

## **The Discussion About Social Grant**

By Josephine Selepe

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Throughout the months of April and May, Khanya College hosted discussions as a prelude to the All College Conference. One of these discussions was about social grants and their impact on Black women in South Africa. The conversation focused on the importance of grants, who receives them, and how they affect people's everyday lives, especially those of Black women, who often carry the burden of sustaining families under difficult economic conditions.

In South Africa, a large number of citizens rely on social grants to survive. There are different types of grants, including the old age grant, pension grant, disability grant, child support grant, foster care grant, and the social relief of distress grant. From April 2003 to 2007, the number of people receiving the four main social grants increased significantly, particularly among the poorest families.

Under neoliberalism in South Africa, Black women carry a disproportionate burden, both economically and socially. The system of social reproduction, meaning how families survive and care for one another, is increasingly dependent on social grants, especially for single Black women and their children. Many of these women do not have consistent employment or access to other forms of income.

While government spending on social grants has increased over time, research shows that this has not significantly reduced poverty for the majority of recipients. The rising cost of living, due to factors such as prepaid water, electricity meters, and the unaffordability of basic food, has decreased the real value of these grants. In many ways, the state is shifting the cost of survival onto individuals, weakening the intended impact of social support.

Another issue is that grants are not considered pensions, as they are not based on any income earned during a recipient's working life. This means that those who did unpaid work, like caregiving, are excluded from earning more support in old age.

Additionally, many South Africans are unemployed and not receiving any grants. Some do not know how to apply, especially online. Others lack access to information or digital literacy, while some are simply overlooked by the system. This issue especially affects older people, those in their late 40s and 50s, who find it difficult to navigate modern systems and get the help they need.

In response to these challenges, communities need to build solidarity and push for better policies. The work done by Black women, especially caregiving and community involvement, is not socially or economically valued, despite being essential to the survival of households and society.

21-year-old Alfred Selepe said, "My experience with the social relief grant of R370 has been positive, especially when I was unemployed. It helped me buy food, toiletries, and even pay for printing documents like CVs while I was job hunting. Although the amount is small, it made a difference when I had no income. However, now the government is thinking of stopping the grant because some people misuse

the money. That decision could hurt those of us who depend on it. I wish more people could learn to save a small portion of it to start a small business. Yes, the amount is low, but for many, it's the only thing keeping us going."

Lindiwe Maqajana, 32, a single mother of two, explained, "I receive a child support grant, but it's not enough. I spend more than the grant on food, transport for my kids to get to school, and household needs. I'm not working, and when I apply for jobs, I get rejected, sometimes just because I'm South African. Some employers openly say they don't want South Africans. You can't save the grant money; it's gone before the end of the month. If I were the government, I would raise the amount to at least R1,000 per child. Single mothers are struggling, and we feel ignored by the government. It's as if Black women are not taken seriously in this country."

"It's very difficult for us as Black people. We are poor—no work, no water, no electricity where I live. During elections, politicians come and make promises, but once we vote, they disappear until the next election. This kind of life, this poverty, is only for Black people. You won't see white people living like this. Winter is coming, and it's cold. Our kids have to bathe with cold water and go to school hungry. We don't have paraffin or wood to cook. The grant is not enough. I'm not working, and my daughter isn't either. We're living in a shack, and we're barely surviving," said Zanele Nhlengethwa, 54, from Freedom Park.

In South Africa, social grants make a real difference in people's lives. They are a lifeline for families on the edge of poverty. But while they help people to survive, they do not provide a pathway out of poverty.

The realities faced by Black people, especially women and children, are harsh. Social grants are vital, but they need to be increased and accompanied by more inclusive economic policies, better access to services, and job creation.

Without structural change, the cycle of poverty will continue, and grants will remain a stopgap, not a solution.

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