that gender roles are still patriarchally dominated (Tshoaedi 2013).

However, Oyewumi (1997) argued for the reconceptualisation of gender, as it might lead to dismantling gender inequality in households and societies. Women's economic contribution to the household challenges men's identity, but gender domination is assured through cultural and traditional values. To some extent, this proves that gender roles are socially constructed based on context, and "ending patriarchy" can only occur through decolonising gender roles to attain equality and equity. The state's failure to provide social security and to eradicate poverty in post-apartheid South Africa is noted, because the initiatives implemented to redress these issues did not reach everyone. The state is acknowledged for its important role in implementing initiatives such as social grants, yet people are distancing themselves from supporting political organisations as they complain about corruption and the way in which political parties enrich themselves.

Limitations of the Book

To some extent, the state cannot be blamed for poverty and unemployment as South Africa is suffering from what Said (1981) called the imperialism of colonisation and the apartheid regime. It can therefore be argued that the state is not independent and democratic but still racially organised as the economy is dominated by White capitalists and monopoly. This is what Thabo Mbeki (cited in Nattrass and Seekings 2001) called a White and Black nation, where White people dominate the economy through capitalism and Black people are negatively affected. This is one limitation of the book, since the topic of poverty should have been expanded and it should have been noted that it is caused by the capitalist system, imparting to individuals the desire for profit-making and the ideology of looking after oneself. In that manner, the book should have critically adopted an intersectional model for assessing poverty and other factors at play in South Africa.

Intersectionality is focused on critically assessing the intersection of factors leading to a phenomenon through contextualisation (Crenshaw 1991; Shields 2008). It could therefore help to understand that democracy is practiced to some degree in South Africa, but that it is shaped by race and other factors. It is therefore incorporated into the recent trend of decolonising knowledge, which will lead to the dismantling of the capitalist system in post-apartheid South Africa.

Conversely, the strength of the book includes decolonising gender as it is traced back to colonialism (Holmes 2007; Oyewumi 1997). I commend the book for showing that gender roles and identity are socially constructed, relative to context and positionality, since it is stated that women's contribution to households threatened men and their roles as heads of households (Mosoetsa 2011, 60). This particularly highlights that men's

identities are socially constructed based on their economic capability and providing for their families. Ultimately, the reconceptualisation of gender roles and identities will lead to gender equity. I believe gender equality is present, as equality in accessing education, for example, is provided for both men and women, but gender equity is not present in spaces such as workplaces characterised by gender discrimination (Elliott and Smith 2004; Hultin and Szulkin 1999). The book deals with the stereotypical way of defining a household, as it appears to be more than a place of reproduction and nurturing, but also includes production for survival, as illustrated by women's engagement in subsistence production to gain an income. Above all, I commend the book for acknowledging poor households and communities dealing with poverty, unemployment and gender inequality as it is interlinked with acknowledging the importance of the "voiceless" when studying related issues.

In conclusion, *Eating from One Pot: The Dynamics of Survival in Poor South African Households* is a wonderful, touching book, focused on issues associated with poverty and unemployment and their impact on gender roles in households. It is shown that gender is relational and contextualised based on socio-economic status. Gender roles (especially for men) were based on economic ability, which fell way after mass retrenchments from the textile and clothing factories. Contestation and renegotiation of gender roles occurred owing to women's engagement in the informal sector and their contribution towards household survival. The state is commended and blamed simultaneously because the limited initiatives implemented did not reach everyone, and these initiatives are considered insufficient because of the number of people who still depend on social grants. Community and church organisations are applauded for helping in dealing with poverty by providing shelter and basic needs for individuals. For instance, communities took the initiative to form non-monetary associations and stokvels based on reciprocity to help in times of need. Practically, this shows that poor people are not passive towards poverty but implement various strategies to survive.

Last, but not least, I commend the author of the book, Sarah Mosoetsa, for a wonderful job in intersectionally studying poverty and unemployment in relation to its impact on households, communities, the state and everyday life of individuals, specifically in terms of gender roles.

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