

# **The Urban MuthaHood: the spaces of mothers in the city of Johannesburg**

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The urban landscape of post-apartheid Johannesburg is fragmented, highly unequal and carries the scars of the spatial injustices of the apartheid regime. South African cities were designed, legislated and largely enforced spatial marginalisation of Black and other “non-white” groups to the cities’ peripheries, townships and informal settlements. In doing so, the Apartheid state constructed an intentionally racially segregated space. Market forces around land costs, unintended consequences of state policy amongst other factors have reinforced the spatial legacy in the post- Apartheid period and have overlaid these factors with issues of income and gender constructing hostile conditions for the poor, for women and for families. Whilst there is a rich mine of literature on the spatial exclusions due to race, the impact of the migrant labour system and the enduring image of Black urban residents as temporary sojourners with their “homes” located in the rural areas, very little study has focused on the gendered spatial experiences of women and more particularly, mothers, in SA cities.

The literature on motherhood, globally, has not focused on the spatial footprints and patterns of mothers in the city more broadly. Scholars of feminism have discussed the cultural construction of the role of mothers and spatial isolation within the domestic realm (Hay 1996). Other studies have examined changing dynamics in the workplace and how women (and men) negotiate both the home and the workplace (Maqubela 2013). There has also been exploration of the provision of pre-school care and education in different neighbourhoods (Holloway 1999), however few studies have examined the range of activities and facilities that mothers engage with their children and as women including the activities of school, work, recreation, medical needs, shopping and community commitments.

In order to begin to speak to this “gap” our paper explores the spatial dynamics of mothers in Johannesburg: how women who are self-identified as mothers, navigate their and their families daily lives in Johannesburg; the challenges and obstacles that they face; their routes, supports and efforts that typify their lives. Methodologically the research draws from a study of the everyday practices and experiences of 25 mothers in the city, who agreed to in-depth interviews and mapping exercises. The participants offered a diverse group in terms of geographic location, income, race, age, and family situation. These women narrated their daily lives and the places and spaces contained within their experiences of the city. The mothers discussed their decision-making around the choice of home, work, school, shopping and recreation and detailed the social and spatial dynamics of their support networks.

Mothers, through their own multifaceted roles, and through the care and provision of their children, intersect and use the city in an intensive and demanding variety of ways. In some

cases these activities are all confined within a single neighbourhood but most often mothers are accessing these needs and resources across many areas of the city. Due to the nature of motherhood as both a relationship of care and a role constructed in society, the burdens that mothers carry in unequal urban conditions are financial, temporal and emotional. Exploring the spatial geographies of the 'muthahood' provides valuable insights into a group of people who engage the city extensively (far more than the 'traditional' suburban construct) and understanding these spatial dynamics exposes the depth of spatial inequalities and poor urban management in new ways.

The post-apartheid period has seen important changes in legislation, constitutional rights and access to urban resources, social grants and greater provision for women in the workplace. However, much has stayed the same and other changes, particularly changes in attitude, what has been referred to as the 'stalled revolution', have been much slower (Maqubela 2013). The research shows that the spatial injustices of the past as well as new inequalities in the city impact the everyday movements and practices of women as well as the choice of home, work and school in the city. In addition, the spatial practices of mothers are influenced by a form of moral geography, which, when overlaid on current spatial inequalities in Johannesburg, result in (in some cases dramatic) compromises and sacrifices for both mother and child. Thus in many ways, constructing a hostile and difficult space, which mothers are forced to navigate and sometimes transgress, social, spatial and legal boundaries using a variety of spatial and social tactics in order to survive and assure the best for their families.

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