CHAPTER 2

‘My wife does not respect me anymore’: unequal power dynamics in households
Chapter one describes how households expand as they incorporate vulnerable family members and how they have to diversify their economic activities in order to meet the challenge of poverty. This chapter deals with the ways in which poverty and unemployment strain household resources and relations. While the household is becoming the only sanctuary for the poor and unemployed, its stability is endangered by poverty and unemployment. Resources are scarce and relations in the household are characterised by conflict. Gender and age dynamics feature strongly in these conflicts. The management, sharing and allocation of resources are highly contested matters.

The chapter will also engage with theories that suggest that households are invariably harmonious places in which resources are distributed amicably among their members. Neoclassical theories assert that households consist of individuals who are either consumers or workers. These theories tend to reject the notion of household collectivity. Gary Becker’s ‘new-household economics’ (1965, 1974, 1981), by contrast, rests on the idea of ‘altruistic collectivity’ and ‘welfare maximisation’ in households. Welfare maximisation can be achieved through ‘benevolent dictatorship’ by the household head. Both the neoclassical and Beckerian approaches have been criticised for treating household relations and dynamics as a ‘black box’ (Kabeer, 1994). Galbraith (1974) argues that neoclassical theory subordinates certain household individuals, particularly women, and disguises the exercise of male authority. Folbre (1994) rejects the notion of a unitary household. She argues that it is not consistent to argue that individuals who are wholly selfish in the market place, as proposed by many economists, would be selfless within the household. She asserts that, in fact, ‘family life is shifting and is a somewhat unpredictable mixture of selfishness and altruism’ (Folbre, 1994:23).

Naila Kabeer (1994:101) argues that the control and allocation of resources within the household is ‘a complex process which has to be seen in relation to a web of rights and obligations.’ There are widespread intra-household ‘distributional inequalities and failures.’ This becomes especially apparent when the allocation of labour time between household production and wage employment is taken into account. Women tend to allocate longer hours to the household and fewer hours to wage labour than men do. This is one of the factors that has resulted in their earning lower wages. According to Folbre (1994:22), the acknowledgement of this fact has led to a ‘new recognition of the possibilities for conflict at home’, even though there are more possibilities for solidarity at work between men and women than was the case in the past.
Bargaining models regard the household as composed of self-interested individuals who engage in both conflict and co-operation. Sen (1984) has described this as ‘co-operative conflict.’ As opposed to altruistic models, the bargaining framework accommodates diversity in decision-making behaviour, does not rule out altruism as a factor in the making of decisions and views gender asymmetry as a product of structural rather than purely individual inequality in relation to power, privilege and resources (Kabeer, 1994).

This chapter adopts the idea of co-operative conflict from Sen (1984) and Folbre (1994) in order to argue that there is more conflict than co-operation in poor households, such as those in Enhlalakahle and Mpumalanga, in times of crisis. These households are characterised by the unequal use, allocation and distribution of income. The notion that family and kinship networks always work together for the benefit of all cannot be sustained. The reality is that these households often share little more than kinship ties and a common living space. In contrast to the livelihoods approach, the chapter will place unequal power dynamics within the household at the centre of its analysis.

The chapter will also describe the growing phenomenon of individuals who live in a single household but who do not share the income generated by their separate livelihood activities. The collective nature of households is seriously undermined in the process. The sharing of space and kinship ties is not always replicated by the sharing of income and other resources. The social practices that have always underpinned the principle of ‘eating from one pot’ are slowly disappearing.

The chapter explores the ways in which poverty, unemployment, inequality and a lack of assets and resources affect men and women respectively. It examines the lived experiences and feelings of powerlessness, shame, abuse and inadequacy that accompany the redefinition of traditional identities and the fracturing of social relations. The man’s traditional role as the breadwinner and head of the household has been badly undermined by unemployment. While the traditional role of women as caregivers has increased in significance, women’s status has not been elevated. On the contrary, their burdens have become heavier and they often suffer ill-treatment at the hand of others. Many women, older women, in particular, experience poverty not only as a struggle with scarce resources, inadequate assets and ill health, but also as a battle against domestic violence and abuse (Gurr et al., 1996).

Household gender dynamics have received a fair amount of attention from scholars. Inter-generational dynamics, though, have been largely

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neglected. This chapter takes both gender and age into account in the course of its examination of the power struggles that characterise the allocation and distribution of disposable income in poor households. These struggles undermine the potential of family and kinship networks to reduce individual and household insecurities in relation to income, housing and food.

Finally, the chapter will also discuss the fact that the diversification of livelihood activities comes at a cost to communities. Not all livelihood options are sustainable. Some actually intensify the effects of poverty and unemployment. Activities such as crime create new tensions in households and in the wider community.

**RE-IMAGINING THE DOMESTIC AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE**

Significant changes in household dynamics emerge as poor households struggle to allocate and distribute limited resources. These struggles themselves push households further into poverty, and the most vulnerable – women, children and the aged – become increasingly marginalised.

**Shifting gender roles: the ‘end of patriarchalism’?**

The traditional role of the man as the breadwinner and the head of the household has been seriously undermined by unemployment and retrenchments. The very identity of men comes into question when they lose their ability to earn an income and provide for their families. Men’s status has always been linked to their economic position. In South Africa, this was closely tied to the migrant labour system and the booming mining industry. The gendered nature of the labour market guaranteed men higher wages than women. In the post-industrial, post-apartheid era, rising unemployment among men has damaged both their economic and social standing. The social power that they used to command has been undermined by their incapacity to earn an income.

The absence of work has led to a crisis in the ways in which men define themselves and their responsibilities in their households and communities since work has always played a major role in defining masculinities (Morrell, 2001). Men’s changing economic position is leading to a redefinition of gender relations in the household. Many men experience feelings of powerlessness and shame as a result.

I have always been the provider, the husband and head of this family. I was working and had a salary to maintain my family, both here and in the rural
areas. Things have changed now. I have no money; I am poor and unemployed (Mr Cebekhulu, Enhlalakahle).

Men believe that the radical change in their economic position undermines their manhood. This has resulted in high levels of domestic violence as they attempt to hold onto their power in the home. The weakening of their status in both the household and the community has resulted in a great sense of loss:

Suddenly I was unemployed and became useless to my family and community. I was respected in the community before, not to mention my household. I was the head of this household. I had a say in everything. I no longer have that power. People do as they please. Come in, as they want. Cook what they want. Make babies when they want (Mr Cebekhulu, Enhlalakahle).

As a man, I should provide for my family but circumstances do not allow me to do so. I cannot buy them bread or even pay their school fees (Mr Mhlongo, Mpumalanga).

Men frequently compensate for their sense of powerlessness by exerting power over women. Zulu tradition is frequently invoked in order to justify the subordination of women and to reassert the position of the man as the ‘natural’ head of the household. The defeat of men in the workplace, represented by retrenchments, has made them especially determined to cling onto their power in the household:

I am still the head of this household. I should be consulted about how money is spent in this house. My wife often uses money in her way, not my way. I want that to change. It has to change (Mr Mhlongo, Mpumalanga).

Most women maintain that ‘things were better’ when their husbands were working. Although their husbands exerted control over the way in which they ran the household and took care of the children, they allowed them to spend the household money as they saw fit.

Nowadays, it is not how I am cooking, but where I got the money to buy food and what I have done with the rest of the money (Sebenzile, Mpumalanga).

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I do not know what got into him. He is forever depressed. He does not talk to us anymore. He just complains about this and that, always declaring that he paid many cows for me and, therefore, I should obey and listen to him (MaTshabalala, Mpumalanga).

Men, on the other hand, complain about the way that their wives have changed towards them:

My wife does not respect me anymore. She treats me like dirt. She has also taught my children to treat me badly. She is forever complaining and does not cook for me anymore (Mr Cele, Enhlalakahle).

Things have changed. We have forgotten our traditions and culture. As a man, I am told I cannot tell my wife what to do. I am told she has rights in my own house. When she does not cook for me, I am told to just keep quiet and not do anything about it. The police and the magistrate said that (Mr Mhlongo, Mpumalanga).

During the days of the migrant labour system, men temporarily lost their role as head of the household when they were away from home. They regained this role as soon as they returned. While their roles shifted according to whether they were present or absent, their status as household head was never called into question. The remittances that they sent home confirmed this status. Today, however, there is a disjunction between an unemployed man’s role as household head and his failure to make an economic contribution. This only changes when he finds a new job or becomes old enough to receive a state pension. While the link between being a breadwinner and head of household has been severed in the case of many men, this has not yet effected a significant role reversal in the household. It has not resulted in the ‘end of patriarchalism’ (Castells 1997:196). Instead, new, and multiple, forms of patriarchy have been emerging in households and societies (Posel, 1991).

Class and relative economic position, it is often argued, shape relations between men and women. Patterns of male domination and female subordination, in this view, will change when the class and economic position of men and women change (Sen, 1994; Sullivan, 1997). Clearly, though, power relations between men and women are also shaped by culture,
history and tradition. Modernisation and gender awareness have undoubtedly brought old forms of patriarchy into question but the retreat to the household (Burawoy, Krotov & Lytkina, 2000, 2001) has also marked the return of traditional norms and values that have a strong patriarchal bias. While the change in the relative economic position of men and women has affected the balance of decision-making power in the majority of households (Alamgir, 1977; Guyer, 1980), men have hung onto their traditional role as household heads to a significant degree. The tensions that this volatile state of affairs produces can lead to intense domestic conflict as well as to violence and abuse.

**De facto heads of households and breadwinners: the micro-political relations of control**

Fatherhood has traditionally been defined in narrowly economic terms. The ability to provide financially is central to the identity of being a father. This has placed serious limitations on the ways in which the role of men can be redefined in a context of chronic unemployment.

Motherhood, on the other hand, has always been defined more broadly. The loss of their jobs in the formal sector has not precipitated a crisis of identity for women in the way that it has for men. Unemployment has actually made women’s role as caregivers even more important than before. The idea of motherhood has taken on a new significance. In a context of high unemployment, poverty, and AIDS, women are seen as mothers of the community as well as of the household. This is inextricably tied to their *de facto* roles as the heads of households and breadwinners. Women take on more and more responsibility for caring for households and their communities as economic and social conditions deteriorate.

I am a mother to my children and all the children in this community. I have to take care of them; mothers do that. As a mother, I should not discriminate. There are many AIDS orphans who need my love and care (*MaMkhize, Mpumalanga*).

I take care of not just my immediate family but also my extended family, both from my side and from my husband’s side. It is a heavy load to carry alone but God has given the world mothers so that we can take care of everyone (*MaTshabalala, Mpumalanga*).
The workload of these women is enormous. Many of the most active caregivers are also old women who have to contend with the effects of old age. The little money that they get from their activities in the informal economy or state grants has to be stretched to support many people, sometimes in several households at once.

In terms of my health, I am not one hundred per cent well, but I am much better than those young children who are dying every day because of an undisclosed disease. I cannot complain to anyone; I am a woman, a mother and community member. All my time in this world has to be spent taking care of those who are less fortunate than I am (Nonjabulo Mazibuko, Enhlalakahle).

The work that I do in my house, the community and church increased after I was retrenched. It has also been worse since many people are sick and unemployed. I actually spend double the time and energy than I spent working at Hebox, my last factory job. The difference here is that I do not get a pay cheque every month. All I get are many sad and hungry faces (MaTshabalala, Mpumalanga).

My vegetable garden is not just for me, but also for everyone who wants to eat. I share it with my neighbours and friends. I also encourage them to grow their own vegetables. My grant money is not mine; it is for everyone that I take care of, that is my unemployed sons and daughters and their children (MaMkhize, Mpumalanga).

Unemployment, AIDS and a lack of basic services, such as water and electricity, have placed a heavy load on women:

I cannot even begin to tell you how much people are suffering in this community because of unemployment, AIDS and this whole thing of paying for everything, including water. I do not have money to buy the electricity card and the same goes for many households. We spend months with no electricity and then the municipality cuts our water supply because we owe them a lot of money (MaSithole, Enhlalakahle).

In the past, we used to raise children and when we got old, they took care of us. Things have changed. We now take care of them and their children.
Either they are unemployed or too sick to go and find another job (Nonhlanhla, Mpumalanga).

Women have become the main breadwinner in numerous households. They support many people with their work in the household and the money they earn in the informal economy:

For the first time in this household, everyone relies on me for food, well-being and just general survival. My husband is unemployed and stays at home. There are just too many mouths to feed (MaKhumalo, Enhlalakahle).

Women’s newly acquired economic importance does not necessarily translate into their acquiring more power in the household. In many cases, husbands, sons, and brothers dictate how the money that women earn should be spent and allocated. Several women reported that their ‘new’ role in the household seemed to threaten their husbands and brothers:

I am the only one working in this house. I buy food, and pay for electricity and water when there is enough money. I share the rest of the money with my husband. We fight about how I should spend my money. Mostly he thinks the money should be given to him (Nomusa, Mpumalanga).

Cultural tradition tends to keep women subordinate to their husbands, brothers and uncles. Challenges to gender-biased traditions are frequently met with domestic violence and abuse. Double standards apply in the home. If a young woman, for example, uses her child support grant for her own or her child’s use, she is accused of being selfish and irresponsible. Young men, though, are not expected to contribute to the household expenses in the same way. Young women complain:

Yes, I have two children and I receive government money for both children but I do not feel the need to use my money for everyone in the house. Why should I do that if my brother is not expected to do the same? He works at the local taxi rank washing taxis and he gets paid more money than I get from the government. I do not remember a day when my mother shouted at him for not buying this or that for the house. She shouts at me every day for not being ‘responsible.’ When I question her about my brother, the response is always the same – I am a woman, I should be more

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responsible. It is even worse with household chores. He just wakes up in the morning and does nothing in the house and I am expected to clean, cook and take care of the children (Nomagugu, Mpumalanga).

Some young women are not prepared to accept sole responsibility for looking after the children any longer:

I was tired of taking care of my children while my boyfriend did nothing for them. So one day I decided to take my children to his house. I left them there. It’s been a year now. I wanted him to raise the children and feel the pain that I was feeling. I thought that my own mother would support me but instead she became one of those people who called me names. They say that the only reason I abandoned my children was that I wanted to be young again and free for all men to see me … unondidwa [isiZulu word that means a prostitute] (Khanyisile, Enhlalakahle).

Both men and women experience powerlessness. Men’s power is directly related to their capacity to earn. This power diminishes with every factory that closes. Women’s power, on the other hand, is closely linked to their role in the home. Nowadays, this role is often the only thing that keeps households and communities from breaking up completely. Ironically, though, the increased importance of the role of women has coincided with a time when the power that they have always wielded in the home sphere is increasingly challenged by men, who feel powerless in the world at large.

When he was employed, I was happy and he was happy. He went to work in the morning and came back in the evening. He would go to his friends and drink there on weekends. Today he is unemployed and always at home telling me how to do my work. He tells me how to cook, how to clean and take care of the children (Veronica, Enhlalakahle).

You know, you cannot do your work when they are around. They want to be directors as if they know what they are talking about. I wish he would get a job and stop interfering with mine here at home (Zanele, Mpumalanga).

Conflict has always existed in households. The situation has got much worse, though, as more and more men have lost their jobs.
FRACTURED SOCIAL RELATIONS I: INCOME AND TIME CONFLICT

The allocation of time and income in households is still largely determined by traditional gender and age roles and divisions. Older women, considered to be natural caregivers, tend to spend their income on the household and on other people rather than on themselves. Men, by contrast, are more likely to spend their income on alcohol and things for themselves.

The Zwane family reflects some of these dynamics. Both Mr and Mrs Zwane are pensioners and receive a monthly state grant, but they use their income in very different ways. Mrs. Zwane had this to say:

I always use my government money for the whole family. I buy food and electricity. I pay for school fees and buy school clothes. I also make sure that the children have pocket money or lunch every day when they go to school. My money does not always cover everything. Then you have some people in the house who use their money for other things but expect a plate of food every day. The price of maize meal has gone up and a loaf of bread is excessively expensive. I do not get a cent from anyone. When I ask about how they spend their money, I am always told I am a woman (Mrs Zwane, Enhlalakahle).

Mr. Zwane saw things very differently:

Firstly, I am not supposed to discuss matters of my household with you, especially since you are a woman and so young. However, I will make an exception. Secondly, as a man and head of this household, I will not be told what to do. I will not be questioned by my wife as to where I have been and how I use my money. It is unheard of in my culture for a woman to raise her voice against her husband. Finally, I expect to find a clean house and a cooked meal every day (Mr Zwane, Mpumalanga).

Tradition is often used as a scapegoat by men such as Mr Zwane who do not want to spend their money on their households. It is becoming increasingly common, though, for women to question men about how they spend their money (Gwagwa, 1998). Men like Mr Zwane often refuse to answer these questions, citing cultural reasons and the traditional position of women in the household.

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Both men and women experience feelings of shame and resentment because of their inability to provide for themselves and their families. It is embarrassing when they cannot afford to send their children to school. Many men and women admit to feelings of defeat and inadequacy with regard to their roles as mothers and fathers. Women, though, feel that they can still contribute to the well-being of their families and communities even when they don’t have money:

I do not have money to help my neighbours, but I am able to help in other ways. I do not go to sick people carrying money. I carry my sympathy, emotional support, prayers and sometimes cooked food. I offer everything else except money (MaTshabalala, Mpumalanga).

People appreciate the little things you offer them. They appreciate the fact that you came to visit them during their times of need (MaNtombi, Mpumalanga).

Money is not an issue anymore. I am able to grow vegetables in my own yard and feed my family. I do not have to have money to feed them (Duduzile, Enhlalakahle).

Household conflict is exacerbated by unequal time use and allocation. Women spend most of their time engaged in household tasks such as childcare, cooking, cleaning and gardening. Men, on the other hand, are frequently accused of doing nothing in the household or of spending their days in shebeens. This gendered division of labour and leisure is confirmed by statistics from the System of National Accounts (SNA), which tracks both paid (SNA production) and unpaid (non-SNA production) work. Macro-economic data, such as the gross domestic product (GDP), are calculated on this basis. SNA statistics show that women spend double the time that men do – 235 minutes a day compared to 117 minutes a day – on activities that are classed as non-productive, such as housework, community service and caring for children, the sick, the elderly and disabled members of the household (Stats SA, 2001b). Men of all ages spend more time on productive activities, such as paid employment, than women do (Stats SA, 2001b). The pattern of paid and unpaid work amongst men and women, young and old, is not unique to South Africa. It is replicated in other parts of the world, in countries such as India, Tanzania, Argentina,
and Nicaragua (Budlender, 2008). The gendered nature of social reproduction places women at the centre of household survival. The necessity for households to create their own livelihoods has resulted in more work for women, but not for men:

Women’s time is not only more pressured in terms of intensity of domestic tasks, but the more enjoyable aspects of time, such as leisure time, tend to be more fragmented than those of men. ... [G]ender differentials in time use continue to have strong implications for the quality of women’s lives, relating in particular to stress induced by ‘the pressure of time’ (Sullivan, 1997:237).

Over-worked women also have no time to take care of themselves properly. Most of the older women in the study embraced the enormous responsibility placed on them by poverty, but many young women challenged the gender division of labour in the household, demanding that men take equal responsibility for the social reproduction of the household. As mentioned earlier, several young women who received child support grants went so far as to refuse to share their money with the other members of the household. This opened them up to the accusation that they wasted money on cell phones, clothes and frequent visits to hair salons:

My daughter has a two-year-old son. I forced her to go and apply for the child support grant, as I was unable to take care of both of them and my other children. She now receives the grant but does not give it to me as arranged. She recently bought herself a cell phone. I have tried talking to her but she does not listen (MaKhumalo, Enhlalakahle).

Mbeki has created such a problem for us parents by giving these young girls these child support grants. They do not use the grants for their children. I have four girls in this house; they all receive grants but I still have to buy food for their children and them as well. My pension money is used for everyone in the house but their money is used for new hairstyles and maintaining their cell phones (MaSithole, Enhlalakahle).

Inequality in the family is generally related to age and gender (Folbre, 1994). A series of negotiations takes place between parents and their adult children. Children’s bargaining power increases in proportion to their
economic independence. Young women with access to a regular income, such as a child support grant or salary, tend to challenge their parents over the allocation of resources in the household. This has led to strained relations between parents and children in many cases. The growing propensity of young women to retain income for themselves or their children runs contrary to the notion that household members always pool their resources for the benefit of all.

**ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE**

A common complaint concerns alcohol abuse and the way in which it depletes household income. It is often the very men who head the households and make the key decisions about the allocation of household funds who are identified as the main culprits:

> My husband returns home drunk every day. There is a shebeen a few houses away from our house. That is where he spent his entire retrenchment package (*Nomusa, Mpumalanga*).

Drug and alcohol abuse is rife among young, unemployed men and women. People are aware that there is a causal link between unemployment and alcohol and drug abuse:

> I would say that unemployment plays a big part in alcohol and drug abuse. Most of the youth are addicted. The other reason might be that we lack good infrastructure in the community, such as sports facilities and other things that could keep them busy (*Themba, Enhlalakahle*).

Parents and community leaders blame shebeens for what they see as the moral degeneration of the community:

> There is a shebeen in every street in this community where men spend their wages and pension money. Young girls also go there in search of men who will give them money. The things that happen in those houses are despicable (*Nonhlanhla, Mpumalanga*).

> Those shebeens should be closed down. They are destroying so many homes in this community. Fathers and daughters are seen drinking in the
same shebeens. The moral fibre of this community is slowly diminishing
(MaCebekhulu, Enhlalakahle).

Shebeen owners acknowledge that it is unfortunate that young men and women resort to alcohol in order to ease their frustration at being unem-
ployed but argue that they have a right to make a living:

If people want me to stop what I am doing, then they should give me a job. This is my job. I do not have a choice but to make a living. I do not force people to come here and buy alcohol from me. I will also not chase them away when they come (Bongani, Mpumalanga).

Escalating crime among the youth is frequently linked to alcohol and drug abuse. Many people – ordinary citizens and politicians – express deep con-
cerns about crime and other social ills:

Crime has increased in the township. Our children are not working and they resort to crime and drugs. Their fathers drink excessively and beat their wives. Young girls have babies just to get a grant from the government. This is what has become of our community (MaCebekhulu, Enhlalakahle).

The youth are unemployed. They loiter about the streets. Their best option is often robbing people of their bags and cell phones. They also take advantage of their grandparents and often take their pension money (Sizakele, Mpumalanga).

Alcohol abuse, the increasing number of shebeens and rising unemploy-
ment among young women is also linked to a booming sexual economy in the two communities. Young women, people assert, go to shebeens to attract the men who will give them money in exchange for sexual favours.

Young girls go to these shebeens to meet men who have money. They do not care whether the person is married or not. They also do not care whether it is criminal money. All they are interested in is men who have money. In turn, they offer these men their bodies (MaBusi, Mpumalanga).

What is happening in these shebeens is close to prostitution, but these young women do not see it like that. For them it is just fun and a way of

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making a living. They sell their bodies to almost anyone who has money 
(MaCebekhulu, Enhlalakahle).

In the words of many community members and parents, shebeens ‘are 
responsible for killing our sons and daughters.’ The spread of HIV among 
young people is frequently linked to shebeens:

The level of alcohol abuse is very bad. Some children qualify at tertiary 
institutions but do not work. So, you will find them spending the whole day 
drinking in shebeens. Even their mothers and fathers drink. When every-
one is drunk, they engage in unsafe sex (Zweli, Enhlalakahle).

Illegal shebeens and the sexual economy are two examples of the ‘hidden 
livelihoods’ that have emerged in townships as a response to poverty. Such 
livelihoods are generally branded as bad and immoral. This leads to their 
becoming ‘hidden livelihoods.’¹ One young woman pointed out the 
hypocrisy that underlies this attitude:

There are double standards in this community. Women are the only ones 
who are branded whores, not the men who provide the money and 
encourage the behaviour. Besides, some women do it because they see 
nothing wrong with it. Most know that it is wrong but have no choice as 
there is no employment (Nomagugu, Mpumalanga).

While the gender bias that underlies the condemnation of the activities of 
these young women can be criticised, the serious implications of selling sexual favours should not be underestimated. In a context where HIV and AIDS are rife, livelihoods that encourage promiscuity are dangerous and deadly.

FRACTURED SOCIAL RELATIONS II: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Alcohol and drug abuse, and the feelings of powerlessness and shame they 
produce, contribute to the escalating incidence of domestic abuse and vio-

lence in most households. These conflicts limit the potential of households 
to become viable livelihood sources for vulnerable people. A retrenched 
mother of four experienced this directly:

I was retrenched in 1998, the same year that my husband passed away. I 
then moved back to my family’s house with my children because of
problems at my in-laws’ house. I was accused of killing my own husband. However, things were also not easy for me at my mother’s house. My brother was always drunk. He often beat me up and chased me out of the house. I then decided to move out but leave my children behind. I am renting this house now with the help of my mother’s pension money (MaTshabalala, Mpumalanga).

Domestic violence and abuse is not a new phenomenon. Most women, though, claim that the situation is getting worse. More and more women report that have been physically, emotionally and economically abused by their husbands, sons and brothers. They link the abuse to unemployment and a lack of accountability on the part of the men in their households. An older woman, who is active in the community, commented:

For most married women, it was a privilege to have a husband. That was years ago, when the men were working and brought home a share of their wages. They provided for their families. These women were happy then. Now that their husbands are not working, the tables have turned. Women come to me complaining about the abuse that occurs in their homes. The matter has got out of hand and no one seems to be taking any notice. All I can do is listen and be supportive. I cannot tell these men and women what to do (Thulisile Zondi, Mpumalanga).

Another woman echoed her words:

All we [women] talk about nowadays is the abuse and violence that happens in our homes. It is a sad situation. It is amazing what the lack of money can do in many homes. Unemployment is destroying many families. Many women leave their children and husbands because they cannot take it anymore (Nomusa, Mpumalanga).

The majority of men agree that there is a connection between unemployment and domestic abuse and violence. They link the problem, though, to the fact that they have lost the respect of women:

We [men] are losing the battle at home. We are not respected as heads of households. Our children no longer consult us about major issues. They go to their mothers, and their mothers are happy to replace us, even when we are available. Their mothers take decisions on our behalf and

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they expect us to keep quite. Well, we will not be quiet. There is no control, discipline, and respect anymore. Our ancestors are turning in their graves. It is our duty to make things right (Nkosinathi, Enhlalakahle).

Some men, though, especially younger ones who themselves have been victims of violence and abuse, argue that the accusation that women do not respect men merely serves as ‘a scapegoat and justification’ for indefensible behaviour:

Not all men are abusers but there are those who do it to vent their frustrations. It has nothing to do with respect because if it did, these men would also respect their wives and not beat them or call them names. It also has nothing to do with Zulu culture; just because a man is the head of a household, does not necessarily mean he has to beat up his wife and children. They have to protect and nurture them (Vusi, Mpumalanga).

This analysis reflects an emerging inter-generational difference of opinion among men. Unfortunately, however, only a small minority of men think like this.

**INTER-GENERATIONAL CONFLICT**

The central role that older women have assumed in providing for their households and communities cannot be ignored. It represents a double role-reversal in the family: women replace men and the elderly replace younger people as primary providers. Older women increasingly bear the financial, social and physical burden of caring for their children, grandchildren and extended families. AIDS orphans often live with them. For this reason, the death or absence of an older woman can have devastating consequences for the survival of a household.

The role of older women as primary economic providers in the majority of households and communities has not led to an increase in their status, as is the case in Russia (Burawoy, Krotov & Lytkina, 2000). On the contrary, their social position has been seriously undermined by domestic violence, abuse and conflict. This is not chiefly due to the economic dependence of parents on their children, however, as is sometimes argued (Griffin & Williams, 1992). On the contrary, the abuse can generally be attributed to children’s dependence on their parents, both emotionally and financially,
and their need to control their parents’ income (Godkin et al., 1989; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1991). Several old women confirmed this:

Sometimes I wish I did not receive this money. Maybe then, there wouldn’t be any reason for such problems in my house. This one wants R100 and that one demands R400, but when there is no food in the house, they get angry (Sizakele, Mpumalanga).

They all demand my money. They wait the whole month for it. They don’t even try to look for work. I don’t give them a cent. They will have to wait until they are 60 or 65 to receive their grant. By then I will be dead (MaBhengu, Enhlalakahle).

The biggest challenge facing older people today in these communities does not come as much from the usual challenges of old age – ill health and death – as from domestic violence and abuse – emotional, financial, physical and psychological. The perpetrators are mostly the victims’ own children and grandchildren. The motive is usually their desire to get access to the older person’s pension money. A political leader in the community commented:

My only concern is that the youth do not respect adults and their parents. I have seen and witnessed this. I have been to meetings in the township, and I can tell you all the other townships experience the same problem (Mr Lunga, Enhlalakahle).

While older women are critical to the survival of households and communities, they feel badly let down by their children, the community and the government:

Our children are no longer an investment. They die young and leave their children behind. They do not respect us anymore (MaMkhize, Mpumalanga).

Some of my friends also complain of being abused by their own children. They wait for them on pension day and take the little money that the government gives them (MaMkhize, Enhlalakahle).

Many people expressed concern about the way young people treated older people, older women in particular:

‘My wife does not respect me anymore’
Our grandmothers and mothers are central to our survival. Yet we take them for granted. We forcefully take their pension money and do not help them around the house (Phindi, Enhlalakahle).

Our mothers and sisters hold this community together. They are providers for their households and communities. They play a crucial role in our society. However, young people like me do not realise this. We treat our mothers badly and do not listen to them (Buhle, Mpumalanga).

The informants in this study confirm Edith Wahl and Sheila Purdy’s (1991) findings about the hesitancy of elders to disclose abuse. Abused mothers and grandmothers often do not report these cases because they are ashamed of what the community will say. They also fear that their children will retaliate or will be sent to jail. Old people are often dependent for certain kinds of care on the younger people who abuse them. The low levels of trust between the police and the community also contribute to their not reporting cases of abuse.

Many of my friends are scared of reporting their children to the police. Wives are also scared of reporting their husbands. They just sit at home and hope for the best (Nonjabulo Mazibuko, Enhlalakahle).

Most mothers and grandmothers invoke cultural and traditional ideals that value age in order to demand respect from younger people. It is not surprising, therefore, that they attribute the poor treatment they experience at the hands of younger people to the loss of tradition:

Indeed the times have changed but our tradition has not. Young men and women should respect their elders. What is happening in this modern era is that old people are not important. Young people opt for a foreign culture. This is a lost generation (MaSithole, Enhlalakahle).

I don’t know what this world is coming to. Maybe it is ending. Maybe God is punishing us. There is no respect anymore for elders. I pray to God every day to show our children the right path (MaMnisi, Enhlalakahle).

The common denominator in the abuse of old people is the abuser’s dependence on the older person. This is usually financial and/or housing
dependence (Godkin et al., 1989; Pillemer, 1985; Ward & Spitze, 1992). This was confirmed in many of the interviews that I conducted with elders themselves and with community organisations. A community church leader said:

The week of pay day seems to be the time that grandmothers, in particular, come to the church to ask for my assistance. They want me to accompany them to their homes and talk to their sons and daughters, who have become violent creatures and turned against them. The problem is not pension money as such, but the children and grandchildren who want to control it (Bafana, Enhlalakahle).

A grandmother observed:

This government money seems to be the source of the problem. Not that we do not need it, but it seems to be a problem for my children because I am the only one who receives it (Matron Gcisa, Enhlalakahle).

A political leader responded:

It is not the government’s problem. The government is trying to help by giving people money, including grandparents. This has been happening for many years and no problems were reported. The problem is at home where the youth are unemployed and do not have any income. The government cannot be blamed (Sizwe, Mpumalanga).

Several factors compound the problem. There is growing unemployment and income insecurity among the youth. Older people, on the other hand, enjoy income security by virtue of their access to state pensions. Many of the unemployed live in a house that is owned by an older person. Their economic position and their proximity to young unemployed people, make elderly people easy targets of crime and domestic violence.

The findings in this chapter do not accord with the tendency to romanticise household relations and to see them as the assets of the poor. Households are not necessarily altruistic entities that serve all household members equally. They are subject to conflict, often between men and women or between young and old people. Poverty and unemployment intensify the unequal power relations that have always characterised the
household. Gender and age strongly influence the opportunities, rights and obligations of each household member.

Despite its fragility, the household remains the most obvious beacon of hope for many of the unemployed, poor, vulnerable and sick. Household conflict, however, seriously undermines its potential to contribute meaningfully to livelihoods and survival. Conflict also characterises the community at large, where it is greatly exacerbated by the increase in crime among the youth and the fact that young women and men participate in the booming sexual economy (Hunter, 2001).

The first two chapters of this book have illustrated how the crisis of poverty, unemployment and HIV and AIDS has led many people in Mpumalanga and Enhlalakahle to retreat to the household. Limited resources, lack of income and household conflict have reduced the capacity of the household to deal with the crisis. However, people in the two townships have not relied solely on the household to see them through the crisis. They have also joined or formed a range of community organisations, networks and associations, formal and informal. The next chapter will describe the role that these community organisations play and discuss their potential as social resources.
Chasca Twyman and Rachel Slater (2005:2) also use the concept of ‘hidden’ livelihoods. They use the term, though, to underline the resource-dependent activities that are unrecognised or overlooked in assessments of urban livelihoods rather than to describe the ‘illegal, illicit or unconventional’ nature of certain livelihoods.