

This article was downloaded by: [HSRC], [Laetitia Louw]

On: 14 April 2014, At: 04:33

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ragn20>

“For us women, working is an unfulfilled dream” : Womens' wage work and food security

Catherine Cross MA in Anthropology ^{a b} & Miriam Altman BA in Economics, MPhil, PhD in Economics ^{c d}

^a Centre for Economic Performance and Development , Human Sciences Research Council , Pretoria

^b University of Michigan , E-mail:

^c Human Sciences Research Council

^d McGill University, University of Cambridge, University of Manchester , E-mail:

Published online: 13 Aug 2012.

To cite this article: Catherine Cross MA in Anthropology & Miriam Altman BA in Economics, MPhil, PhD in Economics (2010) “For us women, working is an unfulfilled dream” : Womens' wage work and food security, Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity, 24:86, 25-37

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2010.10540517>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

“For us women, working is an unfulfilled dream”: Womens’ wage work and food security

Catherine Cross and Miriam Altman

abstract

This article reviews the findings from two small community studies in South Africa on the experience of poor households in respect of the economic downturn, employment, and food security, with special emphasis on gender dynamics. This study was implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council and funded by Oxfam International, and sought to explore the human, social and personal experiences of the economic downturn.

The study interviewed 29 households in Swedenville, a recently formed shack settlement outside of the Pretoria/Johannesburg city region that mainly comprises rural in-migrants, and in Bergpoort, a rural sending community in Mpumalanga.

Most of the shack households and many of the rural households reported not being able to afford preferred foods or to eat three meals a day. The female-headed households without male partners were unable to send workers to the labour market and survived on social grants alone; they clustered at the bottom of both communities’ income distributions and suffered the greatest food insecurity. High levels of migration left migrant households isolated and vulnerable, dependent on their own resources, with few reliable contacts in communities made up of strangers.

Shack households especially reported surviving on part-time or insecure employment of the male partner only, while the women remained out of the labour force; women’s wage employment was low in the rural community as well.

Interviews with the women point to a concealed gender struggle over women’s access to wage work. To protect the male lead role in domestic relations, younger rural-born men in particular may discourage their previously employed wives or partners from remaining in the labour market. Although women’s wage contribution could make these impoverished households viable and food secure, isolated and vulnerable women may acquiesce in order to avoid the greater food security risk of becoming female household heads.

keywords

gender, labour markets, food security, poverty, communities

Introduction

Low-income households in South Africa are challenged by extremely high unemployment and working poverty, as well as a context of high and

rising food prices. It would be expected that the economic downturn would further exacerbate this situation, albeit in uncertain ways. In 2010 Oxfam

commissioned the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to prepare a study on these impacts and appropriate responses (Ngandu *et al.*, 2010). In particular, the HSRC was asked to focus on the social and personal impacts, especially in relation to gender. As part of this study the HSRC implemented a small qualitative survey in two South African communities in Gauteng and Mpumalanga in May 2010.

This article presents some of the findings from these two communities, with a special emphasis on employment, wage income and the link to household food security.

South African households rely on purchased food to feed their families, as reported by Altman and Ngandu this edition of *Agenda*. Home food production is a very small contributor to nutrition, even in difficult times. Therefore, there is great reliance on a range of income sources, namely wage income, remittances and social grants (Woolard & Klasen, 2005). Should these sources not be sufficient, households might also turn to community sharing; this study also considered this possibility. Moreover, there can be intra-household dynamics that affect women's income earning. This article explores the differences between younger and older female- and male-headed households.

South African households rely on purchased food to feed their families

This article first outlines the approach to the qualitative community studies, as well as offering some high-level information on the labour market status of community members. The link between labour market status and household food security is then considered, and the ability to rely on communities for sharing and support. Finally the article considers intra-household gender dynamics that impact on household income and nutrition security (Ngandu *et al.*, 2010).

Overview of the study

A small qualitative study of two communities was implemented in Swedenville and Bergpoort. The rural community Bergpoort was chosen because of its location in a remote migration sending area, connected by the migration route along the Maloto highway and rail corridor into Gauteng and its receiving shack settlements. The shack area of Swedenville is one of the inner-periphery shack settlements in the Johannesburg/Pretoria city region.

Twenty-nine interviews were carried out on a quota sample basis, 15 in Swedenville and 14 in Bergpoort. Although adequate for qualitative use, the interview samples are very small in size and were not selected on equal probability criteria. However, the results are backed up by earlier qualitative work in the same communities: in 2008 the HSRC conducted a 2968-case statistical survey (in Gauteng, Sekhukhune and Mpumalanga) focused on gathering data on migration, livelihoods and settlement patterns (Cross, 2008). Work was restricted to two communities where the Integrated Planning, Development and Modelling Project had worked previously, with three field days per area.

For respondent confidentiality all personal and family names have been changed to fictitious substitutes, and names of nearby towns have also been anonymised.

Methods for the fieldwork were sociological/ anthropological, centred on key informant interviews and a qualitative household survey directed to the head of household or partner. The qualitative survey used an interview schedule with open-ended questions aimed at lived experiences, which employed Oxfam's recommended qualitative indicators for food insecurity but did not attempt empirical measurement. Interview results were therefore summarised in tabulations for inspection, but not formally analysed on a quantitative basis.

Although some of the summary figures are given for descriptive and illustrative purposes, no



CHRIS KIRCHHOFF, MediaHubSouthAfrica.com

Shops in Kliptown, Soweto.

statistical interpretation is warranted. In line with the Oxfam brief, analysis and interpretation have been qualitative, following classical anthropological inductive approaches (cf. Sahlin, 1972) and aimed at policy-relevant insights rather than statistical generalisation. Households were considered female-headed if there was no male head formally attached and a woman held household authority, or alternatively if the female partner owned the house and exercised responsibility for household economic support.

Migration to South Africa's urban labour markets long pre-dates the global crisis, linking the urban and rural sectors. The new urban communities established as shack settlements by rural-born migrants still tend to carry a largely rural

cultural identity and to maintain rural connections. In social and economic terms, the 'metro shacks' therefore effectively represent the main urban branch of the rural sector, rather than an extension of developed urban settlement.

The metropolitan shack areas in Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal represent the closest point at which less-educated rural people can locate themselves in contact with the metro urban labour market (cf. Van der Berg *et al.*, 2004). These areas are selected because of their combination of close access to the city's jobs, markets and amenities, and extremely cheap living costs. They are linked back to the rural sending areas by continuing support relations between generations. In this sense, the urban shack

settlements and the rural sending communities are part of one interacting rural/urban regional system.

'Swedenville', Johannesburg/Pretoria City Region, Gauteng

The Swedenville settlement is run by a local area committee on unused municipal land within the main Gauteng conurbation. It is a relatively new settlement, dating from 2006 or 2007. The community is still beyond delivered services, but offers relatively good transport connections to the metropolitan urban main centres. Because there is little if any renting of shacks and no formal service charges, the area offers the ability to live at relatively low cost. The community has no formal legal standing, and fear of removal is persistent.

The urban shack settlements and the rural sending communities are part of one interacting rural/urban regional system

The Swedenville sample was almost entirely of rural origin, comprised of poor working households of relatively young couples, often upwardly mobile but still very precarious. Reported education levels averaged 11 years for adults. Households were very small, averaging 2.7 members, and children were often sent to rural grandparents. One household was female-headed and three included men only, the rest being married couples or stable partnerships. Two women were employed out of a recorded total of 12 adult women. All but one of the men in the sample were employed in some way at the time of the interview, but many of these reported jobs were temporary, not formal, or otherwise unreliable.

Nearly all households reported that they bought all their food, and nearly all had found some kind of wage work, often insecure or temporary contract employment. Only one household reported having no wage income. Average household income

was estimated at R2200 per month. Some 11 out of the 15 sample households were sending remittances to their communities of origin.

'Bergpoort', Amatshe district, Mpumalanga

The Bergpoort settlement is a poor rural African community located inside a former apartheid 'bantustan' area, in a commercial farming region of Mpumalanga. It was established from a forced removal in the early 1990s, and operates as an enclave run by a local committee on tribal authority land. Infrastructural services are supplied by the local municipality, and transport is adequate but expensive. Unemployment is very high and available work is located outside the area.

Due to the forced removal, the adult population of Bergpoort was entirely in-migrant, and almost entirely from inside the local region (within 10-20 km). Households in the Bergpoort sample were significantly older and larger than the relatively young Swedenville population, with an average household size of 5.1. Average education was 9.4 years.

The average household wage income in the sample was R3400 per month. Five Bergpoort households reported a wage income of over R4000 per month, compared to only one in Swedenville. Five households were formally female-headed. The other three were headed by older women, had no wage income at all, and survived instead on grants and/or remittances. One cross-border male migrant lived alone. The remaining households were male-headed married couples with children and/or grandchildren, and nearly all reported at least one regular wage income stream, although not full employment. Three households received occasional remittances from family members working elsewhere, and three sent out remittances.

In summary, nearly all the male-headed households in these two small qualitative samples were accessing wage work, while four of the six women-headed households were not.

Household food security status

The study considered eight measures of the experience and perception of respondents to food and nutrition security status. These included:

- worry over food for the month;
- being able to eat preferred foods;
- going to bed hungry;
- going a whole day without food;
- noticing food price changes;
- noticing changes in household living standard;
- changes in access to employment; and
- impacts of the crisis identified by the respondent.

In both the study communities food was bought and access to food depended very closely on income security, and particularly on secure access to wage earnings. As reported in Ngandu and Altman in this edition of *Agenda*, more than a million jobs were lost in South Africa from the onset of the downturn to the first quarter of 2010. The majority of these jobs were lost by young, low-skilled workers. However, unemployment and working poverty is already widespread, so the study explored to what extent low-income households could relate the national challenge to their own experience. Some low income households may be so marginalised that they are not substantially further immiserised by this deterioration. At the same time, food prices have been rising well above inflation for some years, and this further exacerbates food insecurity.

Only one respondent clearly identified the relation between food price inflation, stagnant wage rates, a fall in living standards and the global downturn. Rather than assigning blame for job losses to the private sector or to the international community, respondents tended to see the responsible party as the South African Government.

In both communities respondents noted their experience of substantial employment churning with rapid job gains and losses. However, not

many respondents linked this to the economic downturn, since this was an ongoing challenge for them. Households below the R2000 per month wage level reported falling living standards, plus layoffs at work or lost jobs, although food price changes were usually seen as normal and very few respondents could identify any crisis impacts on their own household.

Three of the indicators – worry over food availability, eating less than three meals a day, and not obtaining the household's preferred foods – appeared to relate closely to the household food situation during the crisis, and particularly to household wage incomes below R2000 per month. Surpassing this level depended closely on the household's employment status, underlining a direct but mostly unperceived link between food security and wage employment. Households

In both the study communities food was bought and access to food depended very closely on income security

entirely without wage income were worst off, with the highest anxiety in respect of food security. All such households were women-headed. However, the majority of the other sample households also reported risks and uncertainties around their ability to secure sufficient food on a regular basis.

Sixty per cent of the shack households and 36% of the rural households worried about not having enough to eat for the month. Just under half of the shack households said they could not always eat their preferred foods, compared to 36% in the rural community. More than half of the shack households routinely ate less than three meals per day, compared to 29% of the rural households. The average number of meals consumed per day was 2.5 in Swedenville and 2.7 in Bergpoort.

Vivian A, a married Swedenville woman

aged 27 years, reported constant concern over food availability relating to low wage earning and relatively high household costs:

“Yes, I see food as a worry every month – we pay for lawyers, insurance, transport, our burial society savings club, and my tuition fees, and these take up most of the family income. We only have my husband’s salary as a security guard and our child support grant. We would like to eat delicacies, like Kentucky Fried Chicken and mineral drinks, or to eat out at a restaurant now and then, but our income is not enough. I have skipped breakfast before when we had no money to buy tea and bread. We eat two meals a day because that is all we can manage on our budget, and the situation is stagnant. Yesterday I ate only bread with hot sauce for breakfast, and then maize meal with cabbage at night – there is no chicken or meat. There has never been a change in the number or quality of meals since we came here, and there has never been any improvement.”

Other Swedenville women as wives or partners told similar stories of routinely skipping meals and living on cheap refined starches. For households like Vivian A’s, where the husband’s wage income was low-end and the wife was not in the labour market, she proposed that their wage income could otherwise be R3000 per month if she were to resume working. At this level the household would become relatively sustainable. At the time of study all five of these Swedenville households were vulnerable, at or below an income of R2000 per month.

Household isolation and food insecurity

In a context of low household incomes that are not sufficient to cover food costs, it might be proposed that these families engage in community sharing to achieve the required living standard. However,

the vulnerability of poor rural-born women in low-income households is worsened by social isolation and the loss of connections that is associated with migration and with new communities. Social networks – encapsulating the interpersonal social capital reservoirs of individuals and households – offer poor households support against reverses. They can be based on kinship or local connections: local linkages address day-to-day shortfalls and reverses, while in the contemporary mobile society the relatives willing to offer support in major emergencies are often far away. The closest members of women’s family networks may also offer regular income support from outside the household, through remittances. Without these forms of social support, women’s relation to household wage earning becomes increasingly precarious.

New post-migration communities require time to develop social connections. In Swedenville, a new shack area, two-thirds of the respondents said they had either no one in the immediate area who could help them in an emergency, or only one household able to help; only two respondents could identify more than four nearby households they could depend on. For the somewhat older Bergpoort community, where social capital ties have had more than 15 years to rebuild since the area was settled, the share of respondents with no one or only one connection declined to just over a third. More than 40% could identify four or more reliably helpful neighbours.

Bergpoort networks were closely concentrated among neighbours, while Swedenville’s networks were thinly dispersed and often non-local. In Bergpoort Callista P, whose husband is unemployed and who is struggling to support a family of seven on child support grants alone, reported that she has seven neighbours who she can ask for help if faced with an unexpected shortfall.

In Swedenville many households reported no local network connections at all, and referred only to relatives living elsewhere. This situation can leave



CHRIS KIRCHHOFF, Media4southafrica.com

Officer E. Mosala supervising student points-duty class on Louis Botha Avenue in the township of Alexandra, in a community outreach programme training young people from the township to be traffic wardens.

low-income households, which are marginal at all times, in a highly vulnerable position. Dansinah N said she had no local network at all, and remarked that “everyone is egocentric” – that is, that local shack households appear relatively independent and autarkic compared to the traditional mutualist social ideal of rural-born in-migrants. Her household’s reliable network connections were located in Benoni and Limpopo.

This kind of out-of-area network is an artifact of high migration levels characteristic of shack settlements: it may possibly deal effectively with a major crisis if the onset is not very sudden, but will provide little day-to-day back-up assistance in respect of cash and food shortfalls, and may leave low-income households stripped of emergency

connections in the face of tightening economic conditions.

Sudden household disasters can then present serious problems. During Julia N’s acute asthma attack, her husband was obliged to borrow from the local spaza shop operator in order to obtain taxi fare to the nearest hospital. This is an option which has become common as networks have weakened.

Chronic, long-term income insufficiency, which appeared as a constant risk for women-headed households especially, is the most difficult situation to address through networks, since such poverty generally ensures that any assistance gained cannot ever be repaid. Migration has played a role here in eroding social capital. At

present, the depth of social capital attachments among relative strangers who have moved into the same community is normally too shallow to allow significant help on an indefinite basis.

In general, there is growing evidence that remittances are becoming less important as a source of household income. Where they are paid routinely, it is mostly by own parents or own children. The results from this small survey underline that remittances are less common and less important than they used to be, compared to wage income and social grants. While most of the women in Swedenville sent home remittances, few women in either sample received any; those that did receive usually did so sporadically, for emergencies rather than for daily food security. In both sample communities the adult women were living mainly among strangers, and had little if any financial support outside their own households.

Intra-household gender dynamics and food insecurity

The relative social isolation as household autarky takes hold seems likely to increase dependency on male partners and weaken women's bargaining position inside the household. Female respondents in male-headed households often noted that they were not working due to the expectation of their male partner that they not do so. For the women in the shacks and for many in the rural community, the alternative to their own access to work seems to be one of accepting a position of dependence on the income of the husband.

Although these women had migrated to be in touch with the metropolitan job market, only two women of the 12 in the Swedenville shack sample were working for wages, both from households occupying the top quarter of the sample's income distribution. Eight of these younger women had no children in their shack household, and would in principle have been free to work. In Bergpoort's older sample, four of the 13 women were working, including three from the top half of the income

distribution: the fourth was holding a badly-paid farm job that provided her household's only wage income.

Comments from all sides highlighted the critical importance of employment for women with families, in the light of male partners' uncertain attitudes and unpredictable income-earning status. Several men and women respondents expressed the view that unemployed women are in a compromised position: even in an established family with wage income, they face risks because male partners may lose jobs or default on support responsibilities.

No respondent argued that Government child support grants alone could enable a woman with children to provide for them at a decent level. However, a view was also expressed that women working and drawing in income might threaten the status of their partner in a male-headed household.

Bongiwe Z, a 17-year-old unmarried woman from a well-off family in Bergpoort, tied women's situation in terms of food affordability directly to their employment or lack of it:

"Being able to afford food is a problem for women who are not working. Otherwise the hard times affect men and women similarly, because a job is important to everyone, male or female."

Fundisani W, who was not married and had no children himself at age 27, was sympathetic to the situation of women where men do not meet support obligations:

"It's difficult for women to nourish and sustain their children now – women are more affected by the crisis, for this same reason, that men often leave their women with the children and run away from the burden of their responsibilities."

Harold T, a 38-year-old married truck driver from

Swedenville, attributed women's disadvantage directly to their exclusion from wage work:

"Women have a serious problem because the majority are unemployed, and women are worse off than men because most jobs require men's labour."

He adds, perhaps significantly, that "Women are under pressure to defend their partners ...", appearing to imply that women may be unwilling to express direct criticism of men's actions in relation to women's frequent exclusion from the labour market.

It may be the case that older rural attitudes – which commonly held that married women in well-regulated households remained at home at all times unless they had the husband's permission – may affect rural-born men's willingness to allow wives or female partners to bring a second income into the household. Although urban township families frequently expect wives to work, authority within the rural household was traditionally tied to men's role as sole providers of the household's income. Accordingly, younger rural men as new household heads may be particularly sensitive to women's independent earning, and might oppose their wives going out to work.

Women respondents themselves were not in doubt of where they stood:

"I am depending on my husband's financial support – I am staying in my husband's house" – Khethiwe I, Bergpoort

"My husband provides for me." – Lena K, Swedenville

"I am depending on my husband's salary" – Aurelia J, Swedenville

"My husband supports me, though as I am not working the money is not enough. Right now

I am broke, I have no money" – Samantha M, Swedenville

Like several other Swedenville women in marriage or partnerships, Aurelia J started working in a formal job but gave up the job voluntarily. In her case it was reportedly because the money, at R2800 per month, was too low, although her husband's earnings from his economic activity appeared to be only slightly higher. She comments:

"I worked in the city centre as a security guard, having obtained the training. I worked for a year full-time, and then I left it because the salary was too little. Neither my husband nor I have obtained a regular job since then. I am now supported by my husband's self-employment – he obtains temporary contracts to build sun shelters in people's gardens. The economic crisis has not really affected my job opportunities – I have no job."

Perhaps meaningfully, she adds:

"Women have more ways of making money when unemployed as compared to men – women have families, and when they do not have jobs, they may decide to sell their bodies."

Aurelia J's apparently reluctant decision to leave her job effectively cut the household's income in half and removed the more reliable part of it. When her husband had a break in work, she faced food insufficiency and risked becoming stranded with no paid income at all.

Vivian A, Lena K and Julia N had also worked before giving up their job options in favour of a partner's barely adequate support. Lena K remarked:

"We buy all our food from my husband's salary, and we always have enough. However,

we only have two meals per day, breakfast and dinner, we skip lunch. I send money to my grandmother for my child, who stays with her. We don't have enough money to move, and we don't produce any crops or keep livestock. Yes, women are affected more than men – men need money for beer, while women look after children.”

Julia N, who reported that she left her domestic service job in Mahala township because of the long hours it required, appears to have given up this position at about the same time that her husband finally found part-time employment. She commented:

“was working for some time with a full-time job in Mahala, and I left that job because it was long hours. Only for that, and I didn't receive any UIF or retrenchment package. The only one who obtained a new job was my husband, who heard about a job opening from a friend of his, and went there to make himself available for this part-time Government job in construction. So I get money from my husband's part-time job and from the child support grant, but it is not enough and I am not coping.”

She added:

“We women wish to be employed one day, but our dreams are not fulfilled. We are always loitering at home like flies. There's no way out.”

Julia N is no longer young, and when she added that she could not even afford to buy furniture, her remark may reflect continuing exclusion from the labour market and its implications for her lifetime hopes of a well-furnished home. If women do not maintain labour force participation in their young adult years, better-quality jobs will be closed for them. Even if the husband later in life allows the wife to work, the woman will by then lack

the experience and skills qualifications needed for a better-paid job. Instead, she is likely to be relegated to low-paid domestic work as the main default job category for low-skilled and less-educated women.

However, not all young women in partnership households were held back from entering the labour market. Adele R, aged 26, who lives with her fiance in Swedenville, recently obtained a wage job; this took place at the point when her partner, a fork-lift driver who lost a steady job at a mine, had run out of UIF so that their household was surviving on a series of temporary jobs. Adele R's job was low-paid and carried exploitative conditions; however, their two-person household had no other regular income:

“I have access to enough food now, because I am employed now, and there are only two of us in this household. Last year was worse, because we were both unemployed and living on my fiance's unemployment benefits. But the situation has changed since I started working. Our household income is now up to about R2000 per month, though it sometimes fluctuates since my fiance is only working at temporary jobs. We don't intend to move, because we have found Swedenville is a good place for people with low-income jobs.”

She adds that the household economy is now more satisfactory than when they were living on unemployment benefits and temporary jobs, hand to mouth:

“I can budget now. We are able to eat what we were once eating at home, the only difference is that we now have access to more different varieties of meat. I am relying on my own income to make ends meet, and I manage to send money to my two children.”

The story of Martjie O's household is more

disturbing. Having come from a farm to the urban sector without urban job qualifications, this middle-aged woman and her household have become trapped in severe destitution in the Swedenville shacks, over a period which approximately coincides with the unfolding of the international financial crisis. Martjie O explains that neither she, an older woman with Grade 5, nor her adult son with Grade 6 have been able to gain a foothold in the urban labour market:

“I came to Swedenville with two children in 2009. I left my work as a farmworker because I wanted to come here. When my shack back home burned down, we decided to come to Gauteng. I was looking for employment, but there are no farms here, so poor people can't survive. We have been here for 6 months now, and we can't think of moving now – our money is gone. We are just doing casual labour – I am currently surviving by doing washing from time to time for some black women in Mahala township, I make R80 each time. And my son Siphso sometimes finds temporary jobs and gives me money, maybe several hundred rand. I haven't been able to keep my children in school because I can't pay the transport costs. My daughter is 14 and should be schooling, but she had to stop school in November last year.”

This household occupies a level of destitution significantly higher than that of any of the other respondents in the urban and rural samples: no other household reported children out of school, days with no food, or family members going to bed hungry, all indicators of acute poverty. Without an earning husband, without contacts and without an understanding of how to navigate the urban system, it is difficult to see how this family will be able to climb up again from their present position at the bottom of both communities' income distribution.

Conclusion

In relation to the comments and perceptions of men and women in rural-migrant poor communities, it is worth noting that HSRC's current analysis of its 2008 survey data (Cross, Kok & Turok, 2011, in preparation) is reflecting levels of male employment for the Gauteng shack settlements well over twice as high as reported employment for women in the same settlements. The shack settlements are areas to which people migrate in order to connect to the labour market: one open question is whether any of the Swedenville women who formerly worked or want to work – and now are emphatic about suffering food affordability problems – have been simply unable to find new work during the economic crisis.

This reluctance to accept a two-income family appears closely involved with rural-born women's experience of food insecurity over the medium to long term

Several women's accounts seem to suggest possible resentment toward their husbands for denying them the opportunity to gain employment that could nearly double the household's total income, and would be enough to ease the food problem and put the household on a more stable financial basis. It is difficult to be sure of the dynamics of these cases, but the women's comments sometimes hint at strain in the household.

The labour force in South Africa is increasingly mobile in search of employment opportunities in urban areas, especially as rural areas have stagnated. In the process, it is possible that communities can weaken, with less social cohesion. Even before the global crisis, poor households, and specifically women in these households, were finding themselves more and more isolated and alone, with few social or financial resources in the face of increasing pressure on wage income. Results from the

Oxfam study underline how food security is at risk as household autarky – the situation of enforced or voluntary household self-sufficiency and autonomy – has advanced and community-based mutualism has declined as households migrate from home communities to jockey spatially for positions in the urban labour markets.

When women in the sample stress their dependence on their husbands' support, they may already be signalling that they have taken on the bargain of accepting dependency on their male partner in order to secure the family's share of his greater earning power. If so, the most compelling reason would be that the worst-case alternative of losing their husbands' support entirely and having to rely on their own earning capacity alone would undercut their children's welfare and mean deeper poverty, leaving them to fall to the bottom of the community income distribution on a level with other women-headed households in the Oxfam sample.

Underneath these income dynamics, the role of household head – that of the person who lays down policies within the family and decides the allocation of resources – is still deeply valued in both rural and urban areas. It remains a major reason for young men to marry and take on the difficult obligations of supporting a woman and children. The social standing which the role of head conveys is particularly valuable to young men who want to mark their transition to adult status and who are looking for respect: for older men, the idea of a middle-aged wife working may often become less threatening. However, against the generic claims of men, the *de facto* role of head tends to gravitate to the person who is supporting the household. If young men find themselves losing their grasp on this authority role as wives' wage earning dilutes their role-validating

contribution as men, their masculinity may be threatened and their perceptions of respect and commitment to the married family may slip. This reluctance to accept a two-income family appears closely involved with rural-born women's experience of food insecurity over the medium to long term.

The qualitative results in themselves give little support to the proposition that crisis-driven job losses among men should create space for their women partners to move into wage work in greater numbers. For most of the women respondents the risk of becoming solely responsible for the support of their children at a time when employment rates are falling seems to have already led them to make the choice of a marginal married income and some continuing hunger. Their alternative appears to be the risk of single motherhood, lower total income, and substantially greater food insecurity.

References

- Cross C (2008) *Toward effective spatial planning at municipal level: The TIP settlement typology and survey results*. Final report to Department of Science and Technology, Integrated Planning, Development & Modelling Project Phase 1a, July 2008. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Ngandu S, Altman M, Cross C, Jacobs P, Hart T & Matshe I (2010) *The socio-economic impact of the global downturn on South Africa: responses and policy implications*. Research report to Oxfam. Pretoria: Economic Performance and Development Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council.
- Van der Berg S, Burger R, Leibbrandt M & Mlatsheni M (2004) 'Migration and the changing rural-urban interface in South Africa: What can we learn from Census and survey data?' Draft paper, Workshop on Migration and Poverty, Stellenbosch, 4 March.
- Sahlins M (1972) *Stone Age Economics*. London: Tavistock.
- Woolard I & Klasen J (2005) 'Determinants of income mobility and household poverty dynamics in South Africa' in *Journal of Development Studies* 41: 865-897.

CATHERINE CROSS is currently a Chief Research Specialist with the Centre for Economic Performance and Development at the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria. Catherine was born in the USA and received her MA in Anthropology from the University of Michigan, but has spent most of her adult life in South Africa, with the longest period in KwaZulu-Natal. She has served as senior editor of three scholarly books, and has published a number of academic articles. Catherine has been leading the CPEG migration sub-programme, and serves as head of the HSRC's sector of the DST/CSIR Integrated Planning, Development and Modelling project addressing migration and settlement. She is currently on the reference groups for the National Planning Commission's Spatial Visioning process, for the Presidency's Outcome 8 policy Monitoring & Evaluation initiative, and also for the Department of Human Settlement's stakeholder consultation processes for Planning & Development and for Social Cohesion. She also serves on the Programme Advisory Committee for DFID's Urban LandMark initiative. Catherine has also completed work in these and related fields for South Africa's Presidency, the World Bank, USAID, GTZ, and the ILO in Geneva. Since coming to the HSRC she has worked in researching the fields of migration and population in Africa, housing issues and services delivery, poverty dynamics, gender studies, and homelessness studies. Email: ccross@hsrc.ac.za

MIRIAM ALTMAN is a Distinguished Research Fellow at the Human Sciences Research Council. She previously served as an Executive Director from 2002 to 2010, establishing and leading two divisions focused on the economy, employment creation and poverty reduction. Most recently she led the Centre for Poverty, Employment and Growth, whose flagship was evidence-based employment scenarios, a think-tank drawing together top decision and opinion makers in business, labour, government and academia to identify how the targets of halving unemployment and poverty might be reached. In March 2010 she was appointed as a Commissioner to the National Planning Commission located in the Office of the Presidency. She has a BA in Economics from McGill University, an MPhil from the University of Cambridge and a PhD in Economics from the University of Manchester. Email: altmanm@mweb.co.za

