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## **‘One Man Can’: shifts in fatherhood beliefs and parenting practices following a gender-transformative programme in Eastern Cape, South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

‘One Man Can’ (OMC) is a rights-based gender equality and health programme implemented by Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa. It has been featured as an example of best practice by the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, and the UN Population Fund, and translated into nearly a dozen languages and implemented all across Africa. South Africa has strong gender and HIV-related policies, but the highest documented level of men’s violence against women in the world, and the largest number of people living with HIV. In this context, OMC seeks to improve men’s relationships with their partners, children, and families, reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS, and reduce violence against women, men, and children. To understand whether and how OMC workshops brought about changes in men’s attitudes and practices related to parenting, an

academic–non-government organisation partnership was carried out with the University of California at San Francisco, the University of Cape Town, and Sonke. The workshops appear to have contributed powerfully to improved parenting and more involved and responsible fathering. This article shares our findings in more detail and discusses the promises and challenges of gender-transformative work with men, underscoring the implications of this work for the health and well-being of women, children, and men.

## Keywords

fatherhood; masculinities; gender equality; care; children; ‘One Man Can’

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## Introduction

South Africa has the highest rates of gender-based violence of any country in the world and by far the largest number of people living with HIV and AIDS of any country. These two public health epidemics are inextricably linked; both are driven in significant ways by gender inequalities and by gender norms that equate manhood with dominance, aggression, sexual conquest, and the pursuit of multiple partners. These norms about manhood, combined with corresponding norms about womanhood that emphasise women’s submission to men, make it difficult for women to negotiate condom use or to say no to sex. Masculinity, in other words, is deeply implicated in the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS, and in the pervasive domestic and sexual violence that scars South Africa’s post-1994 democratic dispensation. Increasingly, organisations such as Sonke Gender Justice are making the case that men and masculinities are implicated in the successful resolution of both of these health and human rights problems.

A growing body of research indicates that the lives of men, women, and children can be improved by transforming masculine norms to be more equitable, expressive, and respectful (Barker *et al.* 2010). Such programmes have been deemed promising in the evidence-base and several have been found to have a positive impact on gender equality in relationships and on health outcomes (Barker *et al.* 2010; Jewkes *et al.* 2008; Kalichman *et al.* 2009).

Fatherhood is a key part of male identity and needs to be addressed in work which tries to transform masculine norms (Richter 2006). Research shows that fathering is socially patterned, and in the context of South Africa, this means it is intricately linked to histories of apartheid, unemployment, poverty, migration, racism, family structure, and masculinities (Ramphela and Richter 2006). Many men’s sense of themselves as fathers rests on a sense of being able to provide materially for their children (Morrell and Richter 2006), but it is often difficult for men to live up to this traditional role (Montgomery *et al.* 2006).

In the study discussed in this article, we explored how participation in one gender-transformative programme known as ‘One Man Can’ shifted men’s beliefs and practices associated with masculinity, fatherhood, and parenting. Far from revealing a static notion of all men as distant, uncaring, or uninvolved parents, the literature in South Africa shows that masculinities are in flux, allowing for the positive roles that men play as fathers and caregivers (Richter and Morrell 2006).

## Sonke Gender Justice Network and its approach to gender transformation and women’s rights

Sonke Gender Justice Network is a South African non-government organisation (NGO) that was established in 2006 in order to support men and boys to take action to promote gender

equality and prevent both violence against women, and HIV and AIDS. Sonke's vision is a world in which men, women, and children can enjoy equitable, healthy, and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies. Sonke uses a broad mix of social change strategies, reaching nearly 25,000 men each year through workshops and community dialogues, nearly ten million listeners a week via community radio shows, and millions more as a result of media coverage of high-profile advocacy work to effect change in government policies and practice.

While Sonke is best recognised for its work to transform harmful norms of masculinity and its efforts to mobilise men for gender justice, it deliberately rejects the term 'men's organisation' because this can easily be misconstrued to mean that Sonke advances men's rights – which it does not. Instead, Sonke defines itself as a feminist organisation working to achieve gender transformation, and using as one of its principal strategies the engagement, education, and mobilisation of men. Sonke's board of directors, staff, and volunteers are nearly 50 per cent women, and it works in close and ongoing partnership with many more traditional women-led women's rights organisations. Sonke's advocacy campaigns often deliberately profile men and women working together for gender justice. This demonstrates simultaneously that gender issues are also men's issues, and that men and women can and should work together to achieve a gender-equitable world.

Understandably, some women's rights groups remain uncertain – and in some cases sceptical – of the value of work with men for gender equality. This is often for two reasons: firstly ideological differences, and secondly concerns about competition for resources.

In terms of the first category of concerns, Sonke's analysis holds that this work carries more similarity with, than difference from, more conventionally women-led and women-focused approaches. Some feminist analysis, especially second-wave feminist thought, holds that men are so deeply invested in patriarchy, because of the unearned power and privilege it grants them, that they will therefore resist change, often violently. Not surprisingly, this analysis offers little hope that it is possible to work with men to bring about more equitable gender relations. While recognising the unfair advantages men gain from patriarchy, Sonke views patriarchal privileges as coming at a high cost for men (this dynamic is discussed in the theoretical literature by writers including Messner 1997 and Morrell *et al.* 2012). These costs to men range from compromised physical and mental health, and heightened risk for injury, to limited intimacy and superficial friendships. Recognising these costs, and the love and solidarity many men feel for women in their lives, can and does motivate men to work for gender transformation. Sonke holds that power and control are not the only currency in relationships, and that both women and men deserve greater joy, passion, and connection. Equitable, caring, and connected relationships between the sexes are more satisfying and more consistent with a commitment to human rights and democracy.

In terms of the second concern of competition for resources between women's rights organisations and organisations that work with men for gender equality, Sonke is well aware of the issues, which are real. Resources for gender transformation are far less than is needed for the work in general. In order to achieve the shared goals of gender transformation, Sonke maintains a dual strategy of firstly keeping feedback channels open by engaging in regular discussion with traditional women's rights organisations and representatives; and secondly striving to share access to resources. Sonke has brokered relationships between other women's rights organisations and Sonke donors, and developed joint work and proposals with women's rights partner organisations, securing grants that have sustained their work. Through a longstanding history of collaboration with women's rights organisations, Sonke has developed relationships of trust that have defused some of these tensions. Whenever they emerge, Sonke welcomes a dialogue.

## The One Man Can Programme

The One Man Can Programme (OMC) was launched on International Day to End Violence Against Women, 25 November 2006 in South Africa, and then in Geneva on 6 December 2006, as part of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees's 16 Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women campaign. Recognising the importance of collaboration and the significant contribution made by many rights-based organisations across the world in developing OMC, the initiative was launched as a formal partnership with a wide range of South African and international organisations.

OMC was designed by men and women working together, and then reviewed by many different women's rights activists in South Africa. OMC activities are adapted based on the project goals, the specific groups of men focused on, and the specific community context. OMC is based on the premise that changing deeply held gender and sexuality-related beliefs and practices require comprehensive, multifaceted strategies. OMC works with men and boys of all ages and all walks of life, and is rooted firmly in the belief that all men can become advocates for gender equality and active participants in efforts to respond to HIV and AIDS. As such, the programme is implemented in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas, and with an enormously wide range of men and boys, including religious and traditional leaders; young and adult men in prisons and upon release; farm workers; miners; commercial fishermen; school children and their parents; policymakers and health service providers at national, provincial, and local level.

The OMC Fatherhood Project, which is the focus of this article, was developed and implemented in 2007–2009 in response to a request from UNICEF to increase men's involvement in meeting the needs of children affected by HIV and AIDS, including children who had lost one or both parents to AIDS in two rural communities, Nkandla in KwaZulu-Natal and Mhlontlo in the Eastern Cape. UNICEF's work in these regions had confirmed what a significant body of research already suggested would be the case: that men were not playing an adequately active role in supporting children made vulnerable by AIDS. Indeed, research by many authors indicated that women were carrying a disproportionate burden of caring for those affected by AIDS and that many children were falling through the cracks as a result.

In South Africa, social scientists and public health experts alike have recognised fatherhood as an important driver in health and development for individuals, families, and communities. A seminal campaign, entitled The Fatherhood Project, was launched and implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2005. It placed fatherhood on the agenda of civil society and policymakers alike, as an important area of opportunity, and of challenge. The project produced an anthology of important research outputs on fatherhood, entitled *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* (Richter and Morrell 2006), and a subsequent focus on young fathers was published soon thereafter entitled: *Teenage Tata: Young Fathers in South Africa* (Swartz and Bhana 2009). These two books have become important resources for information on fatherhood in South Africa, and continue to influence the development of local programming that is focused on parenting. However, few gender-transformative programmes have been implemented in the arena of masculinities and fatherhood.

The OMC Fatherhood project worked with black South African men aged 18 or over, living in communities chosen by Sonke because of the effect of high AIDS mortality and its effect on children left vulnerable by the deaths of one or both parents, and Sonke's related desire to promote greater involvement of fathers in the lives of these children. They were recruited into the OMC Fatherhood Project through Sonke's community partner organisations, which included organisations focusing on gender-based violence and HIV- and AIDS-related

matters. The project had three primary objectives. Firstly, it aimed to increase men's involvement, not only in the lives of their own children, but also in ensuring that children in general, and orphans and vulnerable children in particular, had access to essential social services, such as child grants, attending school and having their psychosocial and educational needs met. Secondly, the project set out to develop men's capacity to be advocates and activists in efforts to eliminate violence against women and children, to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS, and to promote health, care, and support for orphans and vulnerable children. Thirdly, it planned to give voice to vulnerable children, training and engaging them in using multi-media approaches (photography, writing, and video) to bring the realities of their daily lives to the attention of the leaders in their communities. The object of this was to catalyse social change.<sup>1</sup>

## Researching the impact of OMC's fatherhood workshops: study methods

In an external evaluation of the impact of participation in the OMC workshops on Fatherhood, participants were interviewed once during the six-month period following their participation in the programme. Interviews took place from February to September 2010. Our collaborators from the University of California at San Francisco hired interviewers external to Sonke, but who were familiar with the communities of interest. Interviews focused on topics related to masculinities, gender relations and rights, violence, gender and HIV risk, alcohol, parenting and fatherhood, and relationships. Interviewers were trained by the last author for three days in qualitative methods, ethical research practices, and techniques of probing during interviews. Researchers were already experienced at discussing sensitive topics such as gender, masculinities, relationships, HIV, and sexuality. Interviews were carried out in the local languages, were transcribed into the local language, and then into English by the researcher themselves. Participants were offered R100 (about US\$12) as reimbursement for time and transportation associated with participation.<sup>2</sup> In analysing our research results, we drew on conventions in thematic analysis and principles of grounded theory within qualitative research methods.<sup>3</sup>

## The impact of the programme

In the study, we found that men have strong and articulate feelings regarding fatherhood, parenting, and masculinity. Here, we will illustrate this point with some of the perceptions and beliefs held by participants. All the quotations used in the article come from the sources we have outlined in this section. The article then goes on to identify changes in beliefs that men attributed to participating in OMC. In the last section of the article, we will explore what concrete changes in fathering practices can be attributed to participation in OMC.

## Perceptions and beliefs about parenting and fathers

To get a picture of how OMC shifted men's parenting beliefs and practices, we need to know about men's initial perceptions and beliefs about parenting and fatherhood. Many of these perceptions involved discussions of men's household authority and decision-making power, and the use of discipline. In particular, some men felt that children *are*

<sup>1</sup>This study was part of a large OMC study that consisted of 90 qualitative, in-depth interviews with men who participated in OMC in three areas of South Africa: Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and Western Cape.

<sup>2</sup>This and other aspects of the research protocol were approved by ethics boards at the University of California at San Francisco, USA and the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>3</sup>To begin the coding process, two researchers extracted excerpts of the transcribed interviews that related to shifts in masculinities, fatherhood, and parenting. To establish a codebook, five interviews were randomly selected and independently evaluated using an open coding process employed during the initial phase of coding in qualitative research methods. After this round of coding, coders met to ensure full refinement of primary and secondary categories referred to as focused coding (following Lofland and Lofland 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Lastly, we wrote analytical memos, to capture main themes and to lift multiple subcodes to a broader thematic analysis.

*representations of the community standing of fathers.* This view was expressed in comments such as:

*I try to instil this discipline in my children because I am a community leader and if they behave badly, then it would contradict my good standing and the responsibilities I hold in the community. My children become a reflection of me in the community.* (54-year-old, five children)

In part to protect their own reputations, and due to the belief that children are a reflection of fathers, many fathers assumed an *authoritarian role as the primary disciplinarian*. In addition, it seems that improvements in women's and children's rights in South African society have led to some men feeling disempowered in terms of their household authority, and some men viewed strict rules and discipline as a way to retain such authority:

*If my child thinks he has got rights, then he should go and build his own home where he will practise his rights. Under my roof, he is my child and he will follow the rules of my home.* (51-year-old, two children)

Some men also rationalised their disciplinary role through *traditional cultural practices that encouraged corporal punishment and spanking*. For example, one man articulated his position by arguing that:

*I think the government was supposed to appreciate that we are not raised like white people because in our culture we believe that spanking plays a crucial part in the development and growing up of an individual.* (62-year-old, three children)

Although most men generally perceived fathers as the disciplinarians within the home, when asked to describe the ideal man, participants expressed sentiments that a man is someone who can sacrifice and take care of his family 'responsibly'. Many men described the 'real man' as 'a man that *loves his family*' (41-year-old, one child), or as 'someone who has dignity and who teaches children the right things' (19-year-old, no children). In addition, most participants of the OMC programme expressed discontent with the behaviour of men in the community who were not considered 'ideal' men; such men were described as those who swear at their children, drink too much, shirk family responsibilities, do not respect their female partners or children, or do not keep up their homes.

### Parental involvement and communication

When asked how often the participants saw their children, the responses were inflected with both cross-generational comparisons with men's own fathers, and contemporary experiences. For example, some fathers suggested that their ability to talk openly with their own children was distinct from their fathers' approach to parenting. Many men in the research were brought up in South Africa's so-called 'homeland regions', where Black South Africans were forced to live and from which adult men of working age were forced to travel to find work in ways that required that men were absent from their families for most of each year. For some participants, therefore, fathering their own children who actually lived with them was perceived as more problematic because of the absence of a role model. Some men described how they learned to become a 'real father' on their own. For example:

*I am an old man but sometimes I do get the time to chat with them, which is something I did not do with my own father. My father was a stranger to me when I was growing up and I would see him only once in a long time ... So it is only now that I have become a 'real father'.* (73-year-old, seven grandchildren)

However, the realities of having to spend too much time working – sometimes away from home as migrants – are a challenge for fathers. Only a relatively small proportion of men felt that the amount of time they spent with their children was sufficient, as explained by one

man: 'I spend a lot of time with my child. Recently I haven't been travelling frequently and therefore I have more time to be with my child' (23-year-old, one child). At the same time, several fathers felt that they spent an insufficient amount of time with children due to their unemployment, and family structure and relationship complexities. For example, several men reported themes such as:

*I am not satisfied. I get to see her on a few occasions and on those occasions the visits are not long enough. The problem is that I am unemployed and therefore am not financially stable to do for my child the things that I wish I could do. I cannot afford to just call both her and her mother because money is scarce and when they get here I should also provide for them. However, I try my best under the circumstances ... I would like to stay with them and see my child growing. It is not nice to be an absent father from your child. I admire other peoples' children that are growing up with both their parents. (41-year-old, one child)*

Not only the quantity of time, but the quality of time with children was also a topic discussed by participants. Several fathers described finding quality time with children despite busy schedules. For example, one father explained how he found time with his children 'after their school hours and also in the mornings. My elder child usually wakes me up in the morning when she is preparing for school and we get to talk about a lot of things, including her schoolwork and also some school announcements'. Some fathers, however, reported that they did not think it possible to play a meaningful role in the lives of their children because of their limited financial means and because they did not have functional relationships with the mothers of their children:

*I never spend any time with them. They all have different mothers and I have no relationship with any of the mothers. I do not have any connection with my children and the only thing that I do is to send money for them if I have it. I am fine with that arrangement. I am comfortable with them being far from me because it would have hurt both me and them to see each other during the time I was sick. I would have felt useless being unable to provide for them. They are ok growing up under their mothers because I am sure they are getting enough parental love and care. (34-year-old, three children)*

### **Changes in fatherhood beliefs and practices due to participation in OMC**

Most participants reported that OMC had influenced their way of thinking about masculinity and fatherhood, and ascribed these changes specifically to the project. For example, many men described how OMC shifted their parenting style from a financial 'providership' role to one of increased involvement, companionship, nurturing, and affection:

*OMC changed a lot in the relationship I have with my child because the bond I developed became even stronger. It's not that I did not have a relationship with my child but I was more of a provider than a companion to her. My relationship with her is much stronger. OMC taught us to show the love and affection we have for our children instead of seeing ourselves as providers. I learnt that as a father I should be able to do my child's laundry, take her to school and back, and have time to be with her so that the child can be proud of me as a father. (33-year-old, one child)*

In addition, several fathers described a shift towards being less violent and being more caring and protective. For example, one man explained his firm and initial reluctance towards children's rights legislation that prohibits corporal punishment but he then shifted his view after programme participation:

*I understood children's and women's rights as a way of undermining men by the government. However since I became part of OMC, I changed my views and appreciated the reasons behind granting special rights to women and children. They are being abused in their homes and I think it is fair to protect them. (62-year-old, three children)*

### Other fathering practices influenced by OMC

In addition to influencing men's beliefs about fatherhood, interviewees also revealed how OMC led to changes in four other fatherhood-related practices. First, several participants described how OMC assisted them in changing fatherhood-related practices away from being an absent father and towards being a *present, positive role model* in their children's lives. For example, one father underscored the influence that OMC had on his relationship with the mother of his child and his daughter:

*OMC helped me in that regard because I was a person that used to like fun and drinking alcohol. I was always out there with the boys drinking. I didn't have time for my girlfriend and my daughter. She would come with my daughter to the tavern and beg me to at least give them attention. Sometimes she would go to my place and find me absent and she would sleep and wait for me. On my arrival, I would get into arguments with her. However after that workshop, I got to understand the importance of care and it has helped me. I am also enjoying it as well. OMC changed the way I live my life and the decisions that I make as a man. I have done away with some things that I used to do because they were not helping me. Being a better man is good because it means I can give my daughter all the attention she needs. (23-year-old, one child)*

A second practice influenced by OMC, as reported by most fathers, was that of *improved communication with children*. Most fathers in our sample reported improved communication with their children about issues such as talking about considerate behaviour, gender equality, and health. These fathers also reported a better friendship with their children, and a greater interest in listening to their children. For example, a 25-year-old father of one reported that: 'I communicate better with both my child and the mother of the child. I also dedicate more time to my child'. Several fathers reported sharing OMC resources with their families and reading to their children: 'It changed a lot because that book sometimes I read it together with my children and give them lessons'. A few participants described how OMC prompted them to discuss HIV risks with their children:

*I learnt some things from that programme, especially on the HIV and AIDS disease. I even teach them [my children] some of the lessons I learnt there. I teach them to know what is wrong and to be aware of ugawulayo [HIV]. I think they listen because as far as I know none of them is infected. (60-year-old, four children)*

Third, many fathers reported using fewer *corporal discipline strategies* with their children. OMC allowed for a better understanding of the effects of corporal punishment, and encouraged listening and talking between fathers and children. For example, one father described how OMC highlighted new and different ways of parenting that were less violent towards children, a critical change given the very clear association between children's exposure to harsh physical punishment and subsequent increased risk of perpetration of violence:

*I was previously a very strict man and a disciplinarian. In being strict, I have to admit that I was also rough in a way, but those young men at Sonke taught us different ways of disciplining children. (54-year-old, five children)*



Lastly, some men described that the OMC programme helped them to recognise the role they could play in positively socialising the next generation of youth to be respectful, gender-equitable, and to share household responsibilities with parents and siblings. For example, several men explained themes such as:

*OMC also empowered me to be able to teach the younger generation, especially the school-going age group, on how to relate in a respectful manner with their parents. I am able to teach children to be considerate with their parents so that if the parents say they do not have money, the children should be able to understand ... I really learnt a lot from OMC. I learnt to teach the younger people to share responsibilities with their parents and siblings. This is particularly so with the boys as we teach them that they should also help with household chores, rather than sit around and not do tasks because they think it is the girls' duty. (52-year-old, six children)*

Several other men described how they increased their own contribution to household work, taking on work traditionally seen as female (including cleaning, cooking, and care work), and encouraged their male children to share household tasks with their sisters and female partners.

## Discussion and conclusions

The research we carried out in our academic–NGO partnership afforded us the opportunity to provide an in-depth examination of changes in men's parenting beliefs and practices in a gender-transformative programme. Our results indicate that the OMC programme has shifted men's attitudes about gender roles and power relations in the direction of gender equality, and improved numerous health outcomes, due to reduced alcohol use, safer sex, and reductions in male violence, against both women and men (Dworkin, Hatcher, Colvin and Peacock 2013). In the current study, results confirmed that men's beliefs and practices around fatherhood need to be seen in the context of changes – economic, political, and social – which affect gender relations, including legal and policy changes which support women's and children's rights. A particularly important aspect of South Africa's history of apartheid is fathers and grandfathers lacking much experience of active fatherhood, since many of them were themselves children in absent, abusive, or emotionally void households. Many participants described significant shifts in their own fatherhood beliefs and practices due to participation in OMC. Specifically, men described a transition from a disciplinarian and provider role towards one of increased involvement, companionship, nurturing, and affection towards children. In addition to describing improved communication and a better quality of relationships with children, men also recognised the positive role they can play in bringing up the next generation to be citizens who are healthy, and respectful of the equal rights of all, including women and girls. The programme appeared to be particularly promising in its ability to engage men on the sensitive topics of masculinities, gender equality, and family life, and to provide a safe space for critical reflections on these topics.

The research revealed that there were several important challenges experienced in this work. First, a few men described how other men ridiculed them for taking on more gender-equitable beliefs or practices in households and relationships. This highlights how gender-transformative programming in the future needs to recognise more centrally that masculinity is not solely defined in relation to femininity, but also in terms of how men practice masculinities in front of other men. Second, not all participants in OMC were able to transition to roles that included companionship, affection, or less discipline with their children. Indeed, while we saw many positive changes, these are challenging to make in the context of South Africa, where the legacy of the migrant labour system has created a narrow definition of fatherhood as a financial and authoritative role. Indeed, persistent poverty coupled with a primary definition of fathers as material providers has been found to

exacerbate men's feelings of uselessness and/or absenteeism in family life (Ramphele and Richter 2006). Some of the men in our sample highlighted this to us. Third, it is worth noting that it was older men in our sample who disproportionately described shifts in masculinities, gender equality, and parenting practices. This may be due to the fact that older men who were not working were at home in a way that breadwinners could not be.

Our research shows that it is critical to bolster gender-transformative health and parenting programmes with young men who may be particularly resistant to change given that their masculine identities are an important resource through which to contest the marginalisation and disempowerment that many men in this context articulate and face (Morrell 2006; Morrell and Richter 2006). Such contextual realities not only underscore the importance of the current work, but highlight how gender-transformative programming should increasingly view fathers as a critical point of intervention to improve the health and well-being of children, families, and men themselves.

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