

## **Baby Showers as Economic Support Networks: An Intersectional Approach**

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### **Abstract**

*The high rates of migration from rural to urban areas in Botswana exposed many women in urban areas to live under diverse socio-economic conditions away from relatives. Some of the women are part of the statistic of those living in poverty and under diverse economic hardships such as limited income generation opportunities as well as those facing difficulties to maintain better lifestyles. As a result, most women are compelled to form new relations and support networks to buffer their socio-economic inadequacies. One of their notable buffers is the transformation of baby showers beyond the rite of passage into both a social and economic support activity for expectant mothers. Adopting an intersectionality lens, the researchers analyse the views and experiences of several women who participated in a WhatsApp informal group discussion on how women economically support each other and form relations as researchers as well as how gender transects with socio-economic factors to re-construct and maintain gendered practices in society.*

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### **Introduction**

As in other countries, Botswana women are central to parenting and care giving when matched with their male associates. The society is organized in such a way that men play a “superior” role of being a provider while women are at the receiving end of being a caregiver (Robinson, 2014). Many women have to do their caregiving roles (including childcare) under poor circumstances that include financial constraints. Women’s circumstances are often a result of inadequate opportunities for employment and other income generating activities (Statistics Botswana, 2011). Additionally, African black women are exposed to diverse injustices like poor access to education that increase their vulnerability (Sewpaul, 2013), hence the feminization of poverty (Holmes, 2007).

The foregoing challenges often motivate women to come up with social and group-oriented mechanisms to support each other as well as to meet societal standards of womanhood. One particular social network group activity that generally has become a trend in both rural and urban settings of Botswana is Baby showers. Baby showers are financial buffers for most of the expectant women in the country. Baby showers are diverse but are mostly feminine (Fischer & Gainer, 1993; and Ahlers-Schmidt, Schunn, Dempsey & Blackmon, 2014). The most common baby shower in Botswana is traditional

baby showers. Traditional baby showers are gendered as they are exclusively attended by females (Fischer & Gainer, 1993; and Motswapong, Kebaneilwe, Madigele, Dube, Setume & Moroka-Modie, 2017). In most instances, men's attempts to seek attendance are discouraged. Hence, traditional baby showers are organized by women for expectant women. According to Strange, Fisher, Howat and Wood (2014), women benefit from attending women's social groups (such as baby showers) as they have the opportunity to learn various things such as parenting and community resources as well as to enhance a sense of association.

The current paper draws insights from women's experiences of traditional baby showers as participants in our group discussion had attended exclusive female showers only. In this paper, researchers want to sensitize the reader that in addition to being the rite of passage, baby showers signal the interaction of gender and other factors such as economic factors to re-construct and maintain cultural practices in our society, some of which are symbols of injustice. Therefore, using an intersectionality lens, the paper discusses how women economically and socially benefit from baby showers as well as how gendered roles and practices were re-constructed and maintained in our society.

### **Brief Literature Review**

Commonly, baby showers are perceived and defined as a celebration of the rite of passage from just being an adolescent girl or a sheer woman to motherhood. Rites of passage are observances that signify a major

transformation in one's life though they might revert to their original positions in the future (Motswapong et al., 2017). Pregnancy and motherhood are supposed to be celebrated as they are a symbol of family growth and joy for friends, relatives and the community at large. Most of the time during pregnancy women encounter lack of adequate support, which is likely to result in emotional strain and as such, different forms of support and social networks are critical at this stage to help them cope with pregnancy (Benza & Liamputtong, 2014). The rite of passage to motherhood in Botswana has a long-standing history of traditional celebrations that symbolized appreciation of the new baby. They had a similar resemblance of the modern baby showers because in both activities there is an act of giving gifts as a token of appreciation and support (Motswapong et al., 2017). Therefore, baby showers promote and inspire the spirit of humanity (Motswapong et al., 2017) as well as to promote social support (Gjesfjeld, Researchers aver & Schommer, 2012).

The rites of passage associated with childbirth would appear to be among those most robust in the face of modern trends toward social isolation. Baby showers are arguably among these rites of passage associated with childbirth. Parties held in honour of women who are about to become mothers accompany one of the major role transitions that most women undergo during their lives (Fischer & Gainer, 1993). Baby showers are usually held near the end of a pregnancy. Pregnancy is the rite of passage which marks the acquisition of the new role of motherhood. A baby

shower provides a platform for exchange of information on motherhood by “expert” mothers. Generally, it is assumed that first time mothers are likely to develop a sense of loss of independence and hence they have to tap on the experience of the “experts” so that they can cope with the loss. At a baby shower, a mother-to-be is provided both with a community of other mothers and potential mothers, and with objects she will use to fulfil her new role. At a baby shower a mother-to-be is provided both with a community of other mothers and potential mothers, and with objects she will use to fulfil her new role. Baby showers seem to contribute to the eventual reintegration of the new and old selves (Fischer & Gainer, 1993).

As a social function, a baby shower is a symbol of female unity and promotion of communal values where it develops and enhances relationships between the participants (Fischer & Gainer, 1993). Friendships are essential for the health of the mother and her baby as the expectant mother gets emotional and material support (Glover & Parry, 2008). Friendships that start during baby showers often translate into long term relationships that can help the mother to cope with her multiple roles after the birth of the child.

Critiques of baby showers argue that they strengthen and propagate discriminatory and abusive practices in our society. Baby showers promote dominant constructions of motherhood and parenthood. From a cultural perspective, women and men who have children are celebrated through baby showers and

gift exchanges which gives the impression that for one to be recognized as a parent in society they must have children (Simon, 2008). The fulfilment of societal expectations and beliefs often provide illusionary emotional gratification that does not guarantee positive parenting practices. Society often gives the impression that without having babies, one would not be emotionally fulfilled (Simon, 2008).

Baby showers also discriminate against people who cannot have children. Their participation in information exchange is often not welcome as emphasis is on experience. The finding of Braithwaite (1995) in a study to examine embarrassment during ritual activities revealed that “coed” baby showers sometimes embarrass participants (especially men) who seem to have limited knowledge of issues discussed during the shower. Institutionalized embarrassments such as those that appear during baby showers include making a person look different from others or providing negative feedback or criticism towards their limited knowledge or behaviour. For example, in Braithwaite’s (1995) study, men made humorous comments about baby gifts while women deliberately made sure that they expose men’s inadequate knowledge of their roles as fathers during pregnancy and after the birth of a child. Therefore, such discriminatory practices often perpetuate gendered practices within a social gathering that is supposed to dismantle them.

## **Methods**

To inform the paper, one of the researchers formed a WhatsApp group, added the other and made each one of us an administrator so that we can add women who would be relevant to the study. The WhatsApp group composed of the authors' familiar contacts. Data was gathered on the views and experiences of women residing in Gaborone (an urban setting) about baby showers. WhatsApp is a popular social media application with practical and relational features that use threaded posts and chats, pictures, audio and video clips between two or more people as well as to give users signals on whether their contact persons are online or not (O'Hara, Massimi, Harper, Rubens, & Morris, 2014). The messages that are shared between people communicating are time imprinted and use single and double ticks as a way to inform the receiver and sender whether the messages have been delivered or read (O'Hara, Massimi, Harper, Rubens, & Morris, 2014).

Due to unforeseen and/or minimal risks involved in the study, the researchers decided not to seek ethical approval but sought consent from the participants in their inboxes and only added those who accepted to take part in the study. The researchers used their experiences to validate some of our own experiences and perceptions about baby showers. The researchers treated the WhatsApp group like a focus group discussion (FDG). The group composed of eight women of different ages below 45 years with diverse backgrounds. Some of the participants were researchers' immediate acquaintances while others were not. All the women who participated in the group had at least one child. The research included

only women that had attended or organized a baby shower. Researchers also created group rules with participants to ensure that everyone's personal experiences and opinions were valued. Additionally, members who were not comfortable to share their information were encouraged to make private comments on the researchers' individual inboxes, although none of them did it. To avoid haphazardness, the researchers made an agreement with the participants to engage in the group discussion every Monday each week in the evening from 18:00hours to 19:00 hours. Everyone was allowed to make a comment on any question imposed. Where an idea was shared, the participants indicated so. Each researcher could ask a question based on the content of the discussion. There was no interview guide used in the study.

WhatsApp has been successfully used by teachers to communicate with students (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014) and researchers as well as by academics to collect data (Kenchakkanavar & Hadagali, 2015). Although the application has its merits in terms of being easily accessible and convenient for both researchers and participants similar to other social media applications, the inability to engage with participants at a physical level sometimes impedes the ability to probe for clarification as well as to extract and interpret non-verbal expressions (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). For example, our experience of using WhatsApp was that at the initial stage of forming the group, a lot of members were sceptical about the goal of the focus group and confidentiality. Therefore, the researchers



emphasized time and again that our intention was to seek their experiences on baby showers so that researchers can write a paper to contribute to literature on baby showers in the context of Botswana. Researchers also emphasized to the participants in the group that researchers would maintain confidentiality by deleting the group after researchers have extracted the data and that their names would not appear anywhere in our paper. Participants were also asked not to reveal the identity of the other members if they happen to know them. The researchers decided not to use codes because they thought the topic was less sensitive. That could be the limitation of the methodology. Additionally, making probes was difficult and the participation of group members was not consistent because they commented randomly. Since the process was voluntary, the researchers did not want to appear forceful; therefore, the researchers kept the group open and active for three months so that they could add their opinions whenever they wanted. The researchers made reminders, probes and follow up on to the group members on a weekly basis. Sometime even if the researchers made deliberate follow up questions, they would not make follow up responses. As a result, the process was not systematic because researchers had to rely on the data the researchers had collected. The researchers adopted an intersectionality lens to thematically analyse the data.

### **Intersectionality Perspective**

Intersectionality lens is embedded in feminist critical theory and appreciates that gender does not act in

isolation to enhance or modify people's behaviours (Allen, Lloyd & Few, 2009; Mahalingam, Balan & Molina, 2009; Sewpaul, 2013). From an intersectionality lens, gender is in constant intersection with other systematic factors such as inequalities and opportunities (Allen, Lloyd & Few, 2009; Mahalingam, Balan & Molina, 2009; Sewpaul, 2013). The outcomes of that intersection are likely to produce either positive or negative impact at individual and structural levels. Intersectionality acknowledges the contribution of structural systems in the re-construction and maintenance of gendered practices in society (Mahalingam, Balan & Molina, 2009; Sewpaul, 2013). According to Mullaly and Mullaly (2010), people's experiences and access to resources primarily come from the structural nature of our society. For example, gender often intersects with class and race to determine women's and men's economic and social status in the society (Sewpaul, 2013).

### **Results and Discussion**

The results affirmed that gender intersects with various factors to influence women's experiences, decisions to organize baby showers and the activities they undertake during the showers. Gender transects with diverse issues such as economic status, knowledge, cultural practices, health and basic needs to motivate women's organization, actions and behaviours during baby showers. The findings highlight that although baby showers are motivated and organized primarily as an economic support mechanism for expectant women, the intersection of gender and the economic status has other outcomes.

Such include provision of educational and information sharing settings about parenting and the care of infant children, forums for moral and emotional support to expectant women, women's moments to celebrate motherhood, meetings to promote social relations among women and processes and forums that promote the reconstruction and maintenance of gendered roles and practices in society.

**Baby showers as economic support networks for women**

Most of the women who participated in the group discussion acknowledged that baby showers are primarily organized to boost the economic status of expectant women and their families, more especially women who are unemployed and those who come from economically disadvantaged homes. Women indicated that some of the women who reside in the city are far from their immediate family members, so they have to highly rely on friends, colleagues and neighbours as a source of social and financial support. One of the participants commented:

“Some of us migrate from our home villages and come to the city to find employment. Sometimes researchers find jobs that underpay us, so expectant mothers need friends and colleagues who can organize baby showers during times of need such as pregnancy.”

Another one echoed:

My dear, city life is not the same as village life where people have the immediate support of families in times of need. When I was at the village, I used not to worry a lot when I faced financial difficulties because I had the support of siblings, but since I came to GC (Gaborone City) and found a job here, I am expected to send money home and pay for both accommodation and utilities. But I am working as a mere security officer and when I got pregnant, I realized that if my friends and work colleagues had not organized a baby shower for me, it could have been more difficult for me to sustain a lifestyle here. Some people provided cash as gifts, others gave me shop vouchers and others bought clothes and toiletry for me and the baby. Honestly speaking I don't think I could have gotten so many gifts if I were at the village.

The participants indicated that organizers of the baby showers usually contribute a certain amount of money that is used to buy food for the guests and gifts for the expectant mother. Similar findings have been found in previous research studies on baby showers (Fischer & Gainer, 1993; and Motswapong et al., 2017). The gifts include clothes of different sizes, diapers, toiletry, and basic utensils such as bathtubs for the unborn baby. Some of the items bought can last up to a year after the birth of the child and in that way new mothers worry less about the baby's needs and they are able to divert some of their

financial resources to other family needs such food, transport, utilities, and other necessities. Thus, one of the motivations for doing baby showers result from the financial limitations of some women and the intention for others to economically change their situations. While the major goal of baby showers are primarily to boost the economic status of expectant women and new mothers and to provide material support, it turns out that the intersection of gender and economic status has other consequences that are appreciated by women during baby showers such as those discussed below:

**Baby showers as educational and information sharing settings about parenting and the care of infant children**

Baby showers researchers are perceived as a support network where women share information, experiences, and knowledge about self-care, parenting and the care of newborn children. They said that sharing of information and knowledge is more beneficial for first time expectant mothers who do not have childcare experience. During baby showers, women share health tips and information about the process of delivery such as sharing the different signs of the process of delivery, infant health conditions such as colic and immunization requirements for infants and babies. Other issues discussed include how to bath the baby, how to use diapers as researchers as well as the advantages and disadvantages of breast feeding and formula feeding. The information is more useful for women who are experiencing their first pregnancy. The information and knowledge shared during baby shower is

considered critical for the successful implementation of parenting or mothering responsibilities (Fischer & Gainer, 1993; and Motswapong et al., 2017). However, other women benefit as well because they get the opportunity to re-think their parenting ways as they get free refresher sessions on parenting and childcare. Information sharing has also been associated with emotional support.

**Baby showers as forums for moral and emotional support to expectant women**

The emotional and psychological status of women during and after pregnancy speaks to the quality and ability of the mother to parent or care for the child (Gjesfjeld, Researchers aver & Schommer, 2012). Participants indicated that one major benefit of baby showers is that they are a mechanism for providing emotional support to expectant women. During baby showers expectant women are allowed to ask questions, share their assumptions, feelings and anxieties about their awaited motherhood experiences. Women get additional information on childcare and the challenges of child delivery in baby showers. Baby showers provide supplementary information on health issues about feeding practices and immunization of children that enhances the prevention of infant and child mortality. One of the WhatsApp group participants who said that she was a nurse by profession highlighted that some women often experienced post-natal depression after delivery, but she has realized that baby showers act as buffers for such conditions. Expectant women are given a lot of information surrounding birth and

childcare and, as a result they are psychologically prepared for parenting and child care experiences.

One of the participants commented:

“Sometimes researchers are not aware of the causes of post-natal depression. In one of the baby showers I attended, one of the participants shared with us that confinement contributes to post-natal depression of some new mothers because they are not used to living in constrained areas, but our elders sometimes perceive us as uncooperative and too modern.”

Another affirmed the above participant’s point as she added:

“Baby showers are important in the psychological preparation for the new baby because sometimes expectant mothers are clueless about what is going to happen as the health workers may not share with them or discuss all practical issues concerning childbirth and childcare with them.”

The above expressions indicate that women are aware that to some extent, they lose some level of self-sufficiency as a result of the new or additional role of mothering and parenting. According to Fischer and Gainer (1993) women are likely to experience a sense of limited self-sufficiency as a result of feelings of over burden with the additional role of caregiving. Some participants expressed that some women sometimes become stressed, depressed

and fail to exercise self-care after delivery of the child. Therefore, messages shared during baby showers encourage them to pay attention to personal hygiene and physical and emotional care. Consequently, it enhances new mothers' physical and psychological wellbeing as well as the quality of their parenting practices or caregiving roles. But those women without social support are likely to experience psychological challenges and lower the quality of their mothering roles (Gjesfjeld, Researchers aver & Schommer, 2012).

### **Baby showers as processes and meetings that promote social relations among women**

Similar to the findings of a study by Motswapong et al. (2017) on baby showers, the participants in our group discussion perceived baby showers as a platform for socialising, connecting with new people and building networks. One of the participants perceived baby showers as a form of mutual trade of social support. She said:

“Baby showers ke motshelo. You scratch my back I scratch yours. If you fail to do for me, you limit me to do my best for you. Baby showers establish and strengthen relationships.”

The above participant expressed that baby showers could be related to the mutual assistance practice where one helps the other with an expectation to be assisted in the same way in future and failure to do



so may result in the termination of the relationship. Baby showers have the potential to build long and lasting relations (Motswapong et al., 2017) because it builds friendships and tests the loyalty of relationships. Social support is critical for first time mothers. It promotes positive emotional results (Gjesfeld, Researchers aver & Schommer, 2012).

**Baby showers as women’s moments to celebrate motherhood**

The majority of the women said that their experience of exclusive female showers is a special moment for women to celebrate motherhood and to exercise women solidarity. It’s a form of female community (Fischer & Gainer, 1993). One of the participants summarized it as follows:

“Baby showers offer opportunities for women and mothers from different backgrounds to come together in one setting to celebrate motherhood.”

The participants indicated that nowadays they hear that there are baby showers where men are allowed to participate. The participants were adamant that the presence of men diluted opportunities for women to have private moments to celebrate themselves. Motherhood is celebrated because women who decide to have children are perceived as selfless, mature and of significant value to society (Malacrida & Boulton, 2012).

**Baby showers as processes and forums that promote the re-construction and maintenance of gendered roles and practices in society.**

Although baby showers empower expectant women economically, emotionally, and socially, the above findings indicate that gender intersects with various factors such as unemployment, economic status, gendered roles, cultural practices, to re-constructs and preserve gendered roles and practices. ‘Gender roles are social roles that are prescribed for a society’s members depending on their sex’ (Renzetti & Curran, 2003: 418). According to Sewpaul (2013), gender role stereotypes are personally internalized to an extent that they become complacent such that those who experience injustice reproduce and sustain it. Gender stereotypes are a summary of descriptions of masculinity and femininity that is rather oversimplified and generalized (Renzetti & Curran, 2003).

Some messages and information shared during baby showers re-construct and emphasize gender discrimination especially since they are delivered in an exclusively female context. According to Atanga, Ellece, Litosseliti and Sunderland (2012), African languages often carry rich messages with contested ideologies. For example, in baby showers the messages often emphasize the role of the woman while nothing is said about the father of the expected child. Therefore, the information that women share in baby showers to a larger extent provide a prescribed ideology about motherhood that often causes women’s distress if they fail to achieve the expected standards of being a mother (Motswapong

et al., 2017). According to Fischer & Gainer (1993), an iconic mother demonstrates devotion and loyalty to societal expectations. Such expectations are skewed as they often disregard women who cannot stay long hours in confinement as a result of work demands. Women's failures fulfil societal expectations consequently subdues women to further discrimination in their communities which might lead to limited access to diverse opportunities. Additionally, standardized messages hampers women's autonomy in childcare (Motswapong et al., 2017) and decreases creativity and opportunities to combat gender discrimination as discriminatory behaviours and practices are re-invented during baby showers.

Traditional (Exclusively female) baby showers that our participants talked about re-construct and re-instate gendered roles as well as the dichotomous treatment of women and men in our society. The traditional organization of baby showers overlooks the need for and importance of male participation in the care of unborn children, infants as well as parenting in general. Such practices reaffirm and re-construct gendered practices that exist in our society regarding childcare and parenting. The exclusion of males and fathers in baby showers endorses the idea that women are care givers, but men are not. Exclusion of fathers in the process deliberately promotes motherhood and marginalizes fatherhood in our society as it re-affirms the ideology that childcare is a woman's responsibility. Thus, this reinforces the "othering" of women (Semley, 2012) as women are perceived as having different roles,

responsibilities, and capacities. Therefore, differential treatment of women often puts them in subordinate roles and responsibilities that are perceived as of lesser value by the society such as childcare. Therefore, baby showers tend to re-construct and preserve sexism.

### **Conclusion and Way Forward**

In conclusion, the result indicated that gender cannot be discussed in isolation. It is evident in the above discussion that the intersection of gender and economic status is consequential to some of the re-construction and maintenance of inequalities in our society. Therefore, there is a need to de-gender baby showers, mothering and parenting to promote gender equality by encouraging both women and men to participate in baby showers to dialogue and share information on parenting and care giving. According to Brush (2006) de-gendering enhances eradication of gender divisions and diversity in the definition of gender resulting in a societal system without prescribed gendered roles and cultural practices. Motswapong et al. (2017) have also recommended the inclusion of men in baby showers as they have similar needs to women when it comes to children's welfare.

Women should be encouraged to make deliberate efforts to invite professionals such as social workers, psychologists, and nurses to offer formal education. Such professionals will be in the position to clear off some of the cultural myths and taboos that might put the expectant mothers under more distress. These expectations might as well expose them to the risk of

maternal depression if they fail to exercise prescribed taboos and myths. Involving men in baby showers can help eliminate gender stereotypes that emphasize caregiving roles such as parenting and childcare as exclusively a woman's responsibility. As a result, it may raise collective awareness of the importance of both males' and females' responsibility in caregiving roles.

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