

# Systematically Excluded:

## Young Women's experiences of accessing the child support grant in South Africa

### Project Brief: 2014

### Background

The South African government continues to demonstrate commitment to addressing poverty. One major mechanism is through an expanding social welfare system via the provision of social grants. The South African social welfare system primarily targets two categories of people, children under 18 who are supposed to be in education and adults over retirement age (60 for women, 65 for men). It does not routinely provide support to those of working age, unless they are classified as disabled.

Children are targeted through three main social grants. The Child Support Grant (CSG) is for children under 18; the Foster Care Grant is a grant for children formally in foster care, and the Care Dependency Grant is an amount for children with severe disabilities that require special care ([www.sassa.gov.za](http://www.sassa.gov.za)).

Evidence demonstrates the short- and long-term positive impacts for children who receive the CSG; children have better growth and reduced hunger (Aguero, Carter, & Woolard, 2007), are more likely to be enrolled in school, progress in school and stay longer in school (Coetzee, 2013). Furthermore increasing evidence shows adolescents who received the CSG had lower risky sexual behaviour – and these effects were stronger when the grant had been received from early in the child's childhood (Cluver, Boyes, Orkin, Molwena, & Sherr, 2013; DSD, SASSA, & UNICEF, 2011, 2012).

The impact for receiving a CSG on caregivers is less clear. One assertion is that it shifts normally dependent household members into breadwinner status, in so doing transforms household relationships and power dynamics (Patel & Hochfeld, 2011). A study in South

Africa suggests that the CSG increased the female caregiver's bargaining power within the household and enabled her to spend more money on items she felt were important (Patel & Hochfeld, 2011). However, global studies on the impact of cash transfer programmes, suggest that while improving the health of women, as well as children, they do little to challenge gender relationships (Molyneux & Thomson, 2011).

Uptake of the CSG is not universal to all eligible children. Cluver et al. (2013) show receipt of the CSG as 71.0%. Studies suggest two broad factors reduce access, age of child and age of caregiver. Two studies assessing access to the CSG for children under 24 months suggest it was around 65% (Twine, Collinson, Polzer, & Khan, 2007; Zembe-Mkabile et al., 2013) and that access to the CSG remains low until children are older (DSD et al., 2012). Research also suggests that younger women who care for children are less likely than other caregivers to access the CSG (Makiwane & Udjo, 2006). The team's own work in urban informal settlements as part of the Stepping Stones and Creating Future study, where women had an average age of 21, suggests just under 50% of women eligible for the grant received it (Jewkes et al., Under review).

Few studies in South Africa explore barriers to accessing the CSG. Quantitative studies emphasise that lack of access to CSG is contributed to by lack of vital registration documents for both primary carer and child and the distance from SASSA offices (DSD et al., 2011; Twine et al., 2007; Zembe-Mkabile et al., 2013). Qualitative data from studies also emphasise the complexity of the application process and documents required, but also points to intra-family tensions limiting access (DSD et al., 2011). Despite studies outlining a range of potential barriers to accessing the CSG, there is little specific research exploring why young women

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are particularly unlikely to access them. This brief presents the findings of an exploratory descriptive study that explored young women's (18-25) access to and use of social grants in urban informal settlements in Durban on behalf of their children, and the impact this has on their lives and livelihoods.

## Methods

We recruited 30 young women (under 25) whose children were eligible for the Child Support Grant for in-depth interviews for the study.

Ethical approval for the study was received from UKZN and the Medical Research Council, South Africa. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

## Impact of receiving a grant

Data suggest that for those young women receiving the CSG for their child this significantly improved their lives, allowing unemployed young women to support their families and take care of their children. Young women expressed a sense of having gained social status and were now able to claim a social space that they previously did not hold in the household. As they brought in an income, the young women were increasingly able to participate in deciding how money was spent within households, or make independent decisions around spending the CSG:

*Interviewer: Who decides what the money [grant] is spent on?*

*Nothemba: I decide and then tell my mother what to buy*

The research found that young women who did receive the CSG tended to use it to support their children directly. Many described how they spent the CSG on small items for their children so they could attend school and not feel socially excluded at school:

*Hlengiwe: My children are now like all other children who are living with both parents and whose parents are working; they are clothed and go to school like other children.*

Another described spending the CSG on funding the child's attendance at crèche and in addition buying food so the child could eat at crèche:

*Zethu: I use it [the grant] for crèche; another portion would be to buy lunch stuff for him for school.*

## Factors supporting and limiting access to the CSG

Analysis suggested young women generally showed appreciation for the CSG and felt the government was

genuinely committed to ensuring that they received the help that they needed. However, they described a range of barriers to their access of the CSG.

## Lack of documents

A recurring problem for women, whether or not they were receiving the CSG, was that they struggled to access the documents they needed to apply for the CSG, either for themselves or their children. Applicants required identity books (ID books), as well as a birth certificate for the child, road to health card and proof of address. Where young women had never received these documents, or they had been lost or destroyed, securing these documents was tremendously difficult, especially when numerous trips were required to hospitals, home affairs and the police.

*Nosifundo B: I lost Thandolwethu's [her child's] discharge card and that is the card that is needed at the hospital so I can get a letter to be able to do a birth certificate for him:*

*Interviewer: When did you start contributing on this stokvel [savings group]?*

*Promise: I started this year because last year I couldn't start early enough.*

*Interviewer: What encouraged you to start saving money in a stokvel? Would you say the information you got at the intervention had an impact?*

*Promise: Yes I was really encouraged because before then, I didn't see the importance of saving money but now I realise it is really important and helpful and I can see the good results.*

*Interviewer: Why are you not getting a grant for your child?*

*Pinky: I don't have a birth certificate for him; and the road to health card together with my ID book burnt in the shack fire.*

## Travel and transport fare

The SASSA offices were not easily accessible to the communities who need the services the most. Most interviewees were unemployed and found it very difficult to get the money needed to travel to SASSA offices to apply for the CSG. The high cost of transport was further compounded by the fact that although the application can, and should, take one day from application to approval, most interviewees described being asked by SASSA officials to make multiple trips to SASSA offices over a number of days:

*Londiwe: It (transport fare) cost me R25 one way. I had to go back there three times.*

*Nonjabulo: There were problems because we didn't have money to go to SASSA all the time. My mother is not working and getting transport money was a*



*problem at times. It was so difficult that at times that we would not go [to SASSA].*

Another interviewee described how she failed to access the CSG because of the high costs of repeated trips to and from SASSA offices:

*Palesa: I ran out of money going up and down to SASSA and this thing not getting sorted out*

## SASSA

There are huge demands placed on SASSA and officials working at SASSA to provide quick answers to applications for the CSG. Almost all interviewees described how they queued for long hours and many woke early in the morning to try and beat the queues:

*Ntombenhle: It was so full, you get there and there are long queues. You get there early in the morning but you will go home late.*

*Palesa: I kept going back and going back. I kept going and it was really full, the queues were so long that on some days I would not even get in, I would end up in the queues until the end of the day and I would be forced to go back home having done nothing.*

Despite the large workload faced by SASSA staff, some interviewees described how they felt some SASSA staff to be helpful and the process of applying and being approved for the CSG went through easily:

*Nomzamo: I finished very quickly; I got it [grant approval] the same day."*

*Zonke: It was very easy because I went today, did my registration, and was back quickly.*

SASSA officials were sometimes seen to try and go beyond their call of duty to help the young women access grants for their children who at times was clear how desperately the grant was needed. One participant described how after discussions with an official, how they tried to help her:

*Sbongile: When I went to SASSA they asked me how old I was and I told them I was 15; we talked a little bit and then they told me to get someone who can register on my behalf so that the child can get the money because I couldn't do it myself since I was still under age (under 18).*

## Belittled and powerless

While some young women we interviewed described positive interactions with SASSA staff, more interviewees described interactions in which they felt 'belittled and powerless', and in particular they linked this to being young applicants for the CSG. Moreover, this was something that they felt was a general experience in their ongoing interactions with many

government institutions including Home Affairs, the Department of Health and Police Services. Women described how they were shouted at and ridiculed by officials, as well as asked inappropriate and irrelevant questions when applying for the CSG:

*Hlengiwe: Even when you've made it inside [to SASSA] there are a lot of questions that they ask you and some of the questions you can see them; for example they ask you why you broke up with the father of your child...*

They also described how they were shouted at and in general treated poorly by officials:

*Nomkhosi: They don't treat people well. Maybe if you don't know something, like maybe, I didn't know that I had to make two copies and I only made one, they shouted at me for that instead of telling me nicely that I had to do this many copies.*

Young women experience a lot of stigma associated with being young and pregnant. Research in health care institutions has shown that young pregnant women are treated differently from older women. Young mothers do not only have to face the challenges of motherhood but they also need to be prepared 'to accept' what is thrown at them for being young mothers. As one participant clearly articulated her feelings "they take our confidence away" and this leaves young women unable to stand up for themselves and claim their rights. A number of interviewees described how this treatment was because they were perceived by officials to be too young to be applying for the CSG.

*Zoleka: They [officials at SASSA] kept teasing me, saying "you have a child when you are so young."*

*Interviewer: Who teased you?*

*Zoleka: The staff at SASSA*

*Zama: They shout at us, especially if you still a young mother.*

Such questions were entirely unnecessary for applications related to the CSG and went beyond the scope of what SASSA officials were required to do. Yet interviewees felt they could not complain or respond in any other way since they were highly dependent on the officials asking inappropriate questions and shouting at them for access to the CSG.

*Lihle: If you talk back they tell you that because you know too much, you can do it yourself and they won't help you.*

## Arbitrariness

Gupta (2012) has described, what he characterises as a bureaucratic arbitrariness in the state's "provision of care" for poor people it is meant to be helping. In essence officials are the state's frontline creating their own series of rules and systems that shape poor people's access to support.



A similar dynamic was described by many of the interviewees, where officials kept changing their mind, or adding additional documentation for what was needed to apply for the CSG. As one participant pointed out SASSA “*was not helpful*” during her application process; “*I would go there and be told I need this and then the next time I will be told something else.*” Others also experienced this arbitrariness:

*Smangele: They (officials) were so difficult because they want a lot of things. First they first told me I needed to get a letter from the Nduna saying I stay in the area and when I went back they said they want a letter from the municipality saying I stay in the area*  
Interviewer: *and the letter from the Nduna, wasn't that enough?*

*Smangele: oh no, now they did not want that, they wanted the municipality one.*

When young women did not have the documents that were required by SASSA to apply for the CSG, it became very hard for the young women and SASSA officials to identify what documents could replace these. It is partly for this reason that young women perceive SASSA to be changing its requirements and leaving them in the dark.

## Support

Despite the challenges described by young women in applying for and accessing the CSG they also described how support from their families, particularly grandmothers and partners emerged as very crucial in the complex and confusing maze of government. Having someone to give them transport fare for the numerous trips it took to complete the application process and at times having someone accompany them to the agencies was important; someone older or male who just by their presence accorded the young mothers some status:

*Nonjabulo: My mother was there with me all the time and whenever I encountered problems, she was there to help.*

## Next Steps

These findings provide a better understanding of the barriers and facilitators to accessing CSG for young women. As part of the team's ongoing work around strengthening young women's livelihoods as a pathway to reducing intimate partner violence and HIV-risk, the team has incorporated these findings into Creating Futures. The manual provides detailed facilitator guidelines around how to support young women and men to strengthen their livelihoods. An additional section will be included to strengthen young people's critical thinking around how to access the CSG.

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