

# **Empowered Women and the Need to Empower Men: Gender Relations and Food Security in Black South African Households**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Poverty and food insecurity are among the most pressing social issues in South Africa and the sub-continent at the beginning of the new century. About 44% of the South African population are considered food insecure (Parikh 2000). More recently, the situation is worsening, due to currency depreciation and inflation, which resulted in a food price crisis (Mail and Guardian, September 13 to 19 2002). Adding to this is the high incidence of HIV/AIDS, further threatening households that already live on the brink of starvation. Apart from external factors that cannot be influenced as easily, whether a household is able to achieve food security depends to a great extent on how available resources are used and distributed in the household. The necessity of revealing the marked differentiation in resource access and decision-making in the household sphere and also between socially connected households has been indicated as of utmost importance (Adams et al., 1998).

This study investigates the composition, socio-economic characteristics and intra-household relations of black South African households and the effect these complex indicators have on their food and nutrition situation. 166 people, mainly women, from 15 rural and urban sites in the North West Province were interviewed, using qualitative methods such as structured interviews with open-ended questions, life histories, observations, and information from key informants. In addition, quantitative socio-demographic information as well as data on health status were used for evaluation. In earlier publications, the approach and methodology of the study were described in detail (Lemke et al., 1999), furthermore the concept, composition and organisation of households were dealt with (Lemke et al., 2001). The most recent publication presents specific characteristics of different forms of household organisation, the socio-economic

situation and the state of food security/food insecurity (Lemke et al. 2002). Therefore, these issues are touched on only very briefly here.

The research extensively draws on anthropological work. In a number of them, not only the disruptive effects of powerlessness are described, but also the innovative social mechanisms of survival, of which social and individual actions for improved food security are essential elements. The important role gender relations play in the general wellbeing of members in black South African households, especially for women and children, is widely acknowledged (Van der Waal, 1996; Spiegel et al. 1996; Liebenberg, 1997; Jones, 1999). The specific place of food security as an element of daily survival within the different spheres, however, has still to be studied. Several authors indicate that in the majority of conjugal relationships male dominance is still very prevalent and that there are conflicts within households, mainly about income and other resources (Bank, 1997; Breslin and Delius, 1996; Jones, 1999; Liebenberg, 1997). The focus of the present paper is on gender and power relations within households and how they influence their food situation.

## **RE-ORGANISATION OF HOUSEHOLDS AS A MEANS OF COPING AND SURVIVAL**

The existing pattern of household types is to a large extent caused by the South African history of repression, relocation and dispossession that resulted in a situation of fluidity, residential instability and disorganisation of households (Spiegel, 1995; Van der Waal, 1996; Ross, 1993). Nowadays, there are several other factors that are compounding the disruption and disorganisation of families and the maintenance of the migrant labour system. Among them are high or endemic unemployment, poverty and increasing societal violence. The concept of household used here was inspired by the conceptualisations of Spiegel et al. (1996) and

Murray (1976) and is built around economic concerns, food security and also the social networks being used for economic survival and increased food security. A **household** is defined as *all people who share income and other resources, possibly also certain obligations and interests, whether they belong to the same or different residential units. In most cases, members of these households are related along kinship links.* **Head of household** was defined as *the person who is making major decisions regarding resources and directly influences other decisions taken in the house.* The term *female-headed household* was also clarified, in order to analyse variations that might occur in the sub-categories of these households due to household composition and power relations within them (see Lemke et al. 2002).

***“If we are married, my boyfriend will have many girlfriends and waste money”***

More than half of women in this sample live in household forms other than in a conjugal relationship. Findings on marital status confirm that almost all of these women are single. Of 130 women answering the question on marital status, more than a third state that they are not married. The majority of these women can be found in the age category of 35 years and above. This indicates that not getting married is not a phenomenon of this particular time or occurring only among younger women, which corresponds with other investigations in South Africa. Koen (1994: 16) gives the following national figures: 43% of black South African children are born to single mothers, and half of black South African women over twenty are single - they are either widows, or separated women, or have never married. Data of Niehaus (1994: 122-123) confirms that single women and men are not concentrated in the lower age categories. Jones (1999) found in a survey of 735 women that 67% aged 18 and older were not married or cohabiting with a partner. In the age cohort of 30 and older, within which marriage or conjugal partnerships might more reasonably have been expected, 55% of women were single, as Jones (1999: 17) states: “...large numbers of women were opting either never to marry, or, if they had married, to remain single after dissolution of the union.”

According to Van der Vliet (1984), the conscious decision made by women to remain single is due to men often being unwilling to contribute financially. Also, women did not accept the submissive roles that were ascribed to

them especially within traditional marriage. Staying single for them meant to have greater independence and also to be able to control their own fertility. Jones (1999) uses the term ‘*singlehood for security*’, which implies that women often choose to be single rather than to live with a partner whom they regard as an economic liability. The following statement of one of the key informants in this research, who lives with her two children in the house of her mother who is a pensioner, stands for many others: “*I left him [my first boyfriend] because he had no responsibility. My [present] boyfriend wants to marry me, but I don’t want it right now. I like to stay with my mother. She is my best friend. - I want to stay alone and independent. If we are married, my boyfriend will have many girlfriends, waste money and run away.*” Bank (1997) distinguishes in his argumentation, that only financially independent women with secure, stable jobs aspire to staying single and maintaining their independence from men. Most of these women stressed that they were not living alone because they disliked men, but rather that they were still looking for the ‘right’ man, who should be somebody they could rely on in terms of providing money, not drinking and not having other women. Stadler (1993) found that it was young educated women who rejected marriage, because it would disrupt their life course designed around independence and employment, being aware that if they marry, they are subject to their husband’s unreliable support and their mother-in-law’s obstructions. These women often through parental support manage to achieve their aims, regarding education, independence and employment.

On the part of men, the lack of jobs and the obligation to pay bride-wealth puts them in a difficult situation because they often simply cannot afford to marry. Van der Vliet (1984) argues that the decision for men to stay single was often the result of insufficient income and the real or perceived inability to succeed as providers. Stadler (1993) also found that young men were opposed to bride-wealth because it meant a financial burden. One of the male interviewees (27) in this research illustrates his situation as follows: “*I left the army three years ago because the contract was not extended. Now I do piece jobs at the mine. I also do plumbing ... I want to change my life. I want to stop drinking and smoking, if I would have work. But even now it would be better to stop. But my friend comes*

*here, and then we go to drink something. And then my girlfriend and me argue. She doesn't like it. It's [that I drink and smoke] because I just sit around all day".*

Another important aspect with regard to the position of women in households are very high levels of domestic violence and violence against women and children. This might be another reason for women to stay single instead of ending up in abusive relationships. As Budlender (2000: 133) states, "Poorer women are often 'trapped' in abusive relationships due to their dependence on partners for food, shelter and money." Not only with regard to HIV/AIDS, violence as a reality in the lives of women and girls must be recognised for the serious issue it is. Violence in many cases is not committed by strangers, but by men the women already know, often by their male partners or within the family. According to Budlender (2000), the combination of poverty, natural disasters, violence, social disruption and the disempowered status of most rural and peri-urban women in Southern Africa form a fertile environment for the transmission of HIV infections. Smith (2000) clearly sees rape as one of the reasons for the increasing HIV infection rate: "*AIDS is storming across the continent because of despicable practices towards women and children – and rape leads the field.*"

The incidence of AIDS has serious implications for the food situation of households. People who are infected with HIV at some stage lose their working capacity and therefore an important income source for the household may be lost. Furthermore, there are additional medical costs for households due to several illnesses that occur when being infected with HIV. Beyond the individual and the household, the incidence of HIV/AIDS contributes to a general lower level of health in communities, because of its close relationship with other communicable and poverty-related diseases such as TB (Budlender, 2000). The combination of both is a vicious circle, leaving more and more people subject to poverty and destitution. Children may lose both parents and become orphans in need of care and financial support. In other cases, extended kin take in orphans, which reduces the average available food resources in these households. Therefore, there is a significant link between AIDS, household food security and individual nutritional status.

### **FOOD SECURITY AND POWER RELATIONS OR : WHY SOME HOUSEHOLDS ARE MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN OTHERS**

To determine whether a household is food secure/food insecure, a set of indicators was used, such as availability of food, access to food, diversity of food, experience of hunger and food shortage, household income and monthly expenditure on food, coping strategies and perceptions of people. The majority of households in this sample (74%) are chronically food insecure. Members of these households do not feel secure that they will have enough food and there is also no diversity of food to ensure adequate nutrition. Food insecure households exist on limited or unpredictable incomes and often on pensions as the main income source (see Lemke et al., 2002). The important question is: why are some households more successful than others, despite similar or even worse economic conditions, and what are the factors contributing to a better state of food security in these households, apart from income?

#### **Per capita Income, Headship and Power Relations**

Comparing per capita income according to headship and power relations reveals that income in households led by men is about three times the income of households led by women and also considerably higher than income in households characterised by a partnership relationship. This finding is congruent with national data: according to May et al. (2000: 34), average wage income in female-headed households is about one-third of the average wage income in male-headed households. Figures regarding poverty indicate that 37% of non-urban female-headed households were among the poorest fifth of households, compared to 23% of non-urban male-headed households. In urban areas, 15% of households headed by women were among the poorest fifth, compared to 5% of households headed by men (CSS 1997). This confirms the frequent assumption that female-headed households seem to be economically worse off than male-headed households, if only taking into account income figures (Von Braun 1999; Jones 1999).

**Table 1: Per capita income according to headship and power relations**

<i>Head of household(n=100)*</i>	<i>Per capita income in Rand</i>
Male-headed (n=10)	1243
Female-headed (n=40)	152
Jointly-headed (n=35)	237
De facto female-headed (n=14)	136
<i>Power relations**(n=100)</i>	
Partnership relationship (n=14)	340
Men dominate (n=36)	466
Women dominate (n=47)	148

\* Data on income were obtained by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Only those households where data on income seemed reliable are included here. However, data on income should always be regarded with a degree of caution.

\*\* In-depth investigation into the issue of head of household revealed the three categories of power relations (Lemke et al., 2002).

### Worries About Food, Experience of Hunger and Power Relations

It was investigated how the revealed power relations influence the daily experiences of people. Worries about food and experiences of hunger are indicated in Table 2.

What is striking about these correlations is that, in households where men dominate, there are more worries about the food situation than in households with partnership relationships and in households where women dominate. This is despite the fact that per capita incomes in male-dominated households are higher (R466) than in both of the other categories (R340 in households with partnership relationships and R148 in households dominated by women). In households with partnership relationships, the incidence of experiencing hunger on the part of both interviewees and their children is lower than in the other categories. In households with men

dominating, the number of interviewees indicating that they go hungry is almost the same as in households where women dominate (40% and 44%, respectively), and 60% indicate that there is sometimes not enough food for children. This is much higher than in households with partnership relationships and also higher than in households where women dominate. The correlations are highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) and significant ( $p < 0.033$ ;  $p < 0.017$ ).

### Food Security and Power Relations

Linking the state of food security/insecurity according to power relations, the picture as

**Table 3: State of food security according to power relations ( $p < 0.001$ )**

<i>Power relations (n=166)</i>	<i>State of food security</i>			
	<i>Very insecure</i>	<i>Insecure</i>	<i>Relatively secure</i>	<i>Secure</i>
Partnership relationship (n=30)	7%	33%	47%	13%
Men dominate (n=65)	19%	66%	12%	3%
Women dominate (n=71)	17%	62%	18%	3%

shown in Table 3 emerges:

Households based on households keep considerable parts of their income for themselves instead of contributing it to household resources (Buijs, 1995; Breslin and Delius, 1996; Bank, 1997; Jones, 1999; Van der Waal, 1996). The following comments of female interviewees in this study group illustrate this: "I don't get any money from my husband"; "The money should not be used for useless things like beer, tobacco - that is the case now"; "I worry because my husband is stingy. I don't get any money from him, I don't know how much money he earns"; "My husband gives me money only month's end."

**Table 2: Power relations, worries about food and experiences of hunger**

<i>Power relations(n=166)</i>	<i>Worried about food</i>		<i>Going hungry going yourself</i>		<i>Children going hungry</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Partnership relationship (n=30)	48%	52%	17%	83%	25%	75%
Men dominate (n=65)	81%	19%	40%	60%	60%	40%
Women dominate (n=71)	80%	20%	44%	56%	49%	51%
Significance of correlation	p<=0.001		p<=0.033		p<=0.017	



### Food Security in Households Attached to Migrant Men and Migrant Women

The state of food security was further compared in households attached to migrant men and migrant women, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Food security in households attached to migrant men and migrant women**

<i>Mean household income &amp; state of food security</i>	<i>Households attached to migrant men (n=19)</i>	<i>Households attached to migrant women (n=19)</i>
Mean household income	R1 326	R496
Very insecure	-	37%
Insecure	74%	53%
Relatively secure	21%	10%
Secure	5%	-
Total	100%	100%

Households attached to migrant men have about three times the income (R1 326) of households attached to migrant women (R496). Van der Waal (1996) found similar differences of incomes of migrant men and women, although these figures cannot directly be compared. Households attached to migrant men are more food secure, as was to be expected as a result of much higher household incomes available to them. One would expect, however, that these households are even more food secure, while the findings indicate that almost three-quarters are still food insecure. It was furthermore found that the number of households attached to female migrants taking credit is lower than in households attached to male migrants (Lemke et al., 2002). This could partly be due to contributions of food by female migrants that increase household resources. It was also revealed that households attached to migrant women have larger networks of relatives and friends that help overcome times of food shortage. Another benefit of contributions of migrant women Jones (1999) points out is that remittances of migrant women are more reliable and that therefore households are able to budget more effectively and would be less likely to take credit at local retailers. What can be stated from the results obtained here is that half of the female partners of migrant men do not know what their partner earns and demand that they should contribute more, while there were no "complaints" regarding contributions of migrant women. This finding is consistent throughout a number of studies (Breslin and

Delius, 1996; Bank, 1997; Jones, 1999; Van der Waal, 1996). Sometimes, men after a while do not remit money home anymore, as Van der Waal notes: "Men's severe neglect of their family-support commitments particularly eroded interpersonal relationships, especially when men established new marital relationships or liaisons at their workplace (1996:34)". One could, on the other hand, see this as a coping mechanism within the limiting situation of migrancy. While it does affect the family at home negatively, on the other hand it gives another woman and possibly her children access to some resources and helps them to survive. Women who get involved in relationships with migrant men might be motivated primarily by the need to obtain accommodation and maybe other economic advantages. According to Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988), there is general agreement amongst both men and women that most of these lover relationships are characterised by mutual abuse: men need a 'domestic slave' as well as a sexual partner, women need a place to stay and maybe other support. As Liebenberg (1997) found, women who stay behind in the rural areas sometimes also engage in relationships with other men. They might be able to get money from a boyfriend in times of shortage. According to 'tradition', this behaviour is still regarded as neither common nor appropriate for women. Due to their submissive role, women are mostly unable to openly challenge the double standards of sexual mentality which men demand, irrespective of their own behaviour (Ramphele and Boonzaier, 1988; Liebenberg, 1997; Van der Vliet, 1991).

### CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Investigations and comparisons according to household categories and power relations with regard to the state of food security support the assumption that households led or headed by women, despite more limited economic resources, are not as disadvantaged as one would expect. They often even achieve a better or an equal status as those households headed or led by men. Households led by women have several ways of closing the gap between their income levels and that of other more privileged household categories. Women, for instance, more often engage in the informal sector which enables them to support their household better. Women also have social resources, such as various networks, that are not uncovered by conventional statistical

methods. Examples of the use of social resources are: better access of women to small credits at local shops, social networks women establish in their neighbourhood and also networks with mostly female relatives. According to Bank (1997: 175), "Feminised social networks built around spaza shops, borrowing and lending in women's names ... allow women to force open social spaces of their own beyond the dominant patriarchal ideology ... the creation of these feminised social spaces is absolutely vital to the survival of many woman-headed households which depend heavily on neighbourhood-level networks and invest a great deal of time and effort keeping these restricted circuits of exchange open."

Jones (1999) also highlights the importance of co-operative alliances for women in female-headed households among their co-resident kinswomen and also with related women in other female-headed households, giving women in female-headed households relative economic security. While these women could rely on intra- and inter-household relationships, "... women in conjugal households often had neither ... in a context where conjugal relations were ephemeral and men prioritised their own needs ahead of those of their partners and children, it is easy to see why some women instead opted for the more assured security of partnerships with like-minded and like-situated kinswomen" (Jones, 1999: 24-25).

It is confirmed by this research that women living in conjugal relationships where there is no equal partnership relationship and also women co-operating with other (male) relatives are in many cases more vulnerable to food insecurity than women who have social networks of female relatives or women who are financially independent.

Households based on partnership relationships are found to be the most food secure, having higher per capita incomes than households led by women, but lower per capita incomes than households led by men. In the latter category, the percentage of very insecure and insecure households is higher than in female-led households, despite the even more striking difference regarding per capita income.

The investigation into why some households are more successful than others, despite similar difficult socio-economic circumstances, reveals that this question cannot be answered in a simple way. However, certain characteristics come to the

fore: households manage more successfully with limited resources if: (a) there are several income earners and therefore also several decision-makers; (b) women are managing resources, which often includes that they also have access to small credits at local shops; (c) the household has access to networks of relatives and neighbours; and (d) the relationship between a couple is based on equal partnership. In some cases one, in other cases several of the above characteristics apply.

In contrast, households manage less successfully if: (a) they are male-dominated; (b) intra-household relations reveal struggle and tension about resources; (c) household members are totally dependent on others due to illness or having no income; (d) there is 'unwise' budgeting; (e) the household head is a pensioner; and (f) single mothers with children who lack social networks form a household.

### **What is the Way Forward?**

Sachs (1992) sees the family and the relationships within the family as a starting point for development, emphasising that it is not about some abstract, idealised model of the perfect family, but about the actual lives that people lead today. He states that "We need democracy in our processes, democracy in our mechanisms, and democracy inside the family itself ... how to strengthen the family and at the same time weaken patriarchy – nowhere in the world has this been fully achieved, and yet this is precisely the daunting task facing us in South Africa" (Sachs, 1992).

The reality in South Africa under the present socio-economic circumstances is that couples often cannot live together. Migrant workers are in many cases separated from their family for exceptionally long periods. Sometimes, they return home only every two to three months for brief visits. Only a limited number of couples are able to maintain a stable relationship because of this situation. According to research done by Ramphele (1993) in the migrant labour hostels in Cape Town, some of these relationships seem to function well, while others are highly unstable or totally dysfunctional. Her findings revealed that the stability of relationships appeared to depend on the security of the man's employment, his remittance behaviour, the level of communication with his wife and how well the couple had adjusted to the periodic contact. As Niehaus (1994:134)

found in an investigation into household formation, "There is great marital instability.....[this] is due not merely to wage labour and migration in search of it, but also to the very formality of the affinal bond itself and the expected gender roles of spouses. The roles of 'husband' and 'wife' were regarded as incompatible with those of migrant and commuter labourer."

An important aspect in the discussion about the position of women and gender relations is the 'crisis of African masculinity' (Bank, 1994), which could possibly partly explain violence against women. The underlying reasons of violence among black South African men were dealt with in a television documentary (SABC, 1998), which argued that since colonial times and in circumstances reinforced during apartheid, black South African men have been constantly subject to suppression and humiliation, in this process losing their self-respect. They were cheap labourers in the mines and on farms, denying them family life and rights. They had to live on their own in deprived conditions in single-sex hostels, uprooted from their families, culture and traditions. In this documentary it is further argued that previously, young black South Africans grew up with the tradition of *Ubuntu*, which implies having respect for others, and some felt they could prove their manhood in rites such as the ritual of circumcision. In the cities, these traditions were sometimes replaced by gang activities where young men had to prove themselves, sometimes even by killing a person. All of these conditions added to the loss of self-respect and self-esteem of men and can result in violence as a means of reaffirming masculinity (Bank 1994). This at the same time keeps women in their subservient roles and does not provide the possibilities for changes.

As was pointed out, a cruel reality for black South African women is the high incidence of domestic violence and rape. The lack of judicial action and the lack of reaction by society as a whole against rape are being criticized by the Women's Health Project (1999: 2), stating that "While we have women's rights articulated well in our constitution, laws and policies, rape – the ultimate power of men over women – is endemic in our society. Most men in our society are not organizing to do anything about it. In fact, many men in leadership positions in our society who work in communications, the judiciary, the

religious sector and insurance companies are resisting change [...] South African women are waiting [...] we are still living in fear and being subjected to acts of violence daily [...] we are also waiting for [...] visible male leaders in sports, arts, politics and business [...] to actively speak out publicly on violence against women and lead by example."

This statement stresses the dire need for male leaders as role models, which could have more effect than if it is only women who speak out about these issues.

As gender relations play such a crucial role for the general wellbeing of households, the question is, if and how we can approach and include men and their role better than this seems to be presently the case in society and also in certain programmes of development. As was shown in this research as well as in numerous other investigations, women have the capacity to build social networks and thus have social resources that often enable them to survive, whether in material terms or in terms of psychological support, while men often lack these support systems. Furthermore, with regard to development programmes, it is mostly women who are addressed. While these efforts should not be questioned, should the focus at the same time not also be on men, to also give them the means for empowerment in certain regards, such as learning social skills, as an accompanying measure for job creation? In which ways could men be reaffirmed as men? Could this reaffirmation help to lower the high incidence of rape, and could there be gradually the implementation or creation of an internalised, new code of conduct for adolescents and young men? Could such measures help to strengthen the family and to weaken patriarchy? Also, the bad social effects of labour migration on family life, which is still very much part of South African life, and the bad effects of demeaning labour conditions for both men and women, should be considered if social reconstruction is hoped for in future.

Finally, I have to admit that in the beginning of this research I was not free of the bias to see the issues discussed in this research *from a woman's perspective*. This was especially due to finding myself in a very male-dominated society in South Africa with patriarchal ideologies within both black and white communities. I was aware of this bias, though, and tried not to fall into a

trap of extreme subjectivity. Discussions with other academics during all stages of research helped me to rectify my views and to limit the extent of bias. Also certain readings and documentaries (Ramphele, 1993; Kotzé, 1993; SABC, 1998) which dealt specifically with the position of men who had suffered under the apartheid system, and are still suffering, helped me to see things not only from a woman's perspective, but from a broader human perspective. However, I find it very important to stress issues such as violence against women, as they are still not emphasised enough and negatively affect and hurt South African society as a whole. A woman's perspective in highlighting the lowly position of women, the way their contribution is disregarded and how they are violated is because of my concern for South African society. South Africans can only benefit from acknowledging reality and trying to redress the situation of women and to use their skills. Despite extremely adverse situations, black South African women are admirably coping and many have achieved to empower themselves.

**KEY WORDS** Gender and power relations; singlehood for security; social networks; household food security

**ABSTRACT** Poverty, food insecurity and the high incidence of HIV/AIDS are among the most pressing issues in South Africa. Many families are disrupted, due to continuous migration, poverty and increasing societal violence, leading to the re-organisation of households and changing intra-household relationships. The article investigates gender and power relations within households and their effect on the food and nutrition situation. It is shown that certain female-headed households and also households based on partnership relationships, despite more limited resources, often achieve a better or an equal situation than households headed by men. Women increasingly prefer to be independent from men, whom they often consider an economic liability. Households headed by women have several ways of closing the gap between their income levels and that of more privileged household categories, such as social networks of kin and neighbours, using credit at local shops and engaging in occasional jobs. It is concluded that families, whatever their state, continue to make use of their kinship links, which is also one of the most important coping strategies for survival. With regard to development, it is suggested that men need to be empowered and reaffirmed as men, to give them the means to change wrong perceptions of their role as men in the household.

#### NOTE

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Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, 9-11 September 2002. The data is based on a PhD study the author undertook in South Africa from 1997-2001. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Fanie Jansen van Rensburg, Department of Sociology, University of Potchefstroom, South Africa, and Ms Carina van Rooyen, Department of Development Studies and Anthropology, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, South Africa, for reviewing the final draft. The responsibility for the issues discussed remains entirely my own. Correspondence: Dr. Stefanie Lemke, Erikaweg 15, 82538 Geretsried, Germany, Tel.: +49 8171 96037; Fax: +49 8171 407 687; e-mail: stefanie.lemke@onlinehome.de

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