

The following passage is excerpted from the Introduction to
Steering by the Stars: Being Young in South Africa
by Mamphela Ramphele

At the heart of the hope that burns eternal in South Africa's black townships is resilience. Resilience of people who have seen, heard and experienced pain and anguish, but kept hoping for a better tomorrow. It is this resilience that kept family ties tightly knotted together even as the fabric was fraying at the edges under the onslaught of the migrant labour system that separated men from their families. Family life was criminalised and made punishable by imprisonment and deportation back to the 'homelands'. Resilience enabled families to survive on meagre wages and old age pensions, and still send their children to school to give them a better future. It also allowed women to walk tall wearing smiles even as their dignity was trampled upon by abusive male partners who vented their frustration at being treated like 'boys' on their own women and children. Resilient black women also carry the burden of giving priority to looking after other people's children that they may put a plate of food in front of their own who are left to fend for themselves for much of the time. Resilience has made it possible for many black South Africans to retain the generosity of spirit and the wisdom to be prepared to follow the path of reconciliation rather than retribution against those who deliberately impoverished them.

The stories of these young people also tell of the cost of resilience. The self-image battered daily by self-doubt. The suppressed anger against one's parents who for good reasons are often not as forthcoming with truth as they could be. This economy with the truth often strikes at the heart of one's identity. Many of these young people are frequently unsure of the identities of their biological parents. Some have had nasty surprises sprung on them about siblings they knew nothing about. There is also anger at being physically and emotionally abused at home, at school and in the streets. Fear of failure accompanies one's daily life. Bewilderment abounds about the causes of continuing deprivation in post-apartheid South Africa. Questions are being whispered about the ability of black people to take charge and make a success of democratic governance given failures in so many parts of the African continent. There are urgent questions about the future and their own position within a more inclusive society in which they remain excluded from the benefits of full citizenship.

Unemployment remains the biggest thief of hope amongst young people. The recent Mesebetsi Labour Force Survey shows that those with tertiary education have a 98 per cent chance of being employed whereas those with only secondary school-level education are overly represented amongst the 45 per cent unemployed. This group of New Crossroads young people, with only one exception, belongs to that category of secondary school leavers who remain without suitable jobs. They have little prospect of new job opportunities. The few new jobs the economy is able to create either require high-level skills or are in the unskilled category. The majority of the fifteen remain unemployed. Only one has a good stable clerical job. A few are grateful to be employed as unskilled labourers.

The book is also a plea. It is a plea to South Africa to listen to the voices of young people. They are not just the future but the present. The South African population is very young. Young people in the fifteen- to thirty-five-year age group constitute almost 35 per cent of the population of 42 million people. Young black people make up 78 per cent of that segment. The majority of young black South Africans share the same hopes, anxieties, fears, bewilderment, and questions about their future as the storytellers in this book. What is remarkable is that these young people have not yet given up on adults. Adults have failed them at many levels in recent history. During the apartheid era parents could not protect their own children against police harassment and the ravages of poverty. In the post-apartheid society poor parents still seem marginal to decision making affecting bread-and-butter issues in society.

In almost every case it is a woman who has kept these young people's hope alive. Women as single parents. Women as effective heads of households with husbands who are not able or willing to assume their responsibilities as partners. Women as grandmothers left to carry the burden of child rearing without the necessary social support except the social pension of R620 (less than \$100) per month. Women as members of the extended family who pitch in when children are left with no available parent. It is even

women as total strangers who establish supportive bonds to keep children safe and reasonably cared for. In some cases it is young women as siblings who provide each other with mutual support.

The troubling social question raised by these stories of womencentred households and social networks is how this affects young men growing up without positive male role models? This question is made all the more urgent by its disjunction from the male-dominated ethos that permeates all South African cultures, black and white. How do poor young black men model their emergent manhood in the absence of adult male guidance? Or even worse, how do young men shape their own manhood in the presence of negative models: unemployed, alcoholic, abusive and destructive men in such large proportions in their own homes and neighbourhoods? How do young men avoid asking the question: what is wrong with black men? Or how do they respond to the same question if asked? How do young men develop the self-confidence to relate to women if women dominate the provision of so much of their everyday survival needs? How do these young men learn to give as men when men seem to be overwhelmingly recipients of care and not its givers?

Similar complementary questions could be asked of the shaping of young women's psyches in a world in which women assume responsibilities for the survival and stability of households and communities without the necessary authority to do so in a male-dominated culture. Fortunately for many young black women there are plenty of positive role models. Women who might be dirt poor and yet carry themselves with a dignity that defies logic. Women who can laugh through pain and anguish. Women who are able to lead even if they are not accorded the authority and recognition of leadership. But at what cost does one laugh through pain?

The misalignment between responsibility and authority bedevils gender relations in many segments of South Africa's social life. Women in their twenties to forties are increasingly opting out of marriage. Many more remain trapped in abusive relationships because their men cannot cope with strong assertive women. But it is this strength that has kept poor black families going for generations. How can young women not be expected to be assertive under such circumstances? But the anger of young men is equally understandable. They feel trapped in a social dynamic that has failed to provide them with the tools to negotiate relationships with women that go beyond women meeting their physiological and emotional needs. Many have yet to be exposed to loving and mutually caring relationships between men and women. How are they expected to manage their fears, insecurities and inadequacies without safe spaces? Is it surprising that many are resorting to the violence they have witnessed so often in their lives?

The HIV/Aids epidemic could not have come at a more inopportune time for South Africa. The wounds inflicted by the insults of racial discrimination, and the other socioeconomic sequelae of the apartheid era are still too raw. Many black South Africans have difficulty coming to terms with a heterosexually transmitted disease of such immense proportions that affects black people disproportionately. It is a cruel irony that it is the migrant labour system, introduced and promoted by the mining industry, that served as the entry point of the epidemic into South Africa from further north. This is yet another nail in the coffin of the family life of black migrant workers in Southern Africa. To add insult to injury, a significant proportion of the returning heroes of the struggle against apartheid also served as an additional entry point. Having been scattered in their youth throughout the world, but largely in Southern Africa, these young and not so young activists also brought back the dreaded disease. More than ten per cent of the population is now infected. The fifteen- to thirty-five-year olds, the most economically active group, bear the largest burden of the disease with about 25 per cent of them infected. Young women are disproportionately affected.

The failure of the post-apartheid government to respond adequately to this catastrophe should be understood against the fear of acknowledging an epidemic that could easily be used to fan the worst racial stereotyping. The mistrust of science that has traditionally been controlled by white people also contributed to ambiguity in the government's policy response. Denying black South Africans access to scientific knowledge was a central feature of apartheid education. The chickens are now coming home to roost. With gender relationships as unequal as they are, and with increasing sexual violence against women and children, HIV/Aids might yet succeed where apartheid failed: snuffing out the flame of hope.

The post-apartheid government must transcend the legacy it inherited and deliver appropriate preventive, promotive and drug treatment to the countless citizens afflicted with HIV/Aids. We must not allow the past to imprison the present and the future.