

September
2015Mobilizing critical research for
preventing and eradicating poverty

THE END OF POVERTY: BLACK WOMEN'S ENTRY TO THE MIDDLE CLASS IN SOUTH AFRICA

By Hilde Ibsen

This brief argues that:

- A focus on the problems of the poor and social policies alone are not sufficient for long-term poverty reduction.
- Gender equality and middle class formation must also be addressed in order to avoid the continued feminisation of poverty.
- Poor people must be empowered in order to develop their capacity to aspire.

Introduction

When the African National Congress, the ANC, presented its visions for the future of South Africa in "Ready to Govern" (1992), one of the basic objectives was to "develop a sustainable economy and state infrastructure that will progressively improve the quality of life of all South Africans" (ANC 1992). The ANC revitalized the call for a national democratic revolution, which entailed an interventionist state with the goal of lifting the most disadvantaged and marginalized. Part of the transformation process was to strengthen democratic institutions, increase equality and achieve economic growth. A framework for the new economic direction was set out in "A Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act" with the aim of providing opportunities for black capital to accumulate (Southall and Tangri 2008). According to former president Thabo Mbeki, the handling of the economic future of South Africa included promoting the formation of a black middle class, which 'will itself be committed and contribute to black economic empowerment' (Mbeki cit. in Hirsch 2005, chap. 6, p. 17). Within the ANC the strength of a new black middle class evolved as a means to reduce inequality and fulfil the vision of a better life for all (Ibsen 2015). After twenty years of democracy, there is consensus among researchers that the middle class is expanding, though there are significant variations in definitions (Burger et al 2015). Based on a monthly income per capita threshold

Summary

After 1994 the South African government implemented a flurry of strategies aimed at poverty reduction and gender equality. The government committed itself to creating a democratic state with the goal of integrating economic growth and social development. As a result many black women received new opportunities to exit poverty and enter the middle class. This brief argues that this was possible due to the interaction effects of governmental policies and the development of aspirational capacity among South African women.

of R 4 100 (2012 prices), it is estimated that 3 million black South Africans belong to the middle class, compared to 350 000 in 1993 (Themediaonline 2013), and approximately 1.5 million of them are women (UUISM 2008). When this is said, however, South Africa is still one of the most unequal countries in the world despite the fact that the level of extreme poverty has dropped since 2006 (Poverty Trends in South Africa 2014). Unemployment rates are alarming and there are many structural barriers to overcoming poverty, particularly in rural areas.

Stepping stones for entry to the middle class

A dominant view on the position of black women in South Africa is that they have been at the tail-end of the social order when it comes to being marginalized, poor and oppressed by African males as well as by the apartheid system. That black women got access to the middle class at all was, "one of the most dramatic changes" for women of the new South Africa (Cock and Bernstein 2002, p. 168). Several enabling factors are recognized. There is continuity from a strong culture of female power. African feminist scholars have stressed that despite gender hierarchies, South African women have historically defined and carried out their own struggle. Many of them

have been powerful and able to mobilise their energy, and emancipated themselves through education and civic action (Meijntes 1996; Gasa 2007). This argument resonates with a pilot study of women that grew up in rural areas under poor and humble conditions (Darkey and Ibsen 2015). They claimed that, even though the governments' poverty and gender policy was crucial for empowerment and social upward mobility, another important stepping stone for entry to the middle class was their mothers. The most concrete expression of a mother's role as an empowering agent is her encouragement for education. In order to get a better life and get out of the poverty trap, they repeatedly told their daughters to value education. Recurring statements were: "I am the woman I am today because of her"; "Yes, I am a strong, educated woman because of her". Many of the mothers worked hard in order to pay for their daughters' education, and one was "so determined that she would send her five girls to school irrespective of the community beliefs" (Darkey and Ibsen 2015). Through tertiary education poor women climbed the social ladder and stepped into typical occupations that belong to the upper and lower middle class categories. Importantly, they gained aspirational capacity. This resonates with the arguments of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai that the capacity among poor people to aspire is decisive for the poor to create alternative futures. Aspirations constitute nodes that have to do with wants, preferences, choices and ideas about the good life. In order to exit poverty, the poor must be enabled to develop their capacity to aspire, and when this capacity is triggered, the chances for success will increase (Appaduraj 2004).

Conclusion

The focus in this Poverty Brief has been to explore how previously disadvantaged women's entry into the middle class in contemporary South Africa was possible. Political choices made by the government were of core importance, whereby the emancipatory culture inherent in the ANC was expressed in the fight for liberation and democracy. Since 1994, the ANC-led government has highlighted gender issues, at least rhetorically, and the government has repeatedly stressed the importance of the role of the middle class in forging the development of a democratic state and reducing inequality. Politics matters, but it also interacts with the personal capacity to aspire. For some South African women, the exit from poverty was made possible because educational attainment triggered by their mothers gave them aspirational capacity.

Author

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