

# MAN OF THE HOUSE

THE TRADITIONAL MODEL OF BREADWINNING DAD AND HOMEMAKING MOM IS FAST CHANGING ACROSS THE WORLD

By Ciska Thurman



Our nation is culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse; it's also diverse in terms of how families manage domestic duties. New figures have revealed that globally the number of stay-at-home dads has tripled, but in South Africa this is not a trend. We spoke to a number of local organisations that focus on dads, and interviewed two male house spouses to find out how they make it work.

### THE DEAL WITH DADS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Following the economic crisis of 2008, significant numbers of men in Europe and North America found themselves at home. This led to an upturn in the trend of dads who now deal with the lion's share of homemaking – that includes cleaning, cooking and kids (feeding, ferrying and fostering). Compared to men in the workplace, this group still remains small globally. In South Africa, little has changed at all.

According to EmployMen SA (employmen.co.za), there are currently 60 000 stay-at-home dads in SA. But Jaco van Schalkwyk, founder of The Character Company (which provides long-term mentorship programmes to adolescent boys growing up with absent fathers), suspects this group can be divided into two very different types. 'The first group, most likely the smaller of the two, has made a conscious decision to stay at home because of the benefits to the family, given that Mom has a well-paying job. This role reversal is unusual considering the very strong patriarchal foundations in South Africa. The second group is typically at home due to unemployment – they have not chosen this position based on the positive outcomes for their family, but instead have resigned themselves to the role.'

Consciously homemaking dads are in a unique position in SA, in that they are often supported by a domestic helper or female family member in the home. This allows them the opportunity to work – albeit part-time – from home. They are 'semi-retired by choice', as EmployMen SA describes them, which not only gives their spouse the chance to fully explore a career, but offers countless benefits to their kids.

### PUTTING DADS IN THE PICTURE

Dads in the Picture (DITP) founder, Meshack Kekana, asserts that 'studies have shown a reduction in drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and an involvement in criminal activities, among other outcomes, when there is a positive male influence in a child's life'. DITP is an organisation of like-minded fathers who see a need for dads to play a more active role.

The Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie's (SAVF) Erna Rheeder supports this by adding: 'An involved dad experiences the joy of truly getting to know his children. He can now share in his kids' activities, successes and sadnesses, and can actively build positive relationships that strengthen family bonds.' However, in South Africa, Meshack explains, 'The



socialisation and nurturing of men is as providers and not primary caregivers. Even in cases where a mother passes away, other family members usually step in and take over the role.' The perception – from men and women – is often that men cannot raise children on their own. For this reason, there is a need to highlight and learn from rare, but real, SA Super (stay-at-home) Dads.

### MAKING IT WORK

Brian Seabela from Pretoria and Capetonian Andrew Sheridan\* are professionals – an auditor/financial manager and architect, respectively. Both men have chosen consciously to downgrade business and upgrade family, at opposite ends of South Africa.

'I work independently, in many different ventures, so doing this from home makes sense,' says Brian. 'My wife is a transformation and workplace diversity manager – work that she needs to do outside of the home. Her mother lives with us and, together, we take care of our nine-month-old baby girl. I also do all the cooking and everybody pitches in with the cleaning.'

Andrew's wife travels for work often, which is the reason that first led the couple to explore this arrangement. 'I make up for any anxiety caused by their mom being absent for large chunks of time,' explains Andrew. 'I work as a consulting architect on my own terms, and with the support of a helper at home, it means I'm able to manage the kids and my workload as it varies from week to week.'

Both dads speak openly about their struggles too: 'Other people's reactions can be discouraging,' says Brian. 'When our daughter needed to go for her first vaccination injections, the nurses were bemused and eager to tell me they had never seen a dad bring in a six-week-old baby by himself.'

Similarly, Andrew admits that juggling his responsibilities at work and home can be a bit of a challenge. 'If one of our children is unexpectedly ill, I have to delay or cancel important meetings at the last minute. Also, men are not as supportive of each other as women can be. Other men I know who are in this position tend to isolate themselves from their friends and extended family when they believe their family set-up goes against the norm.'

Whether the stay-at-home dad becomes a trend in South Africa or possibly even a reality in your home (see 'Is it for you?' if you are thinking of taking this step), open communication with your partner is key. Today's generation of young parents is, slowly but surely, in the process of pioneering their own domestic paths. ■

\*Name has been changed.

IS IT FOR YOU?  
For couples considering this domestic arrangement, contact one of the following organisations:  
Africa Fatherhood Initiative  
africafatherhood.co.za  
The Character Company  
thecharactercompany.co.za  
Dads in the Picture  
dadsinthepicture.co.za  
Front Page Father  
frontpagefather.co.za  
Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie  
savf.co.za

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