

# Family matters:

## An overview of family values and preferences

The South African government introduced a series of legislative and policy reforms aimed at promoting stronger, more cohesive families after 1994. Yet much remains to be understood about the varied effects this political change has had on family life and attitudes. In this article, **Benjamin Roberts, Steven Gordon and Jarè Struwig** present initial findings from one of the first national family surveys to be conducted in the country.



Data for the study come from the 10th round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), which was conducted in late 2012 by the HSRC. The survey round included a dedicated questionnaire on family structure, family-related roles and values, as well as policy preferences. With financial support from the Department of Science and Technology, the survey was administered to a nationally representative sample of 2 547 respondents, aged 16 years and older, living in private households.

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### Satisfaction with family life

In terms of overall self-rated family assessments, South African society remained distinctly family oriented and people tended to voice satisfaction with their family lives:

- An estimated 95% reported that family was an important part of their lives.
- When asked about levels of satisfaction with family life, 21% were completely satisfied, 40% were very satisfied and 23% were fairly satisfied. Only a small minority (11%) reported that they were dissatisfied and 5% were neutral.
- The results suggested that satisfaction with family life could be related to material conditions. For example, only 55% of those who had gone without food were often or sometimes satisfied with their family lives in

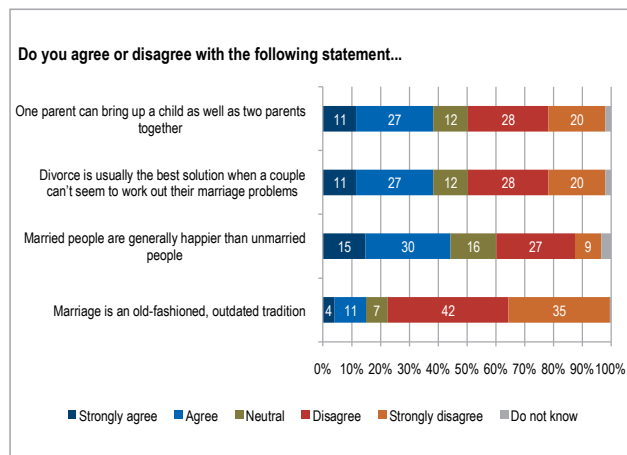
the year before the survey. By contrast, 92% of those who had never gone without food were satisfied with this aspect of their lives.

### Marriage, divorce and cohabitation

Available evidence on marriage patterns in South Africa suggests relatively low and declining rates of marriage, and high rates of extra-marital childbearing. Given this, some initial insight into prevailing attitudes towards marriage was provided (Figure 1):

- Generally favourable views continued to be vested in the institution of marriage. For instance, a considerable majority (77%) disagreed that marriage was an old-fashioned, outdated tradition, with only a minority agreeing or providing a neutral response.
- Nonetheless, the public was more ambivalent about the impact of marriage on the quality of people's lives. Less than half (44%) agreed that married people were more contented in life than the unmarried, with 37% disagreeing and 19% being undecided.
- The importance attached to marriage was also reflected in general disapproval of divorce and cohabitation. A considerable share (48%) rejected divorce as the best solution for couples with unresolved marital problems, with only 38% favouring this option, and 14% being unsure. On average, 62% opposed the view that non-marital cohabiting relationships were permissible, even when a couple did not plan to eventually marry.
- Financial difficulties in paying bride wealth (*ilobolo*) has been suggested as one potential barrier to getting married. The survey found mixed evidence on this account, with 39% agreeing and 37% challenging the view that bride wealth served as a disincentive to marriage. Overall, 61% approved of the tradition of paying bride wealth, with 56% arguing that it strengthened bonds between two families.

Figure 1: Attitudes towards marriage



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2012

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### Children, child-rearing and parenting

South Africans place a strong value on raising children and being a parent, as the following results attested:

- There was near universal agreement (97%) that raising children was life's greatest joy, while clear majorities rejected the suggestion that children represented a financial burden for parents, restricted their employment and career opportunities, and curtailed their personal freedom (58%, 59% and 62% disagreed respectively).
- Much research has been conducted on the roles of mothers and grandmothers in raising children and broader provisioning for families. The HSRC has been at the forefront of promoting increased attention to fathers and fatherhood in the country. On an encouraging note, the survey found that sizable shares believed that fathers wanted a loving relationship with the children (88%), received considerable respect for performing their fatherhood role (75%), and felt that fathers should have equal responsibility to mothers for child rearing (71%). However, the public harboured deep concern that many fathers in South Africa did not live with their children (81% agreed).
- Nearly three quarters (72%) agreed that single parents could bring up a child as well as two parents together. Many, however, remained strongly opposed to same-sex couples raising children.

Though South Africa has a comprehensive framework in place for the protection and care of children, there is increasing recognition of the need to strengthen families

so that extended kin can continue to foster and care for the children of relatives affected by HIV/AIDS. Efforts aimed at promoting the adoption of children are also being emphasised, especially in cases of abandonment, familial neglect and abuse, or the absence of family to provide kinship care. In terms of attitudes towards such forms of child care:

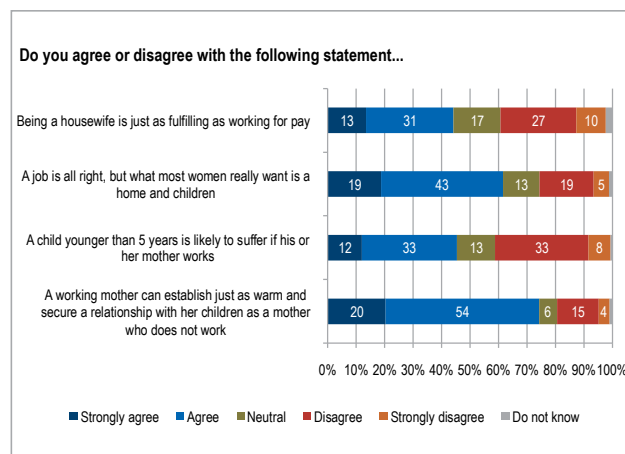
- Slightly more than half of South Africans (54%) believed we as a society should be doing more to encourage and support the adoption of children in need.
- The population gave broad preference (75%) to orphaned children being cared for by their extended families (grandparents, aunts, uncles) over their adoption by people who were not related to them.
- The public endorsed (85%) the provision of government financial assistance to ensure that orphaned and vulnerable children were cared for by their extended families.

### Gender roles

One of the fundamental societal changes to have occurred worldwide over recent decades has been the reconfiguration of the roles of men and women, husbands and wives. In relation to attitudes towards women, work and the family, the survey indicated that:

- Almost three quarters (74%) believed that a working mother could establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who did not work.
- However, many felt that women should remain home to look after very young children, with 45% agreeing that a child younger than five years was likely to suffer if his or her mother works. Surprisingly, women were not less likely than men to agree with this statement.
- There was considerable agreement (61%) that home life was the first priority for South African women, with only 24% disagreeing.
- The public was more divided when asked whether being a housewife was as fulfilling as working for pay, with 44% agreeing and 37% disagreeing. Again, unexpectedly, women and men did not differ appreciably in their views.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards the role of women in the workplace



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2012

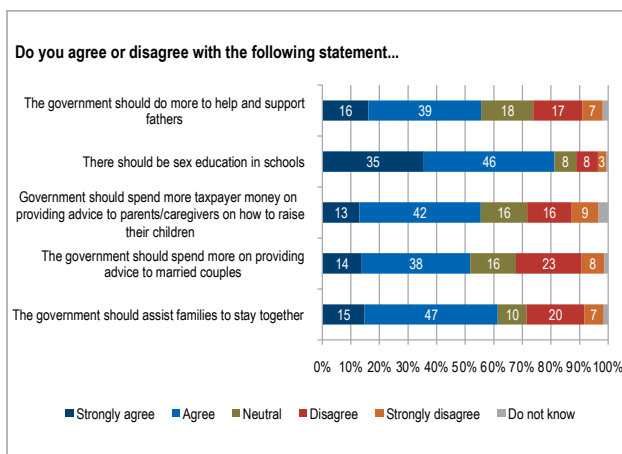


**Family-related policies**

Notable support appeared to exist for state intervention to assist families, especially in the context of a society that was continuing to grapple with the ravaging effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, attitudinal cleavages emerged when examining the specific types of assistance to be offered:

- A sizable share of the country (61 %) said that the government should assist families to stay together.
- The public were more divided over whether the government should spend more on providing advice to married couples (52% supportive; 31% opposed; 17% neutral).
- South Africans were also split over whether the government should spend additional taxpayer money on providing advice to parents/caregivers on how to raise their children. More than half (55%) supported such a measure, but a quarter were opposed and a fifth, unsure.
- Strong support (81 %) was nonetheless found for sex education in schools.

Figure 3: Attitudes towards the role of the government in strengthening families



Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2012

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**Conclusion**

These preliminary results from the SASAS 2012 family questionnaire offer a glimpse into the complex and dynamic nature of family values and preferences as we approach and reflect on 20 years of democracy. They form part of a bigger programme of research that is currently underway at the HSRC, aimed at producing policy-relevant evidence in order to reduce vulnerability and strengthen families so that they continue to nurture, support and protect millions of South African citizens, both young and old alike. The results portray a society that is deeply wedded to the institutions of family and marriage. And while our respondents openly acknowledge the contributory role of families in their lives, there is a concomitant, robust demand for a proactive state role in promoting family values and helping to maintain family cohesion. ■

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