

The International Corner

Work and Family in South Africa

By Jeffrey Bagraim



Jeffrey Bagraim

Bio: Jeffrey Bagraim is an Associate Professor in Management Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He teaches, consults and conducts research in the areas of commitment, change, and work-family.

Jeffrey holds a Business Science honours degree in psychology, a BA Honours degree in I/O Psychology (First Class), and a Masters degree in I/O Psychology (Distinction) from the University of Cape Town. He received his PhD from the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom.

His professional affiliations include the International Association of Applied Psychology, the American Academy of Management, the South African Institute of Management Scientists, and both the American and South African societies of I/O psychology. He also retains professional registration as a psychologist.

Jeffrey serves on the editorial board of the Irish Journal of Management and reviews submissions for several South African and international journals. He has presented over 50 papers at academic meetings and has published his work in a range of journals from Management Dynamics to Human Performance.

South Africa is a culturally diverse country of 49 million people with 11 official languages and large disparities in wealth and resource allocation. Despite being a middle-income country with abundant natural resources and a modern business infrastructure (supported by developed financial, legal, communications, energy, and transport systems), unemployment remains high and poverty is pervasive. Apartheid-era imbalances in income distribution, decent housing, education, and health care still exist.

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, female participation in the formal economy has increased substantially. In 2007, Statistics South Africa reported that female labour force participation was just shy of 50%. However, as in many other countries, women still carry a disproportionate responsibility for household maintenance and family care. A national time-use survey in 2001 showed that South African women spent more than double the time men spent on household and care activities but much less time than men engaging in educational, social, and cultural activities.

A notable feature of the South African work-family context is the prevalence of HIV and AIDS, which is projected to account for about 75% of premature deaths in South Africa this year.

In 2009, the United Nations estimated that approximately 5.7 million people were living with HIV and AIDS in South Africa. Young adults are particularly affected, with current estimates that 1 in 4 males aged 30-34 and 1 in 3 females aged 25-29 are living with HIV. These age brackets indicate that it is not uncommon for one or more parents to die prematurely, leaving young children. The personal, economic, and social consequences on the children are severe, especially if the parent was a low-paid employee already impoverished through loss of income during their illness. An increasing number of children are now raised by their grandparents in “sandwich families” or left on their own in child-headed households. Combating HIV and AIDS is high on the agenda of both civil society and government.

The South African government has a strong commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Therefore, it has promulgated legislation and implemented policies that promote empowerment, ban gender-based discrimination, and ensure equitable treatment and equal access in the labour market.

Yet, despite an enviably progressive national constitution and a highly developed labour relations system, South Africa has little in the way of legislated family-friendly legislation. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act recognizes maternity leave (currently 4 months with limited financial assistance for 121 days within these 4 months), but all other possible forms of work-family leave are combined into a narrowly defined “family responsibility leave” provision. This provides 3 days of paid leave per annum to attend to sick children, the funeral of “defined individuals,” or (for fathers in the absence of any legislated paternity leave) the birth of a child. “Family responsibility leave” only applies to employees who have been employed for at least 4 months with the same employer and who work at least 4 days a week. It does not provide time to care for sick family members other than one’s children, an important issue in a national context characterised by widespread poverty and HIV/AIDS.

Regarding flexible work arrangements, South African employees have no distinct legislative right to request flexible working arrangements and it remains to be tested whether denying such a request, made for the purpose of care, could be considered unfair discrimination. As with all the provisions detailed above, many employers do offer more generous family-friendly policies and practices such as flexible work arrangements, paid maternity leave, and paid paternity leave.

Given the above situation, South Africa presents an interesting and rich domain for further research on work-family issues.

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