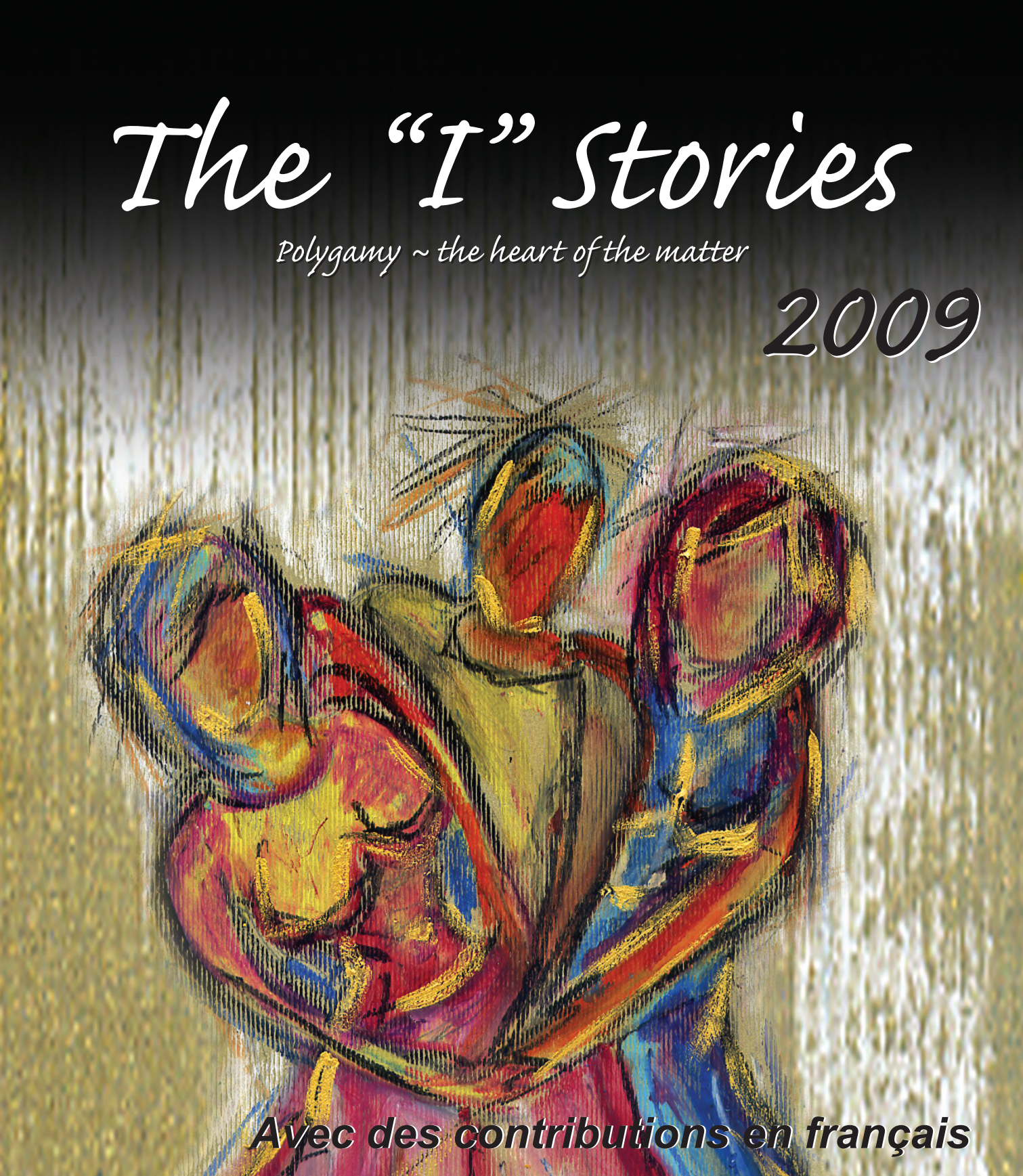
The "I" Stories

Polygamy ~ the heart of the matter

2009



Avec des contributions en français

The *"I" Stories* is a project of Gender Links (GL), in collaboration with partnering organisations, to share first hand accounts of women and men on gender issues. Annually, GL produces *"I" Stories* from survivors of gender violence for 16 Days of Activism; in 2005 GL also produced a collection of *"I" Stories* from South African local government councilors. This current collection - *Polygamy: The heart of the matter* - is the first of its kind, sharing stories and insights from women, men and children of polygamous marriages. GL is a Southern African non-governmental organisation committed to a region in which women and men are able to realise their full potential and participate equally in all aspects of public and private life.

Editor: Deborah Walter
Editorial assistants: Cindy Dzanya, Mandla Masingi
Design & layout: Debi Lucas~Top Art Graphics
Graphics: Anushka Virahsawmy
Printers: DS Print Media

Gender Links
Derrick Avenue
Cyrildene 2198
Johannesburg, South Africa
Phone:+ 27 (0) 11 622 2877
Fax: + 27 (0) 11 622 4732
www.genderlinks.org.za

In this series, where writers have given their consent face photos are used with their stories



President Jacob Zuma with three wives, Nompumelelo Ntuli (left), Thobeka Mabhija (second left) and Sizakele MaKhumalo (right), after the State of The Nation address in Parliament on June 3, 2009



Photo: TIGXpress Project

Cultural expressions for HIV/AIDS awareness



Photo: Gender Links

16 Days of Activism celebration in Swaziland

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* Due to the sensitive nature of these stories, many contributors have chosen to use pseudonyms

Acknowledgements

The stories in this book are a small representation of the voices of tens of thousands of women and men living in, or who have lived in, traditional polygamous marriages. We thank them for their contributions, without which this book would not have been possible. Several partners and individuals co-operated in gathering stories for this volume of *"I" Stories*. Special thanks to Lutheran Development Service in Swaziland for co-operation in collecting stories in Swaziland. Thanks also to Makhosonke Myende and Deborah Mahlobo for organising contributors in South Africa.

We wish to thank our sponsors, UNIFEM and HIVOS, for their support to produce this book of *"I" Stories*.



A traditional Zulu homestead, a central house with smaller houses around it for the wives *Photo: Digital Journal*



Foreword

By Bafana Khumalo

Discussions on polygamy are critical in the context of a transforming continent. This is a long overdue discussion, given the many challenges related to gender transformation. Many argue that culture and cultural practices are sacrosanct and rigid. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Evidence the world over shows that culture, by its very definition, is dynamic and transient. Culture adapts and responds to changing environments and contexts.

The collection of stories in this booklet presents various scenarios of polygamous relationships, chronicling the current and past experiences lived by men and women across the Southern African Development Community region, including South Africa, Swaziland, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe, as well as Senegal. Each writer shares their own account of living in polygamous relationships and what this has meant for them as women, men and children.

Polygamy is a controversial practice characterised by contestations and debates, especially in this era of human rights discourse. Gender equality discourses are a subject of great interest worldwide, and no less on the African continent. Pivotal questions are - “Does polygamy promote gender equality? Is it beneficial to both parties (men and women) equally? Does it advance a human rights culture?”

In many discussions of polygamy, the negative aspects take centre stage, especially the disempowerment of women. However, the stories contained within are not all negative. Positive success stories do exist in certain cultural settings and individual families. It is natural that some harmonious and successful polygamous families exist, because people are different – in terms of personal ethics or responsibility, commitment to their varied faiths and self-control. Each polygamous family unit is unique, and because of this it becomes difficult to make generalised assertions.

However, the practice of polygamy is generally viewed as detrimental to the advancement of women’s rights as it relies on patriarchy and subordination, which infringes on the freedom of choice and expression. This may also happen when it comes to important issues like reproductive health, access to treatment, the right to negotiate safer and satisfying sex. This is particularly important because there is also debate about whether multiple partners within a union increases (as a result of more partners) or decreases (because men are less likely to “go outside”) risk of HIV transmission.

Evidence from latest research on HIV prevalence in the sub-Saharan region suggests that multiple concurrent partnerships are one of the key drivers of the pandemic. It is worrying that some young men today claim to invoke the cultural practice of polygamy to justify their indiscretions related to risky sexual behaviours (that is culturally justifying multiple partners outside of marriage).

What is also common in these stories as a running thread is the fact that this practice is essentially about satisfying men's needs. It would be interesting to specifically explore to what extent women feel their needs are met in these relationships or, better still, an assessment of women's perspectives on polyandry?

Perhaps time has come for societies to challenge notions of masculinity, expose its weaknesses and create space for men to interrogate themselves on these critical issues. Men associate masculinity with status, prestige, power and control. Yet, men's health and well-being are also jeopardised by these rigid gender roles. Perhaps it is time to discard notions of masculinity and femininity, to be replaced by notions of humanity. Our needs and emotions are the same, with our differences being mostly biological.

This series of *"I" Stories* avoids the often misleading limitations of generalisations by providing snapshots of the life experiences of people from polygamous families. These stories also give vivid impressions of emotions and personal opinions on the subject – invaluable insights based on personal experiences.

These stories present an opportunity to "step into the shoes," so to speak, of the polygamous lifestyle from different roles; be it from the heart of the wife or daughter or the eyes of the father or son. These very different perspectives point out the challenges that the complexities of polygamy pose in the present context of gender work and the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.

This book sets the stage for that vital public engagement on this important subject, a discussion that needs to be brought into the public space. I am certain that this book will go a long way towards this eventuality.

Bafana Khumalo is a Co-founder and Co-director of Sonke Gender Justice Network. Bafana served as the Deputy Chairperson of the National Commission on Gender Equality from 2000-2006. Prior to being appointed to the CGE in 2001 he was a Pastor and Director of the Lobethal Lutheran Conference Centre and later the Executive Director of the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA) where he managed the SADC Region. At the CGE he has assisted National and Provincial Departments of Government to plan and co-ordinate many activities related to men, gender and HIV/AIDS.



A word from the editor

Deborah Walter

Although still widely practiced both in Africa and around the world, the practice of polygamy is seldom spoken of. In South Africa, the issue leapt to center stage during the run up to the 2009 presidential elections. The sudden interest was not surprising - after all, how many countries have a polygamous president in its highest offices?

Questions of culture

Heading into the polls, the polygamous lifestyle of Jacob Zuma, leader of the African National Congress (ANC) became a hotly debated topic of discussion, especially amongst gender and women's rights activists. Mainstream media focused on such logistical matters as security costs and which wife would accompany the new President during official functions. Gender Links (GL) and partners held a "Great Debate," televised by SABC International and published several opinion pieces through the GL Commentary Service on the topic. Traditionalists argued cultural choice, while gender activists questioned polygamy's place in a constitutional democracy.


Background

Who will Zuma's First Lady be?

Zuma has four wives, so who will he pick as his No 1? Many have picked his latest to be in the pound seats.

Zuma's threats to judges should worry law-abiding South Africans

Amongst all the debate, the voices and the views of those most "in the know," women and men living in polygamous relationships were virtually non-existent. Recognising the importance of these missing voices, Gender Links embarked on this *"I" Stories* project to collect personal accounts of women, men and children from polygamous unions.

The first section of this book shares stories from writers questioning cultures, beginning with a Zambian gender activist who grew up, very happily, with three mothers. This story, in which each wife lives an empowered and independent life, shows the complexity of views on polygamy and the tensions of questioning cultures. Yet, other stories paint a different picture, in which culture literally traps women. Shocked to learn she was the eleventh wife, Tholakele Dlamini recalls, "He married me through the Swazi law and custom, that meant no going back." Though Mozambican Isabella Jaime's father is a traditional healer with 5 wives and over 18 children, her feeling is that "most people still think in the past and that is why they justify polygamous practices."

Polygamous families

The second section focuses on multiple wives. Several stories recall emotional, physical, and financial abandonment by husbands and families and gives insight into the pain some women face, for example, if pregnancy does not follow marriage quickly or family favours another wife. There are also two sets of stories, from husbands and wives, which candidly tell of some of the problems, but also give some insight as to how these families function successfully - "talking is the only solution," says Zabele Mirole.

The third section includes stories of growing up in polygamous homes. Whether be it experience, or growing up in a more "modern" age, many children from polygamous families are critical of what they see as the competition for scarce resources, confusion, and unhappiness of mothers in these

relationships. "… focus on what it does to the children, what good does it do them when they live amongst feuding adults," suggests Mwiindi Himaambo. Worse, are accounts of children mistreated by the mothers who are not biologically their own.

"Polygamy is fair since both the senior wife and the new one have to agree on the marriage. The marriage cannot continue without the senior wife's consent. The imposition of the idea of equality of gender is not compromised because the husband does not deal with his wives as 'half-wives' but as complete human beings."
- Zimbali Kwela, response to article on Mail and Guardian Online

Violence at home

The last section shares stories of gender violence. Some say that the unequal, patriarchal nature of polygamy, as well as tensions existing in such homes, can lead to gender violence - not just physical but also emotional and financial. As well, there are those who hide behind the banner of culture to make excuses for multiple partners and even sexual abuse. "My stepfather used to come to me and say he wanted to sleep with me, saying that I was his second wife," says Nomsa, though she was just a child at the time. However, statistics show us that gender violence is as prevalent in homes with one husband and one wife - perhaps this points to a need to talk about gender equality in every kind of relationship - polygamous, monogamous, cohabitation, etc. The final story, from a male gender activist in Zimbabwe offers a more positive view - with three wives, Elliot Makumbe became a gender activist with Padare men's group, and now ascribes to the ideal that "men of quality are not afraid of equality."

HIV/AIDS

The final two stories of the book are accounts from women who contracted HIV in polygamous relationships. There are many people who propose that polygamy helps to reduce HIV prevalence as it keeps multiple sexual relationships within a family unit. Yet, for these women, polygamy was no protection from HIV. As Helena Eduardo recalls, after accepting her husband's second wife, "Armando started to have other relationships and he would lie to both of us about his whereabouts." Mavis Muunga also contracted HIV from her husband, and wonders if she had accepted her brother-in-laws offer of marriage, "most likely, he and his wives would also have been infected with HIV/AIDS and later died."

"Polygamy is not a function of any particular culture; it is a function of patriarchy. The definition of this is the superiority of men over women. And if we accept that this is an unacceptable ideology, as much as apartheid was a function of racism and we rejected it, if we reject sexism, we cannot subscribe to a system where men can have many wives, but women can not have many husbands."
- Colleen Lowe Morna, GL Executive Director

Talking about gender

All of these accounts offer food for thought about gender and gender equality, and questions some of our assumptions about polygamy. It's a choice say proponents - but stories show women who expected to be the only wife, women pressured by husbands and family, or who lacked the economic power to disagree - and none of these offer choice, even if the person says "yes."

Women cannot be happy or empowered in polygamous relations say some - but accounts show there can be a different side. There is happiness, joy, and co-operation in polygamous families. These stories also portray rigid gender roles not only cause problems for women, but men also. As it stands, men face incredible pressure to reproduce quickly, provide for families, and be the glue that holds the family together.

As one of the first of its kind, those culturally attached to polygamy and those vehemently against are likely to read this book. We ask that everyone read it with an open mind, hear the stories and voices reflected in these accounts (and ask "Are the people happy? Is this the best for our daughters and sons? Are their needs and rights taken care of?"). There is much to be learned from these small glimpses into others' lives.

We welcome your comments and contributions, please email editor@genderlinks.org.za

Questions of culture



A gender activist in a polygamous family

By Lusungu Banda,* Zambia

I have three mothers and eleven siblings. Growing up in a small community, our home appeared no different from other large families where several generations lived together.

We moved to a bigger town when I was in high school where I had my first encounter with nuclear families. I was quite shocked to find that some of my new friends had their own bedrooms, with just two or three siblings, and did not live as we did, almost one on top of the other. Our polygamous family was unusual in this new town, but if people were curious, they kept it to themselves.

We lived as a big family with children squabbling and competing for attention. We lived as many big families, children squabbling, competing for attention. If any one of us shouted "maaah," whichever mother responded first was the one we were looking for.

I only found out that mother number three was my biological mother when I was involved in an accident at 17, and had to have a blood donation. I learnt later that all the children figured out who their biological mother was in similar circumstances, in their teens, when they needed a genetic history for school or something. That information came too late in our lives to change how we related to each other, as age group and interests had already formed bonds and alliances.

In 1985 during the Beijing conference, there was a lot of talk about gender equality and its associated issues of discrimination and empowerment. At that time, I was writing for a woman's news service. Polygamy was singled out for discussion, and I was asked to do some research and write stories on the topic.

I cannot recall whether I was told to look for only the negativity or bad things about polygamy, or whether I simply wanted to join the huge wave that said polygamy was an affront to the rights of women. As the stories began to flow, I began to absorb what I was writing. If there was a bad word associated with polygamy, you bet I could find another more offensive word to describe it. I wrote it all.

This began to fracture my relationship with my family. I saw my mothers as characterless wives, anonymous, weak, disempowered and abused women. I saw my father as this misogynist, a weak character whose "manliness" was derived from lording over helpless women. I began to disrespect them and attacked their way of life in my articles, calling them uncivilised and referring to my mothers' as living in harem, in my more milder articles.

There came a point when my older siblings ordered the rest of the family not to have contact with me until I began to show some respect for the family, especially the mothers. It was a painful period for me; I really missed my family, especially my father.

One of my mothers' (number two) finally had enough and literally pulled me by the ear and drove me to the family compound where the family asked me very firmly exactly what my problem with our home life was.

Put directly like that, I was a little tongue-tied because I was being asked to talk about my family and not polygamy generally. I began by making a spirited attack on how the religion of Islam is practiced (which was as good as blasphemy in our household) saying men had twisted the prophets words so that they could be polygamists, when it was quite clear that polygamy in Islam was only allowed in times of war to protect women.

I then regurgitated the usual arguments how it was unacceptable for a man to want or have more than one wife if women could not have more than one husband. I said it was not humanely possible for him to love and be fair to all of them. Someone was bound to suffer. I said plural wives suffered the indignity of sharing the affections of one man, making him the focal point of their lives, turning him into a god-like figure where

everyone fights for his favour. I talked about how marriage was about commitment to one partner, not many.

My mother (number one) then asked me if I, or any of my siblings, were in any way dysfunctional (my siblings are all high achievers, I am the only one without a PhD). Did we suffer any lack or abuse while growing up because we were in a polygamous household? No, we did not.

My father asked me to reflect on who owned the wealth in the family. My mothers' had come into their marriages with nothing, but between them had two supermarkets, three service stations, a garage and a nursery school. Also, they had all built houses for their parents. While my father's wealth was for the family, each mothers' wealth was hers alone. So how could I describe my mothers' as weak unempowered people?

My oldest sister, a divorced single parent, reminded me the mothers were the people who went to school meetings and helped with 12 sets of homework. We always had the first and best, whether it was the latest fashions or birthday parties, and our home was always popular because of the homemade goodies, unlike some of our friends whose mothers were too busy.

We also had more choices than our friends did. We went to mother number two if we were in trouble at school, with the neighbours or our friends, as she was the understanding one. Mother number three was the domestic one, she did all our cakes and dresses, while mother one was the nurse. Her point was there was always a mother around for us at any one time, something her own children do not have as she is always working.

All my mothers said that if they had another chance, they would still enter into a polygamous marriage. They pointed out that my father treated them well, was never abusive and supported them in whatever they were doing. They asked me to point out any weakness or anything that takes away from their lives by being in a polygamous relationship. Naturally, they also pointed out that bad marriages are just that, whether it is in polygamy or in mono relationships. In their opinion, there are just as many divorces and abusive situations in mono relationships.

My mothers say polygamy has been given a bad name by those who want to use it as an excuse to have sex with young girls or many women or people who want to have extra marital affairs and call it having a second home or "small house."

According to mother number one, when she married my father she assumed, like everyone else, that she would be the only wife. When my father told her he wanted to take another wife, her only condition was that the new wife become a Muslim (mother two was Catholic). Ten years later, when mother number three came along, the two mothers were prepared and helped her blend into the family.

Based on my own experience, I know and have lived the "good"' side of polygamy and feel truly blessed to have a family such as mine. I wouldn't have it any other way. But does that mean that if I find a "good" man like my father and "good women" like my mothers as co-wives, I would agree to be a plural wife? I am not sure. I think you have to a have a special kind of temperament to share your husband. I know I don't have it.

* not her real name.



I don't see myself in a polygamous marriage

By Isabella Jaime with Fred Katerere, Mozambique

My name is Isabella Jaime and I am a 20 year old Grade 12 student living in Maputo. My father is a traditional healer who has five wives and more than 18 children, though he could have more children and wives who are not known to the family.

Since he became popular 15 years ago, he has had several offers of women. Sometimes, when he treats people who cannot pay, they offer him a wife in the place of money.

Although I have grown up in the family where my father had pride in his polygamous status, I cannot imagine myself getting into my mother's shoes by marrying a man who has other wives, or will think of himself as being a polygamist.

I detest the idea, because I have seen how his wives suffer because he cannot meet their needs. For us children, it was only a lucky few who managed to go to school.

Our father never gave us the love that children should get from their fathers. When he was not away on his endless healing errands, he would be busy rotating around houses of his wives. At times, we would not know where he was for a week.

It is a bad experience that I would not want to happen to my children and me. I would like to always be together with my children and husband, in good or bad times.

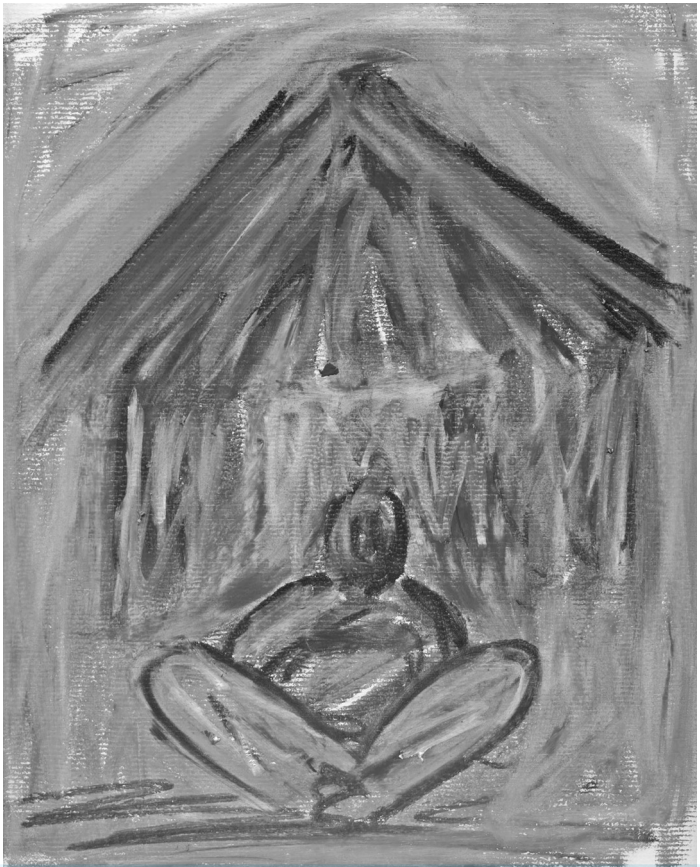
What I also detest in a polygamous marriage is the fact that women are sort of 'put in competition' with each other, as each woman vies to attract the attention of the husband. It is because of this competition that many women die of being either poisoned or otherwise murdered by the wives of her husband.

I have seen these cases happening in my rural home, where a woman was hacked to death by the third wife of her husband. The argument happened after the women had a disagreement on how to use money their husband had given them to buy food and clothing for their children.

With examples like these, I feel men who decide on having polygamous marriages want to make women and children suffer. I have seen how children in polygamous marriages are never happy because, for a child to grow up and be happy, he or she needs to be living with both their parents.

The problem that I have seen in Mozambique is that most people still think in the past and that is why they justify polygamous practices.

I would lead the debate on anti-polygamous marriages in Mozambique if I had the resources to mobilise people or even petition parliament to approve a law that will prohibit a man from marrying more than one wife.



Forced into marriage

By Lozitha Hlandze, Swaziland

My name is Lozitha Hlandze and I am 56 years old. I live at Sinyamantulwa in the Lubombo region of Swaziland. I'm a mother of six; four boys and two girls. I sell wild fruits to feed my family.

My family forced me to marry, at the age of 18, a man who was much older than I was. I'm still married to him although he is now nearing 70 years old. When I got married to this man, he already had 4 wives.

My marriage was discussed between my parents and my husband. When my grandmother told me the news, I knew I was not interested. She then threatened to tie my legs with aloe leaves, and if this failed, they were going to make fire in the gogo's hut and tie me upside down, while facing the fire. I imagined the torture and I agreed to go.

My arrival was met with mixed feelings from the other wives. They did not want to see me. I was told that I would take orders from the first wife, who treated me like a slave. "Do this, don't do that" was the order of the day.

Since I got married to this family, my life has been hell. I never enjoyed myself here because I did not love the man. I was afraid to talk to him and my parents were always on his side, while I had no one to lean on.

During my early years of marriage, I was not allowed to go home nor interact with other women. I was not allowed to take my children to school.

I now stay in my own home, which my husband does not bother visiting.

In a polygamous life, one learns very little that is good, but a lot of bad things. I do not want my children to be like me.

Kicked out after my husband's death

By Tholakele Dlamini, Swaziland

My name is Tholakele Dlamini. I am 48 years old. I stay at Sigcineni. I have five children; three boys and two girls. I depend on piece jobs from my neighbours.

I was married to a polygamous man who was much older than I was, at the age of 22. When I first saw this man, I knew he was older than I was, but I had been brought up to understand that older men are caring. The first day I went to see his family, he married me through the Swazi law and custom, that meant no going back. I was the eleventh wife. This was a shock. I did not know this before I married him.

Every wife had a hut to herself and her children. The husband had a hut to himself where he would call a woman to come and spend a night with him. I was told that the issue of sleeping together with the children was to protect the wife from secret lovers.

I was not allowed to wear shoes and I wore long aprons. The housekeeping duties were divided among the wives in a rotational manner.

My first born child was a girl and that's when my life became sour. My in-laws, along with the other wives, said the child did not belong to the family. Again, my second child was a girl. This time my mother-in-law decided I should have my own home to raise "these prostitutes," as she called them. My husband did not visit me anymore and he continued to marry more women.

In 2001 my husband died. I was not involved in the burial discussions although my children were considered as heirs to their father. After the funeral, the family told me to leave with my parents and the girls, but leave everything else behind. My in-laws said I did not work for the things I had. Even though the girls are safe, they are struggling to get employment since they are uneducated. Now I am poor. It looks as if I never had anything in my life.

Pénaliser la polygamie au nom de nos valeurs communes

By Salla Dieng, Sénégal

Mon histoire et celle de ma mère sont les deux facettes d'un même médaillon. C'est la première fois que je parle ouvertement du sujet de la polygamie car je suis convaincue de la nécessité de se départir de toute réserve et d'agir lorsque que se présentent des causes à défendre.

Ce qui m'attriste le plus, c'est le fait que ma mère ait au départ accepté le rôle de coépouse. Mais je pense plutôt qu'elle a accepté ce qui lui a été imposé pour «sauver la face». J'ai l'impression que d'autres logiques ont aussi dicté son choix, entre autres, celle de ma fratrie et la mienne et cela ne fait qu'ajouter à ma colère. Mais cela me pousse aussi à l'action car ma mère a finalement choisi l'option de sortie ou «l'exit option ». Aurais-je fait le choix de rester ou de partir si j'avais été à sa place, avec six enfants sur les bras, dont deux ayant moins de dix ans? Honnêtement, je ne sais pas.

Il y a quatre ans, mon père décide de prendre une seconde épouse. Cela se produit un an après mon départ pour la France. Ma réaction est alors très violente car ma famille est au courant de ma position très nette sur la question de polygamie. Le faire dans mon dos est une trahison. Je refuse donc de parler à mon père pendant une période assez longue.

Certains penseront bien sûr au complexe d'oedipe mais je justifierai mon ressentiment par le fait que mon père et moi avions une relation très complice - la même d'ailleurs qu'il avait avec tous ses enfants -, secouée par des frictions parfois, du fait de la manifestation de mon désir d'indépendance, mais avec une certaine connivence intellectuelle. Cette relation était basée sur le respect, sur le fait que nous adhérions aux mêmes principes que lui et ma mère ont mis tant d'années à nous inculquer et qui me sont restés.

Devinez donc le déchirement que je ressens lorsque j'apprends la nouvelle par ma grande sœur, puis par ma mère, alors que mon père ne dit rien. Plus tard, pour expliquer et justifier le fait qu'il ne me l'ait pas annoncé lui-même, d'autres personnes viennent me dire qu'il s'agit d'une affaire entre mon père et ma mère. Et que par conséquent, je n'ai pas droit au chapitre.

Je trouve cela inadmissible. Après plus de 20 années de vie commune au cours desquelles mon père maintenait sa famille au sens nucléaire du terme, le voilà qui décide d'inclure une tierce personne dans NOS vies. Et on vient me dire que je n'ai pas «droit au chapitre»?

Je remets en question et fustige ces tabous et ces traditions qui nous maintiennent, nous Africains dans l'enfance de l'humanité, dans la nuit de l'ignorance, du passéisme, de l'attentisme et du sous-développement. Pendant mes 22 ans d'existence, j'ai eu comme guides deux personnes que je chérissais, pour soudain me poser cette amère question : «Connaissais-je mon propre père?», «Quand est-ce que l'intimité du couple devient une question d'ordre plus largement familiale?»

A partir de là a commencé pour moi une longue phase de doute, de dépression, de souffrances dans ma chair et dans mon cœur, de maux sur lesquels je n'arrivais pas à mettre un nom. Je pouvais rester assise une journée, les yeux dans le vide. Puis, la colère explosait: je raccrochais à chaque fois que mon père essayait de me joindre par téléphone. J'écrivais des lettres-fleuve à ma mère - lettres dans lesquelles, je tentais de la pousser à la révolte.

Je regrettais que mon père accepte de faire ses enfants subir les affres et les drames de la polygamie qui étaient étalés tous les jours dans les journaux à la page des faits divers. Drames dont la famille de ma mère elle-même avait fait les frais deux ans plus tôt, en manquant de peu l'éclatement avec des problèmes d'héritage à la mort de mon grand-père maternel, polygame lui aussi.

Le fait de grandir dans une famille polygame devrait-elle justifier que ma mère doive subir le poids du déterminisme de son environnement, et ma réaction n'est-elle jamais que le résultat du fait que j'ai grandi dans une famille monogame? Je ne pense pas car je n'accorde aucun crédit au déterminisme qui n'est, à mon sens, qu'un des multiples visages de la politique du bouc émissaire.

Je n'arrivais plus à avoir confiance en moi, ni en les autres. J'ai même coupé les ponts avec mes meilleurs amis, qui, pourtant, ne demandaient qu'à m'aider et avec qui je ne suis parvenue à ravoir des relations normales que récemment.

Passée cette phase de doute et de questionnements, cet événement traumatisant m'a poussée à prendre ma vie en main, à vouloir aller de l'avant pour «être le tapis rouge sur lequel ma mère marcherait la tête haute». Ma mère a sacrifié la brillante carrière d'artiste peintre qui s'offrait à elle pour son couple et pour ses enfants mais elle devait subir l'affront d'avoir à «partager son homme». Existe-t-il une chose plus intimement horrible pour une femme? Combien de sacrifices seront exigés des femmes pour qu'elles soient jugées «dignes» d'être épargnées de la polygamie?

J'ai alors décidé de changer de ville en France car je ne voulais que plus rien ne me rappelle le choix de mon père, ni ses conséquences sur ma vie relationnelle et scolaire. J'ai choisi de m'inscrire dans une des plus prestigieuses universités françaises et je me suis réfugiée dans l'écriture qui est devenue ma meilleure amie.

C'est ainsi que mon roman qui relate les relations entre une mère et sa fille et les violences de genre imposées aux femmes africaines, a vu le jour, vingt ans après « Une si longue lettre » de Mariama Bâ. Mon roman était un hommage à cette dame qui, la première en Afrique francophone, a fait le choix de s'épancher dans un roman et donc de raconter ouvertement les drames de la polygamie et de s'inscrire dans la lignée du féminisme africain encore balbutiant.

La polygamie est, à mes yeux, la forme de violence basée sur le genre, la plus pernicieuse, amorale et inéquitable qui soit. D'ici, j'entends déjà gronder la colère de quelques «mâles» qui trouvent inconcevables que les femmes puissent penser à opter pour la polyandrie. J'entends d'ici ceux qui croient en une religion ou à la tradition, crier au blasphème. Et pourtant, je maintiens ma position.

La polygamie doit faire partie de ces pratiques contre lesquelles des sociétés toutes entières se sont levées pour exiger leur interdiction dans les textes, au même titre que les exécutions sur les places publiques ou l'esclavage, car ses conséquences sanitaires, sociales, économiques mais surtout psychologiques, innombrables et désastreuses, se perpétuent sur plusieurs générations.

Je ne demande pas cette abolition au nom d'une religion ou du fait que j'en ai subi les conséquences. Je déteste la stigmatisation ou la victimisation. Je choisis l'expression vocale, la «voice option » et je demande la pénalisation de la polygamie au nom des valeurs humaines que nous avons tous en commun, hommes ou femmes, Africaines, Asiatiques ou venant d'autres horizons, musulmanes, mormones, d'autres religions «ou sans religions».

Je demande l'abolition de la polygamie au nom de l'amour qui ne doit pas souffrir du partage érigé en règle, de ce que les Constitutions ou les traités se veulent porteurs, à savoir l'égalité. Je n'évoque pas l'égalité dans le sens d'avoir les mêmes conditions mais dans celui que les femmes ne souffrent pas d'inégalités du fait qu'elles soient nées femmes (sexe) et du fait que l'on s'attende à ce qu'elles remplissent certains rôles différents de ceux assignés de facto aux hommes (genre).

Je demande l'abolition de la polygamie du fait que c'est l'expression d'une supposée domination d'un sexe sur l'autre (comme si le fait d'être née femme rendait insensible à la douleur d'avoir à partager sa moitié et la rendait plus «apte» à être coépouse!).

Je demande l'abolition de la polygamie au nom de ces milliers d'enfants et de femmes, victimes ordinaires au courage extraordinaire qui doivent s'atteler chaque jour à la lourde tâche de la reconstruction, à surmonter cette épreuve, à ne pas reproduire ce schéma ou à ne pas sombrer dans une profonde crise d'identité.

Enfin, je demande l'abolition de la polygamie en vertu du premier des articles de la Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme: «Tous les êtres humains, naissent libres et égaux, en dignité et en droits».

La crise économique peut faire régresser la polygamie

By Amania, Sénégal

Je suis professeure d'arts plastiques et artiste peintre vivant au Sénégal. Je vais vous parler de la polygamie telle que je l'ai vécue, mais aussi de manière générale.

Le Sénégal est un pays laïc, où la religion musulmane est dominante avec 95% de musulmans et 5% de pratiquants d'autres religions. Donc, on ne peut parler de polygamie sans pour autant évoquer un aspect aussi important que la religion.

Si, en tant que femme, j'ai pu accepter la polygamie, c'est parce que je suis musulmane, croyante et vivant avec ma foi. C'est ce qui m'a surtout aidée à accepter et à pouvoir gérer ma vie de femme-polygame. C'est pour vous dire que sans cette religion, telle que je la pratique, telle que je la connais, jamais je n'aurais accepté de vivre la polygamie.

En fait, cette religion estime que l'homme est naturellement polygame. Et avant l'apparition de l'Islam, l'homme vivait avec beaucoup de femmes, dans un harem, comme il l'entendait. L'Islam est venu limiter la polygamie à quatre femmes pour l'homme qui en a les moyens. Dans tous les cas, c'est une question de choix car aucune obligation ne pèse sur les hommes musulmans.

Vu ce passé, nous, femmes africaines, voyons et vivons tous les jours avec une majorité d'hommes monogames-coureurs de jupons, à tort et à travers, avec des maîtresses, des «deuxièmes bureaux» comme on le dit localement.

Je n'ai pas choisi la polygamie, et pourtant, j'ai accepté d'avoir une coépouse. J'ai préféré avoir une coépouse officielle que je connais, au vu et au su de tout le monde, que d'en avoir une officieuse, qui existe et que je n'aurais jamais connue.

Toutefois, en ne tenant pas compte que de la religion, on voit que la crise économique est en train de faire ses effets. Entretenir une femme, une famille déjà pose problème, à plus forte raison d'en entretenir plusieurs.

Il est également nécessaire d'évoquer l'aspect sanitaire. Nous, personnes impliquées dans un couple monogame, vivons tous les jours avec les risques liées aux Infections Sexuellement Transmissibles dès qu'un des membres de cette relation vit avec une troisième personne. Et si cette dernière a une infection, les autres ne sont ni protégés, ni épargnés. C'est encore pire si cette infection se nomme VIH/SIDA. Car ce sont des familles entières qui seront décimées, surtout si les frères d'un père de famille mort héritent de ses femmes (pratique du lévirat) et qu'on ne sait pas de quoi est mort ce père de famille.

Sur le plan psychologique, il faut être forte pour supporter une autre avec qui partager l'homme qu'on aime et avec qui l'on a toujours vécu paisiblement. C'est le fait de ne pas supporter cette nouvelle situation qui amène cette jalousie exacerbée et qui entraîne les coépouses à des actes de violence extrême comme s'ébouillanter, ou d'autres choses atroces, surtout si elles vivent sous le même toit.

Donc il est impensable, et même imprudent de réunir des coépouses sous un même toit. Si l'homme veut être polygame, il faut qu'il ait les moyens de le faire. La polygamie a un coût et je n'aurai jamais accepté la cohabitation. Ma coépouse habite une autre ville.

Sur le plan relationnel, cela dépend de chaque femme et de sa capacité de dépassement. C'est donc un tout. Si sur le plan psychologique, on n'accepte pas l'autre, il n'y aura pas de relation entre les coépouses. Personnellement, j'entretiens de bonnes relations avec ma coépouse et sa famille. On s'appelle de temps à autre, on se rencontre parfois dans les cérémonies…

Est-ce que notre relation serait pareille si nous vivions sous le même toit? Je ne le pense pas. Aurais-je pu la supporter, aurait-elle pu me tolérer? Est-ce que mes enfants auraient pu la supporter? Je ne pense pas car mes enfants supportent difficilement la présente situation.Toutes ces questions font qu'il soit préférable de vivre séparés et de ne se rencontrer qu'accidentellement.

Elle est plus âgée que moi et n'a pas le même niveau intellectuel. Peut être est-ce cela qui l'a rendue plus supportable à mes yeux. Si elle était plus jeune et plus instruite, l'aurais-je supporté? Je ne crois pas. J'aurais été plus jalouse.

Notre culture et notre tradition ont joué un grand rôle dans cette acceptation de l'autre, ce qu'en Occident, on aurait appelé 'hypocrisie'. Nos ancêtres, nos grands-parents et parents ont été polygames. Moi-même, j'ai des demi-frères et sœurs, j'ai grandi dans une famille polygame, peut-être cette accoutumance m'a-t-elle aidée à mieux supporter la polygamie.

Mais les temps ont changé. La vie est de plus en plus chère. La crise économique aidant, la prise en charge de l'avenir des enfants est un élément non négligeable, qui doit être pris en considération. Ce sont autant de facteurs qui doivent faire régresser la polygamie.

Les femmes doivent prendre conscience de leur majorité en nombre et de leur apport dans l'économie nationale. Elles doivent davantage se prendre en charge, ne pas attendre tout de l'homme qui en profitera pour les exploiter. Elles doivent savoir que l'homme est naturellement polygame, qu'il ne vaut pas la peine qu'elles se crêpent le chignon, ni d'attendre quoi que ce soit de sa part.

Peut-être est-ce une femme désabusée qui parle, mais je dis à mes sœurs que l'heure est à l'union. Nous devons travailler et nous prendre en charge complètement pour éviter d'être sous le joug de l'homme. Nous devons avoir au moins une indépendance financière et économique car le mariage n'est pas une carrière. La fin de la polygamie, ce n'est pas pour aujourd'hui, la religion et la tradition aidant, mais ayons au moins conscience de notre force, et de notre rôle au sein de la famille et de la société.

L'homme ne doit pas oublier que les temps ont changé, que la femme qui l'a choisi parmi tant d'autres est toujours là et que son amour n'a pas changé. Ce serait donc égoïste de sa part de laisser cette femme et de penser à une autre femme qui viendra forcément briser l'entente familiale.

Est-ce que la femme continuera à avoir la même confiance en son mari ? Existera-t-il toujours la même complicité qu'il y avait dans le couple autrefois? L'amour de cet homme est-il sincère? Un homme peut-il aimer deux ou plusieurs femmes à la fois? Voilà autant de questions ouvertes auxquelles les hommes doivent trouver des réponses.

Plural wives





Abandoned by my husband's family

By Moleboheng Thato, South Africa

My name is Moleboheng Thato. I have one child and live in Sunrise, a township in Natalspruit, just outside Johannesburg. I am a woman who used to be in a polygamous marriage, but now I live alone.

When I married my husband as a first wife, we lived together in the Transkei, in the Eastern Cape, in South Africa.

I stayed for five years without bearing a child. My mother-in-law always used to insult me, saying that they wasted their 'lobola' money on marrying me because I could not bear children. It was very painful to me because it was not my fault that I did not bear children. The situation made me feel very bad.

When we had been married five years and there was still no child, there was a family gathering. It was decided that my husband must marry a second wife. According to my husband's family, they wanted grandchildren.

My husband did not want to take a second wife at first. He asked me about the idea of marrying another wife, and I was not pleased with it. But his family did not ask me if I was okay with this idea. Just because I loved my husband, I became patient and faced the facts. I then accepted and said he could go ahead and marry a second wife.

When my husband married again, his family favoured the second wife more than me and they were always trying to push us apart. After the marriage, my life became very painful. The second wife and I stayed in different houses but in the same compound.

All of a sudden, my husband stopped coming to my house to see and sleep with me, but only went to the small house (the second wife's). He also started giving me less money than he gave the new wife, because I did not have children.

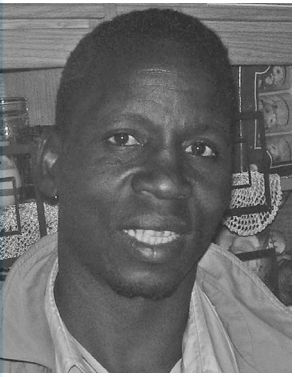
In spite of the fact that my husband's family wanted to keep us separated, he started seeing me again and we made amends, because he loved me. After all of this, when we were together again I became pregnant. My husband told his family that he loved me, that we had a child coming, and that he must support us.

In 2006, l gave birth to my child, and life changed. Things were good between my husband and me. However, in 2007, my husband got sick. We travelled from Transkei to Johannesburg where we stayed together while the second wife stayed behind with her four children in the Transkei. He then passed away in 2009.

After that, my husbands' family did not want to have anything to do with me. They did not welcome me when I went home to the family. They took the second wife and her children in to stay with them and left me outside.

Life is very difficult for me because I do not have a job. I only receive some small money from rents and I struggle to feed my child, who is now 3 years old. I miss my husband, the father of my child.





Marrying a second wife

By Anthon Ndzhulula, Mozambique/ South Africa

I was born in 1963 in Mambhone district in Mozambique. I arrived in South Africa in 1989. My mother separated with my father in 1974 and he demanded all his 'lobola' from his in-laws. He then took his 'lobola' plus me and my siblings with him, although it was unlawful because if a person takes back the 'lobola' he must leave the kids with their mother. From that time, I spent most of my youth without knowing where my mother was.

I grew up with him, until I married my first wife, in 1987. Although, I was not a rich person, I had my own business, a tavern where I sold alcohol. With this, I made enough money to support my family.

I would spend most of my profit on women outside marriage and my business fell apart. I lost all I had in a very short space of time. Not only was my business going down, but also everything I tried failed. My children were dying right, left, and centre. I was blessed with five children but now only three are alive.

As this was happening, I went to consult some elders and traditional healers. They explained to me that the reason my things were not going well was because I did not have a second wife. Initially, I was against polygamy and did not want to hear anything about it.

I did not want to marry two wives, but because things were not going my way, I felt I had no choice. They explained to me that the whole thing germinated from the fact that I did not honour and receive blessings from my mother's family; therefore, I ought to marry another wife to take the maternal name.

I went to speak to my first wife about my intentions to marry a second wife, following the bad events taking place in our house.

My wife agreed, and she gave me the go-ahead. It took me a year to find the right woman to be my second wife.

Again, I reported to my wife about my findings and she supported me in my decision. I then arranged to bring my second wife home in 2006. After I married my second wife, I miraculously found out where my mom was and took her to stay with me.

Being a polygamist is challenging, even more so for those married with ten wives or more, because each has her own ethics and policies and one has to channel that through infusing their ethics with those of the house. It is important that when the second wife arrives, she be given the ethics of the house, so that she knows what to do and what not to do.

However, I have to stress that for me having two wives is the same as having one wife because we have all committed ourselves to the ethics of the house.

However, some women are just interested in your wealth. If they realise that you have nothing to offer, they will force you to an argument, so that they can have an excuse to leave you. However, those that love you will stay no matter what.

In this relationship, I cannot be independent and I always have to be in the middle. It is dangerous to take sides because they will be jealous of each other. I don't feel this is my family, but my wives' and kids'. I am just a tool. While a man is married to his job, the wife is married to the family. My job entails listening to what they have to say and seeing what needs to be done. I do not own this family.

I make sure that I share the love I have with both my wives equally by making an effort to know them very well. If you live with a person that you know and they are open to you and visa versa, it's easy to see if they are happy or not. However, if one sees that their partners are not happy, and they refuse to let it out, they must look for an elderly person to help. The elderly know how to force the truth out of their hearts. In that way, things will be sorted out.

If a person wants to be a polygamist, he must let his wife know about his intensions and reasons for him to marry a second wife. This is done to avoid problems at a later stage and to show that you are a responsible man.

One thing I admire about this type of marriage is that it cuts down chances of men cheating because they will always be satisfied sexually and emotionally. For example, if you are having a bad day, your wives will respond differently and that helps revive your energy.

Conversely, if one of them is in a bad mood, there will be no need for you to go out and look for other women to keep you happy because the second wife would be there to give you happiness. This entire thing revolves around feelings. If today I'm in the first wives' room, tomorrow I'm in the second wife's, and in that way am forever satisfied; there is no need to go out.

Since I married my second wife, I have never cheated. I'm even very scared to go out. If I propose a lady, and she says yes immediately, I will never entertain that because I can never know if she has AIDS or not. And should I go out, I'll be putting my wives in danger of contracting STIs.

What I can say is that people must stick to their roots. That is following African culture and its customs. They must not follow these western cultures because they are misleading. People must seek understandings in the revelations brought out by our traditions because they have life. That is the reason young people nowadays are dying of sickness and lots of things.

This western history education, taught in schools, is all lies. For example, they say that a human being originates from gorillas. That is nonsense. God created a human being out of the soil and brought him a partner. He did not take a person out of baboons, but out of his own creation.

If one can look at statistics, there are more women than men. Logically that gives credence to men to become polygamists. Those that are criticising are far away from these things. Most have been westernised and don't understand the dynamics of traditions and cultures.

First, we need to understand where does polygamy germinate from? It started during the times of Abraham after his wife Sarah could not bear children. Therefore, he made his slave-girl Hagar the second wife. Hagar then gave birth to Ishmael, Abraham's first son. So, these things come a long way.

As long as there is no quarrelling in the house and even if there is, talking is the best medicine. For me, I am happily married to both my wives.





Accepting a second wife

By Zabele Mirole (Ndzhukula), Mozambique/ South Africa

I arrived in South Africa in 1989 with my husband and have three kids, two girls and a boy. Two are in high school and one is in primary. I am the first wife in a family with two wives.

My husband is unemployed but he fixes television sets at home. Sometimes if he is not too busy, he joins us in the fields, to plough, so that we can provide food for the family.

Although I knew that my culture permits polygamy, I never thought I would share a man with another woman. However, due to problems we faced as a family, I took the decision to accept that my husband marries a second wife.

We were struggling and things were not going very well in the house. For example, my husband would get sick constantly and after some consultations with traditional healers, they advised that my husband marries a second wife, and we sat down together and discussed the whole issue.

I decided to support him in the move to marry another wife because I understood that the problems we faced were related to him not honouring his mother's family. And with proper consultations with traditional healers and the elderly, it was deemed relevant for me to allow him to marry another wife so that his mother's family could be honoured by giving the maternal name to the second wife.

He left to look for another wife. It was only after a year that he came back to me with the news that he found a wife of his choice. I then took a leading role and made sure that I meet his second in-laws. My husband gave me the 'lobola' and I went to the second wife's home to bring her home.

Now that she is married in this family, she will use my husband's mother's surname. In that way, we will be honouring the family so that our things can fall into place. And

since she came here, we have not had major problems because polygamy has been our culture since then.

Even though I see that sometimes my husband shows more interest to the second wife, I have no problem at all because I am the one who gave him the go-ahead to look for her. I absolutely have no have problem with it also because she loves my kids as well. For example, when I'm away she takes care of them, gives them food, bathes them and gives them love. But I have no idea whether that will change once she starts having children. I am not sure if she will love them the same way as now or not. Also, I'm not sure if my husband will show different love between my kids and hers'.

Sometimes she does things that hurt me, but if that happens, I sit down with her and talk about it. I also understand that even if I was alone there would always be problems, and talking is the only solution.

A person who wants to be a polygamist must sit down and discuss it with his first wife, because if there is no agreement, there will forever be problems. Therefore, for this to work out, the second wife must receive blessings from the first wife because, not only would she be married to the husband, but also to the first wife.



Happy as a second wife

By Norah Masingi (Ndzhukula), Mozambique

I was born in 1986 in Mambhone district in Mozambique. My stepmothers raised me after my mother left my dad. My parents were always fighting and my mother left me while I was still young, at the age of seven.

I grew up in a polygamous family. This is where I learned that it is possible for one to get married to a polygamist because my mother never fought with the other wives, only my dad. Therefore, I realised that this thing is possible.

When Anthony Ndzhukula told me he wanted to marry me, I did not hesitate. I felt it in my heart that it was the right thing to do. I decided to move in with him and his first wife because they lived together in harmony.

That is the reason I did not have two minds when the opportunity to get married to this family came my way. However, when Mr Ndzhukula came to my family, my father did not want me to leave, only my stepmothers did. They said it was good for my growth.

So, I left Mozambique and moved in with this family in South Africa. Since I arrived in 2006, I have never had serious problems. Although there are some problems, just like in any other family, I have never seen anything that can tear my heart into pieces. Here I feel at home because it feels the same as at home. My father would give me whatever I wanted and here nothing has changed, and I am happy. I love my husband a lot because he does everything for me despite his first wife's presence.

It is good to be married with other women to the same man because when you arrive they will tell you the dos and don'ts. They will guide you with information about the husband's dislikes and likes. That helps you to do well in your marriage.

However, I can tell you that I will never allow my husband to marry another wife because I just think we are enough. I think he would struggle to support all of us. I know he is aware of that and will not even think of going that route.



Standing together in the face of abandonment

By Mubayandi Kwiima* with Perpertual Sichikwenkwe, Zambia

My name is Mubayandi Kwiima.* I am 39 years old and a mother of five. I'm the second wife in the polygamous marriage of three wives. I work as a clerk at one of the government ministries in Zambia.

My story started in 1989 when I got married to a man who presented himself to me as a single man. My parents accepted his gesture and allowed him to marry me after he had paid dowry as per our Tonga tradition.

Before we got married, he told me he was the father of two but that he was single. After the marriage, about a year later, the number increased from two kids to six.

One day, his mother-in-law (mother of his first wife) walked in my house and bluntly informed me that the man I called my husband was already married, separated from his wife, but that they were not divorced.

When my husband returned home, I confronted him on this issue and he apologetically confirmed the story. I knew I was in hot soup. I am a child born out of a polygamous marriage. My mother was a second wife to my father, so I was already familiar with the happenings in a polygamous marriage. Since I was already pregnant by then, and the fact that his wife was not back, I saw no point in leaving him.

In 1994, his first wife started coming home and my husband asked me to accept her as part of the family, especially since she was the first wife and they were married. Looking at the misery that was showing on the first wife's face, I understood that she was going through a lot and I accepted that she move in with us.

Problems in my marriage started immediately because I was working but the first wife was not. Every time I bought anything or cooked food, mostly bought with my own money, the first wife would grab the food on grounds that the money was from our husband, accusing that the man was fond of me and not her.

The trend went on until in 1999 when our husband, who was a Human Resource Officer at a government ministry, decided to stop work and moved to his farm. By then, he had managed to get the first wife a job as a cleaner in the same ministry where I was working.

This was the beginning of serious problems for us all. After few months he came back home and told us that he did not want any of us to visit him at the farm, instead we should concentrate on educating and feeding our children because he was no longer going to be providing anything for us.

Before long, news reached us that this was because he had married another woman, to make it three wives. This angered both of us so much that the first wife decided to follow him with all her children to the farm. However, before the night was over, he chased her back.

Two days later, our husband came to our house and informed us that it was true that he had married another woman. He told us never to visit him at the farm without his permission. He reiterated that he is never going to provide food for us but that we should work hard to educate our children and provide for them.

It was at this stage that I confirmed that polygamy was a dirty game and, in reality, it was not marriage. I told myself that if I had to carry on with life, I had to be a strong by myself.

The first wife was devastated with our husband's behaviour and almost took her own life. Since problems had forced us to develop a good relationship between ourselves and our children for survival, I advised my friend against this move. I told her that there is no need to take her life over a man who does not provide anything for the family. I reminded her about her seven children that needed her attention.

I comforted her and told her that even if the husband does nothing, the fact that we were both working was fine, although our income was inadequate to cater for all our needs with our children. These problems forced us to develop a close relationship.

As if his mistreating behaviour was not enough, in 2001 our husband stopped having conjugal rights with both of us and just concentrated on the third wife. He completely stopped coming and even changed his phone numbers. We would only see him if there was an illness or sickness in the family. After a couple of years, he came back home and told us that we were still his and it was up to us to follow him to the farm.

We discussed the issue and vowed never to follow him for conjugal rights. We thought about HIV/AIDS and how many wives have died of the disease at the hands of polygamy.

I have always known polygamous marriage not to be good and very few people in such marriages have peace and enjoy life. There is so much unfaithfulness in polygamous marriage and that is the reason there are so many deaths among such couples in this era of HIV/AIDS.

There is always fighting and quarrelling among the wives. In situations where you find the wives becoming friends, they usually work together against the husband. In many cases, they encourage each other to have extra marital affairs and keep each others secrets.

Now there is nothing I can do because my husband has not officially divorced me. I am still living in the matrimonial house and have to look after my children, educate them so that tomorrow they can have a better future and look after both of us.

I do not intend to seek divorce as long as he does not do so. I want to maintain my title. For me, it is marriage for life, whether in polygamy or not.

* not her real name



Jealous family

By Thulisile Myende, South Africa

My name is Thulisile Myende. I got married to Jacob Myende in 1981 in Pietermaritzburg when I was 21 years old. When l met him, he told me he had never married before, so l was his first wife. He paid 'lobola' and we had a wedding.

The family was very happy when we married and did not show any different feelings about me. We stayed together in Pietermaritzburg where I stayed at home with the family.

After some time, one of the aunties started beating and harassing me. She was evil and had no form of respect for me. I was unable to have any peace. I later realised that she was jealous that I was married and she was not.

I did not get pregnant right away and she would insult me, saying that I'm infertile, even though it was just a short time after we married.

In 1982, I fell pregnant with Makhosonke and he was born in 1983.

I think that one day an evil spirit got into my mother-in-law. She chased me away, back to my own family's place with Makhosonke, because she had found a girlfriend for her son (my husband). Under pressure, my husband paid 'lobola' for that other woman, but they only stayed together for two months.

Although I left that family because they chased me away, I would not have been able to stay with another wife. I think I could not have stayed with her because women can be very jealous.

My father also had two wives who stayed in different houses and did not get along well. They did not live nicely together. My mother and her sisters were always afraid of the second wife.

My father was an alcoholic and sometimes he would want to beat everyone in the house. When we would run away, he would move onto the other house to fight with them. We would only come back the next day.

My husband did not love this other girl and he came to look for me because he loved me. He spoke to my family and he realised that we should be together. We stayed together and I don't think he went to see the other wife any more. I gave birth to a second child, Sithembiso, in 1985 and then the third one, Ntombikhona, in 1988.

My husband left for Johannesburg in 1991 to work. At that time, I was also working and the children were staying with my family. In 1993, my husband's mother said I should go stay with my husband, and so I joined him in Johannesburg. We lived happily for a long time.

In July 2002, my husband began to have mental problems. One night while we where all asleep he disappeared in the middle of the night. Until today, I have been looking for him everywhere but to no avail.

I reported the case to the police and to the Sowetan newspaper but, up to now, I have not heard anything. I wish I could find someone to help me find him.



Advice from my mother

By Pedro Nhavate, Mozambique

My name is Pedro Nhatave. I am a 60 year old who lives in Maputo's neighbourhood of Zimpeto. I'm a retired government worker with three wives and 15 children.

As a young man growing up in a family where I was the only boy, I always imagined having brothers. My situation was worsened when my sisters married off and I was the only child living with my parents until I married my first wife.

My mother encouraged me to have a big family and until now, I do not regret her advice. Currently I have three wives and all of them are like my mother. I cannot remember the last time we had a fight or an argument because we are just one big family.

My first born has also followed in my footsteps and now has two wives and I can see that one or two more of my sons will have more than one wife, because they enjoyed growing up in a big family where there are no problems.

I managed to live peacefully with my wives by avoiding what other men usually do when they marry more than one wife. When you are married to more than one wife, the best idea is to live with them in the same house or build their houses in the same compound.

When you separate them, it will create problems because when you are visiting the other, there will come jealousy. However, when you are in the same house it's easy because none of them will miss you, unless you travel to a far away place.

My children have learnt to call all my three wives as their mothers without distinguishing that this one is their real mother or whatever. I have also given advice to some people who want to marry a second wife and most of them have had successful marriages.

Although most people shun the idea of having more than one wife, I have found it to be a good idea. After all, in this country, we have more women than men and, to balance this, more men need to think about having a second wife.

Also, what I have seen is that most people who shun the idea of marrying a second wife have affairs with girlfriends. This idea is very bad because it promotes promiscuity and the spreading of diseases like the incurable HIV/AIDS pandemic.

However, if one is married to more than one wife it would not be normal for him to have girlfriends and getting into other affairs. I will be happy to see all my sons having more wives, its does not only create a big family but it also promotes peace in the family.



He knows how to care for his family

By Kgomotso and Siphamandla Malatsi,* South Africa

My name is Kgomotso Malatsi.* I am 25 years old. I married my husband at the age of 17 and this is our eighth year together. Together we have a 2 year old son and I have a 6 year old daughter from another relationship. She stays with my mother in Kwazulu Natal (KZN), because my mother did not want to stay alone.

I am originally from KZN and I now stay in Johannesburg. My husband is 27 years old. He is also originally from Kwazulu Natal but now works in Johannesburg.

My husband's second wife stays in his house in KZN and they have been married for two years. We stay together here in Johannesburg.

Two years ago, I heard from other people that he decided to take another wife. I was very angry because he did not tell me first.

My husband decided to take two wives because he was dividing his time between Johannesburg and KZN. He says that when he decided to propose to the second wife, he made it clear to her that he already had a wife and that she would be the second wife. She accepted the situation and moved in with him. He married a second wife because he thought it was good for the house, as we would share responsibilities.

He says the reason he did not to ask for my permission is that he knew I would not like it. He says that although in the old days, if you want to take another wife, you would send the first wife to propose for you, today things have changed.

It made me sad for about two months. I was very jealous and surprised, because I did not think that he would take another wife.

He tried to explain to me what was going on in an effort to ease the pain I was feeling. He explained how it felt to only have one wife and that he needed someone at home to take care of things. For example, sometimes he would send things home to KZN that needed to be taken care of.

It was very hard but I tried to understand the situation. I was also worried that should he take a second wife, my child would suffer. However, I later accepted the situation and continued with life.

To be honest, at first, I did not love him but only stayed with him for the sake of our child because I did not want my son to grow up without a father. After a while, he started begging me to stay. I then realised that he loved me.

Now I love him because he is a good man and he knows how to take care of his family. When I asked him about when he proposed to the second wife, he told me. He decided that we should meet so we could live a peaceful life.

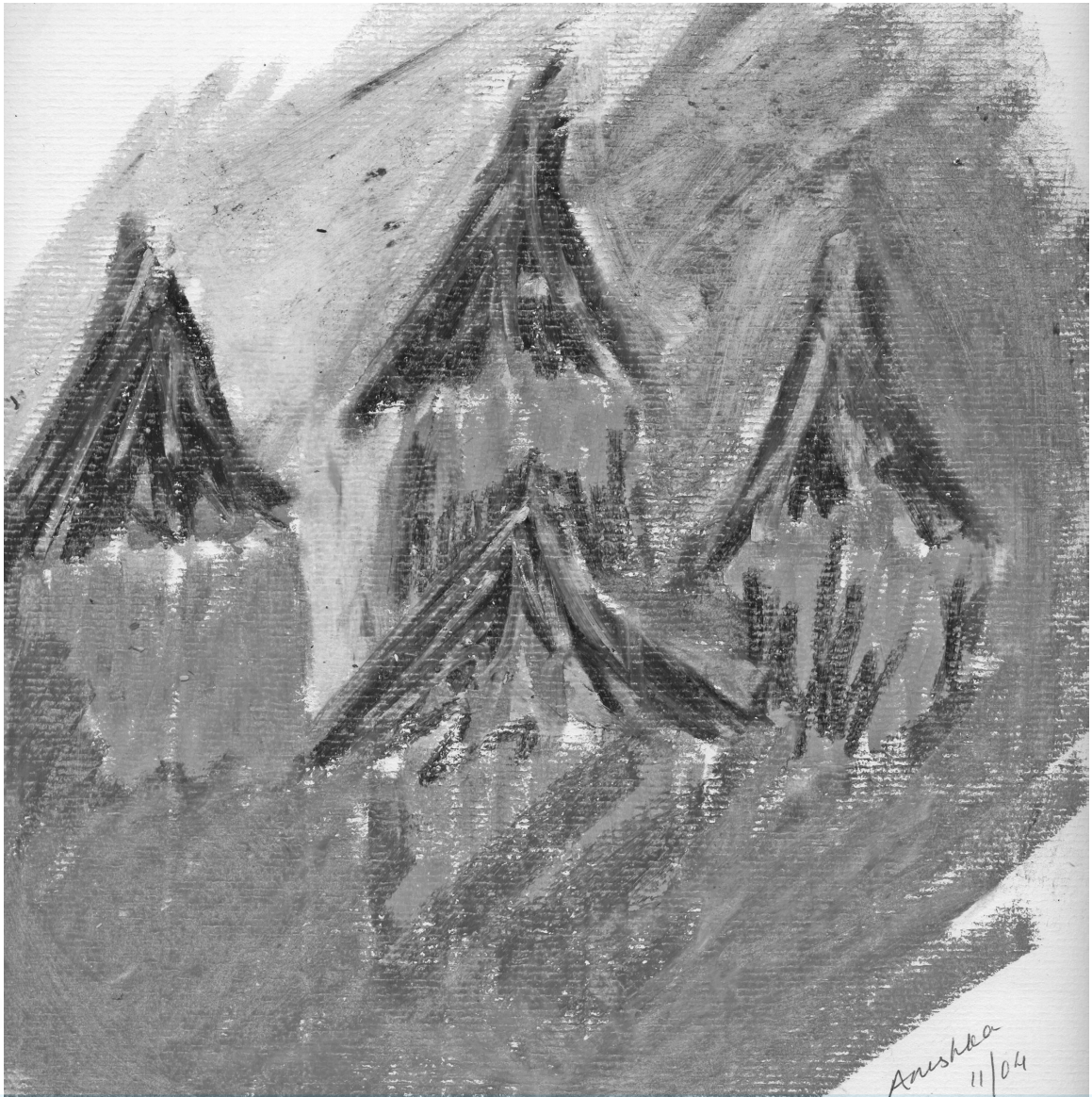
I also told him that I wanted to see that woman, and he agreed. I pretended to be happy when I saw her for the first time, but deep in my heart, I was not very happy.

However, I realised that she knew that I am the first wife. I also realised that she was very scared to see me. Even though I felt bad about the situation, I also did not want her to feel bad. Even if she did not like me, I would go to my husband so he could sort out the problem.

In the last two years, my life has changed although it is not easy when we visit the other wife. I still feel unhappy about the situation. Nevertheless, the fact that we stay in different places makes life easy for both our husband and us.

My husband says that, according to our culture, being married to two wives is not a problem at all. It is not difficult to have polygamous relationship, as long as there is understanding amongst the partners.

I think my husband is a good man and he will take a good care of both families. At the moment, I don't think it would be a problem for my husband to marry another wife because I have accepted already that he has another wife.



Growing up in polygamous homes



I am the daughter of a chief

By Mwiindi Himaambo

I am the daughter of a chief. Royalty. Yet I feel as worthless as a child that has been cast out to the streets.

My father has three wives at any one time living with him on the royal grounds, but he always keeps two more in the surrounding village. Our Tonga culture allows, and even encourages, polygamy. At the last count, I had 22 siblings and I hear the mothers are pregnant so another three are on the way.

On the grounds, his wives have their own little huts adjacent to the palaces' three bedroom house where we, his children, live with him. Depending on who your mother is (if she was the flavour of the month or if was she living on the palace grounds) you had a bed with a mattress, or just a mattress, or you sleep on an 'mpasa', a reed mat.

Father does not have an income, save from what his subjects give him and an allowance from the government. His wives till the land and feed the family. In monetary wealth, we would fall into the poverty bracket. We were saved from illiteracy by the school authorities whose duty it is to enrol the chief's children at the only primary school in the area. That is as far as anyone does for us to get an education. The rest is up to you.

The only maternal thing the mothers do for the children is ensure that the palace servants light a huge brazier at first light. A giant clay pot is placed on it. This pot first boils water for bathing. A little later the water would be used to make tea for breakfast.

Mid morning, mealie meal would be added to the water to make a thin porridge for lunch, which would boil the whole day until evening when more mealie meal would be added to the porridge to turn into 'nshima' (sadza) for supper. We do not sit down for meals, if you are hungry; you simply scoop up whatever is boiling. I hate that cauldron because it embodies everything I hate about my family life.

As royal family, we are supposed to be privileged with lots attention, but this is not my reality. The mothers, including my biological mother who is the longest serving wife, are uncaring, pre-occupied in trying to stay married to the chief. The mothers encourage the children to be competitive for my father's attention – for example to get married and bring in a good 'lobola'. There is competition amongst the mothers on whose children looks after them better.

The royal household is mayhem. My father and his wives have humiliating arguments and fights about whose bed my father would sleep in that night, about whose children were being favoured, they fight about finances, everything. My father encourages the strife so that he could manipulate them.

This fighting permeates to us, the children. We fight with our siblings who were not from our mothers or from a mother we did not like. The older siblings with jobs do not assist younger siblings with whom they do not share a mother.

Violence characterises a large part of my family life. If you were weak or could not defend yourself, you are in trouble. I have unsightly scars on my stomach and legs and my arm was once broken. As younger children, we carried our possessions, consisting of clothes, books, hair combs, Vaseline, in our school bags which never left our side. If you took your eyes off it for a minute, it would be gone and you would battle for years to get a replacement.

One time, I became emotionally attached to a sweet. My father brought a packet of sweets and was gave us one each. I did not eat my sweet but hid it. Every so often I would take it out and just hold it, happy to have been given something by my father. One of my sisters grabbed it from my hands and ate it. I was so angry I beat her.

Her mother, who was skinning a goat, aimed the knife at me. It embedded in my thigh. I now walk with a slight limp. I stole a pencil sharpener from one of my half sisters when mine went missing. Her sisters ganged up on me, I fell and broke my arm. It did not set properly so I have a bent arm.

There was nothing that I owned that I did not get through violence whether it was food, shoes or a piece of clothing. I often wondered whether we were any different from children living on the streets.

I enrolled at journalism school and began to work as a hotel chambermaid to pay for the fees. Unlike my workmates who were ashamed to clean toilets, I found a kind of liberation in being able to buy myself a chicken drumstick for lunch and being able to eat it alone without sharing it with two dozen others.

I shocked a young man who tried to date me. At our first meeting, I asked his views on polygamy! Obviously, he had never thought about it and could not give me the answer I was looking for and so ditched him. Word went round that I asked 'weird' questions and boys avoided me.

I have dated a few men but as soon as they start professing their love for me, I think, 'this is the same thing my father says to his women when he wants to marry them'. I look at men as liars and potential polygamists and just go cold. At 38, I must be the only virgin of my genre!

Like my older siblings, I say I hate my father because his polygamy brought me such pain, but I have never been able to completely cut him off from my life. When he is sick, which is now often, I have him brought to Lusaka for treatment. I feel a sense of duty and also an underlying need for his approval or just a simple acknowledgement that I am his daughter and he cares for me.

Instead, he never fails to point out that he is losing out on wealth because I refuse to marry and bring him a huge 'lobola'. He thinks my views on polygamy are a testament that education for women is wrong.

My mothers are another matter. They see nothing wrong with their way of life and do not like me because I cannot accept polygamy. I hate reflecting on the early years of my life because I'm just angry that I never had a loving and secure environment to grow up in.

Polygamy should be criminalised for the sake of society. There is nothing good about it. It produces dysfunctional families, children grow up in an unnatural atmosphere and do not get properly socialised. Forget for a moment what it does to the plural wives, their

loss of rights, their subjugation and focus on what it does to the children, what good does it do them when they live amongst feuding adults. What kind of message does this arrangement send to girl children about their value.

I know that even in mono marriages there are some bad family situations, but none are as dire as the problems that polygamous families experience. There is not a day that goes by that I wish I came from a two parent family.



Wishing for a home for my children

By Thembi Ngulube*, South Africa

I grew up with no parents, staying with my grandfather. My grandfather used to tell me about my mother, that she used to drink beer and sleep around everywhere.

He had two wives but divorced the first wife and married a third wife. Unlike the second wife, the third wife never liked me at all. I suspect it was because I was not her blood granddaughter. She became even more jealous when she realised that she was not becoming pregnant, while I already had children.

During my stay with my grandfather and his wives, life was difficult and there was a lot of unhappiness around the house. My grandmothers did not get along with each other. The third wife was the one who was the problem. She did not like the second wife, although the second wife really tried to get along with her. The third wife used to drink and when she was drunk, she would start insulting the second wife, claiming that it was her house and that she must go and stay somewhere else.

One day when I was ten years old, my grandmother (the third wife) chased me away from home. My grandfather looked for me until he found me. He built me a shack where l stayed with my friends. In the shack, we would bring boys in because we wanted them to buy us food.

When she heard that my grandfather built a shack for me, my grandmother came and chased me away again. I left the shack and started sleeping here and there, until l heard from people that my grandfather had passed away.

I went to my grandfather's house and when l got there, they where already preparing for the funeral. We buried my grandfather and after that the third wife had already gone to fetch her children who were not my grandfather's children.

The third wife was the one that was legally married to my grandfather, so when my grandfather passed away, she took away everything including the house, even though my grandfather registered the house in my name.

The third wife started insulting the second wife and me, telling us to leave the house. When she saw that we were not leaving, she consulted an 'Inyanga' where she was getting 'muthi' to bewitch the second wife. The second wife started to get sick, every now and then her legs got swollen, and so the second wife decided to leave the house.

Soon after the second wife left, the third wife turned on me and it was worse. She never wanted me to stay in that house and I ended up leaving after she called the police on me.

Now I am staying with my real sister's grandmother but I'm not happy because when she is drunk she tends to call me names. For example, she likes saying, "This thing that was born by a bitch, that doesn't even know her mother or her father."

Later, the grandfathers' house was sold to the second wife and she also changed her attitude towards me because of the third wife's influence. The two wives know that my grandfather left the house to me, and so they are jealous that I might be able to take it away from them.

At the moment I'm in pain because l do not want my children to live the life l went through. Until now, l cannot even go to my grandfather's house because my step-grandmother's children stay there and they don't even want to see me.

When l go to that house, grandfathers' children tell me that I am not needed there and that I am not of that family. Now, l have children who have different fathers. My problem is what will happen to my kids should I die today? Where will they stay because l do not have a place called home?

My wish is to get a place of my own for me and my children. What pains most is that l now no longer know where l come from.

* not her real name

Struggling in polygamy

By Mpumelelo and Zodwa Ndlovu,* South Africa

My name is Mpumelelo and I'm 30 years of age. I have two kids. I'm the only girl at home with four brothers. My mother is Zodwa. We wanted to tell you about our life.

Since I was a kid, I never enjoyed life, until today. I was born at the Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg. When I was seven, my parents sent my brothers and me to stay with my grandmother and my cousin in Kwazulu Natal.

While we were there, we would come home from school hungry, only to find that my grandmother has cooked and ate with my cousins, but did not leave any food for us. The dishes would be clean and their stomachs full. The only thing that left would be the smell of the food.

Imagine coming home, tired and hungry with no food to eat, and when you ask for food they would just give you tea and pap? After that, we would be expected to go fetch water at the river far from home.

Sometimes we would came home and my brother would be forced to cook while my cousin sat there and did nothing. My brother was only eight then. Early in the morning, we had to go again and fetch water so that we could bath and go to school.

We would go to school without food or money. Sometimes when we came back from school there would be no food again and we had to sleep with empty stomachs.

It was painful, actually, it was hell. Life went on and time passed by until my cousin got married and went to stay with her husband. We were then left with 'gogo'. Still my cousin would come at the end of the month to collect money from granny after she got paid her pension, even though she was no longer staying with us.

It was still difficult for my brother and me. Whenever my father sent us money, my grandmother would take the money and give it to her. When we would tell our father, he would do nothing other than telling us to hold on.

My brother went to Johannesburg to visit our parents and he never went back to Kwazulu Natal. I was left alone with my grandmother until I followed him to Johannesburg too. We left grandmother alone because she was not treating us well.

At that time, my mother did not have a job and my father was busy with another woman. That is why my grandmother treated us like rubbish. She only loved the other woman, but not my mother.

My mother says that when she agreed to be in a polygamous marriage, she did not know it was going to be difficult. She even later contemplated a divorce.

However, my father's family was happy that there were two wives in the family. But my mother says the problem was that he did not take good care the two wives. He did not know how give them the same love.

My father used to beat her with a stick. She then realised she should get a job, rather than relying on her husband.

According to my mother, polygamy is part of the Zulu culture, but if you are not a real Zulu, it is hard to follow. Polygamy was okay in the old days because people knew how to live in this type of a marriage. Also, they knew how to follow their Zulu tradition.

She says she got married to a real Zulu man and the life of Zulus is meant for Zulus. She's fed up with polygamy and would not want a polygamous relationship for her children.

Until today my dad is the same, he is still running after women, but my mom is still with him.

I thank God for my mother because she has been everything all my life. As I said before, life is so difficult because I'm not working and, as there is no one working at home, we only survive through my mother's pension grant now that she is not working anymore.



Two different homes

By Ntokozo Mkhize,* South Africa

The practice of 'Isithembu' or polygamy, is a part of Zulu culture that has been practiced for a long time. It is considered the way that men prove themselves to be real men. To me, the practice has advantages and disadvantages.

For example, my own mother took care of my half sibling when his mother disappeared, leaving him behind. So, in this way, he gained a parent, otherwise he might have been alone.

Polygamy was part of my family because of the need to maintain my father's two different homes. My father had a house in Johannesburg, where he was working, and a home in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), where my grandmother was staying.

My mother, his first wife, lived in Johannesburg and did not want to stay with my granny in the rural area. My father took another wife to stay with my grandmother in KZN. When my father took another wife, things got better for my grandmother because she had help with cooking, water gathering and the gardening.

However, my mother was not happy with all this and she would not visit KZN anymore to avoid fights with the second wife. My mother had no choice but to accept the given situation, but every time we visited KZN, there would be conflicts between the parents. Only during traditional ceremonies would the family sit together in one room.

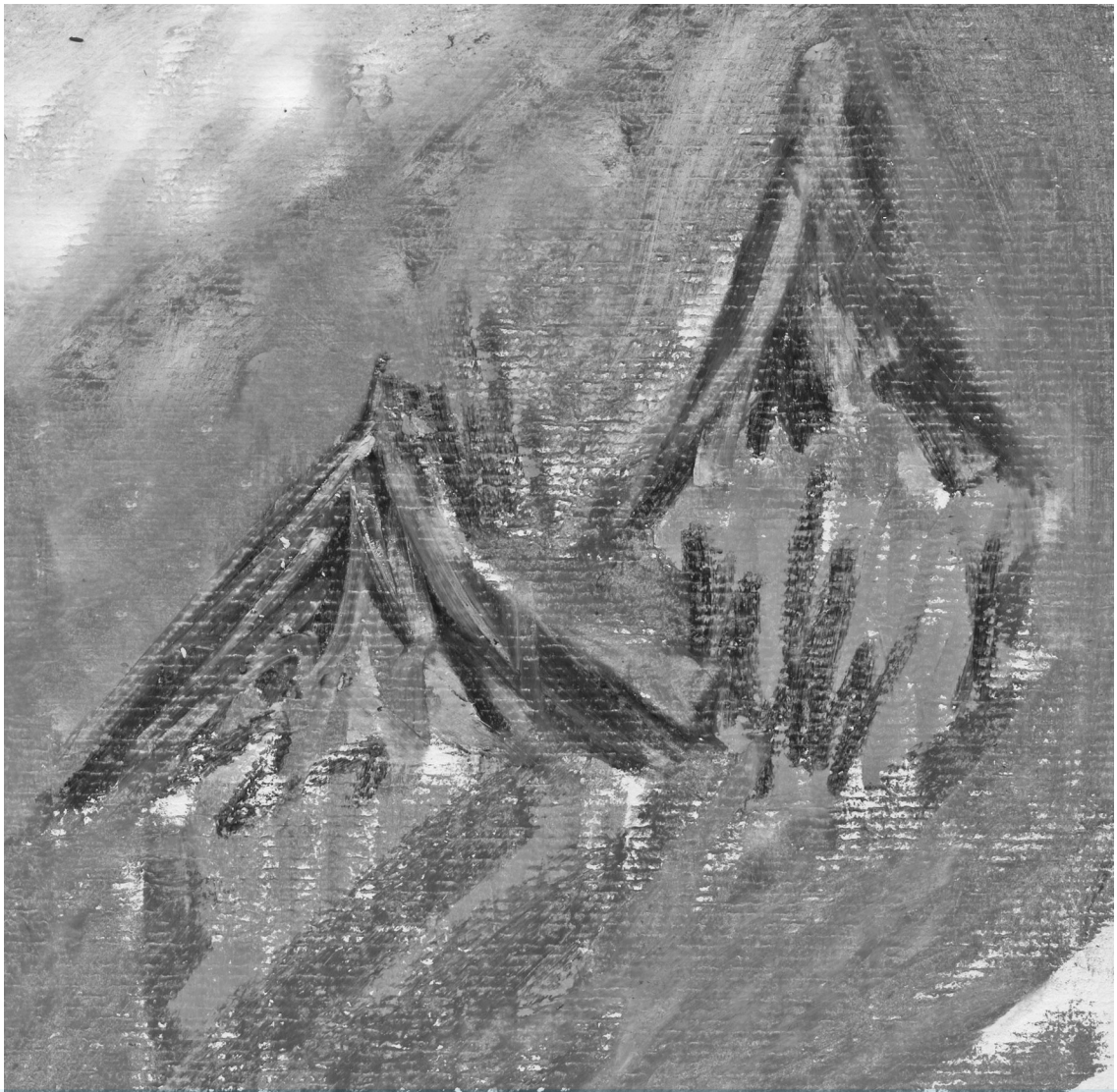
My father's second wife was very caring to me. Even though I was not her child, she would make me feel at home. She treated me like her own child.

I remember the first time I visited, she gave me a cap that my half-sister was constantly fighting over. Amazingly, my half-sister and I were very close to each other, more than we were to our different mothers.

The second wife decided to get out of the relationship. She left, leaving behind a child, which was the boy my mother looked after. We do not know what happened to her up to this day. My father would visit KZN every three to six months, but she never came back.

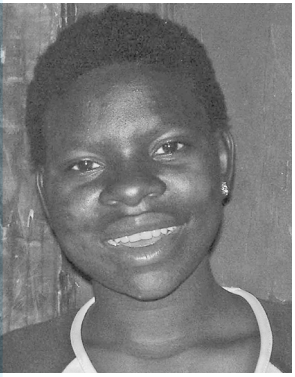
Except for the expanding family and tradition, polygamy these days does not last long. It is not the same as during the times of our great grandparents where some men would marry up to seven wives or more and still last until death.

** not his real name*



Speaking out on gender violence and HIV/AIDS





Not a second wife

By Nomsa Masungwini, South Africa

My mother married my stepfather after she gave birth to me out of wedlock. I grew up with my mother and her new husband. I do not know my biological father. I was the oldest amongst the other children in the house, but I did not feel part of the family.

The problem started when my mother started having children with my stepfather. She stopped loving me like her own child. Even the time I was still very young, she used to go drinking and when she came back, she would ask me why I did not cook. She always asked me to do all of the things in the house and for my stepfather, cooking, washing, and everything. Sometimes she would even tell my stepfather that he could sleep with me because I was not his daughter.

I was always very hurt that my mother and stepfather never wanted to put me into school. I only went to school for a short time. From a young age, there were times when I would ask for soap from my mother and she would say, "Girls your age have boyfriends who are taking care of them."

My stepfather used to come to me and say he wanted to sleep with me, saying that I was his second wife. He used to do this when my mother was very drunk. When I told my mother, she would insult and yell at me.

He started to touch me all the time around the house, even on my bum. He used to buy me things, like sweets and told me that he would give me money if I did not tell my mother. I told my mother anyway, but she did not do anything and told me not to say anything to anyone.

One night when my mother was out drinking, my stepfather finally called me to his bed and slept with me. I was scared because he told me that if I did not, he could chase me from the house. The first time it happened, I was 9 years old.

After that night, my mother came home in the morning. I told her what he did but she did not do anything and yelled at me as usual. She told me not to talk to anyone, it must stay between us.

When I was 14 years old, I missed my period and found out that I was pregnant. I know that it is my stepfather's baby, but when I told my mother, she refused to believe me and chased me from the house.

My mother said that I was in a relationship with a guy where we rented our house, but I was already pregnant at the time he became my boyfriend. I started a relationship with this guy because my mother and stepfather did not want me in their house, and there was nothing I could do as I had nowhere to go.

l told my stepfather the child was his, because l need him to support the child as l cannot afford to. My stepfather denies that the child is his, but he knows very well that he is the father.

I stayed with my boyfriend until l gave birth, and until now, I am staying with him. As I write this, my baby is just two weeks old. My boyfriend does not know that this child is not his. He is unemployed and I am just staying with him because l do not have a place to stay.

One day my mother came drunk and told this guy that the child l have is not his, but he did not believe her. I am hurt that my mother would do this because l do not want my boyfriend to know that this child is not his.

I gave up myself long ago due to sleeping with this old man when l was young in an effort to put food on the table.

A source of violence and deprivation

By Vivien Banda* With Dingaan Mithi, Malawi

My name is Vivien Banda* from Kasungu district in the central region of Malawi. My father has six wives. In our family we are 15 children, however most of the time, I do not see any problems with my brothers and sisters, we always work together and agree on common issues as children.

What I am telling you is polygamy is not good, the form of violence I faced in the family as a child is that most of the times we are not well taken care of by the father. It is my mother who fends for all of us, when he is away.

This means that my mother faces many challenges and struggles to get food to feed us, while the father is not even concerned. This, in my opinion, is a form of violence or psychological torture.

Another problem in our family is that there is no equality amongst children, just because of the huge number of children; our father cannot manage to take care of us all at once. Sometimes he denies helping one of us when there is a problem, such as issues of school fees.

One day I wanted some money to start a business, but to my surprise my father told me that he did not have the money, while at the same time, one of my brothers was given the money. I went to inform my mother on the issue, she tried to reason with him but it did not work.

This made me feel unwanted, it was a sad experience.

Later it was me who was lucky, and my father gave me capital to start a business, while the rest of my sisters and brothers are left out and feel neglected.

What I have observed is that in a polygamous relationship a woman is always deprived of her personal freedom; hence she cannot make progress in her life, because happiness is supposed to start in a family.

I advise fellow women out there to desist from being in polygamous relationships, this is a common ground for violence against women. I can tell you that many women are suffering, there is a certain friend of mine, whose father is polygamous, the only difference with the situation in our family is that they divorced, while for me there is no divorce that has taken place.

Polygamy is not good because all the family members suffer, food distribution is a problem, like in our family.

I advise you, my fellow women, not to be fooled into going for a man who has many wives, this is not good at all and this is where, in most cases, women face violence.

** not her real name*



I will stay for the sake of my status

By Ellena Banda* with Daniel Manyowa, Malawi

My name is Ellena Banda. I was married to John Zimba in the year 2000. We had two children together.

Our marriage was in good health until 2006 when I gave birth to a disabled son, Chisomo. My husband left me alone in Chilinde, Lilongwe to take care of our son.

He said he could not raise a child who is cursed and disabled. From that time, I lived in pain because he married another woman in Mchinji.

I was left with the responsibility of paying the rent of about R4 000 every month and to provide food for my children. Since he could not walk, I would put Chisomo on my back and take him to school every day.

My relatives and friends grew tired of supporting my child and me. I decided to get married to my current man. We have been married for ten years.

When he proposed to me, he lied to me, saying that he was not married, and so I married him. But this was not true, he had two wives before me.

The wives do not stay together. Each of us has our own houses where we stay.

Currently, he works as a rubber stamp maker at the Lilongwe Main Produce Market, but he does not raise enough money to support all of us. To add salt to the already painful wound, he only spends a week or so at our house, as he shares the month among the three wives.

Chisomo who is also mentally challenged as well as being paralysed has since found some support from an organisation, Parents With Disabled Children Association of Malawi (PODCAM), which was formed by parents that have children with disabilities.

The organisation provides food, clothes, counselling to parents in such status. It also assists the children with school fees.

It is not possible for me to get out of this marriage because, although he is not providing for our needs, I like the fact that I have earned the respect of being married. I do not want to lose that status.

When I ask for money from him, he shouts at me. Sometimes he threatens to leave me if I continue disrespecting him by demanding money for food and soap. I often have to go to my relatives to beg for food.

One thing that worries me is that since I cannot demand condom use from him, I feel I'm vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

* Not her real name



Practicing equality in a polygamous home

By Elliot Makumbe with Paul Juru

My name is Elliot Makumbe. I am a polygamist with 3 wives staying at Nharira service centre in Chivhu District, Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe about 200 km south of Harare.

Having been recruited into PADARE/ENKUNDLENI Me's Forum on Gender, and trained in gender concepts, I have accepted their values and principles. I subscribe whole-heartedly to their code of ethics that says, "Men of quality are not afraid of equality."

My wives and children have the freedom to express themselves freely in our family affairs. We have gone for more than a year without witnessing any sexual, physical and psychological violence in the family. Economic deprivation caused by the current depression also affects us negatively but, as mentioned below, the livelihood skills we have are propelling us.

Mine is a case of practical experience in the polygamy field stretching from birth till now. I was born in 1954 in a family where my father had three wives, copying from his own father who had seven wives. My four uncles had more than two wives each.

It was therefore a cultural norm for me to get into polygamy. From generation to generation, it is automatic for all the Makumbe boys to enter into polygamous matrimony. The female siblings can join polygamous relations like their brothers.

My religious background also played a pivotal role in influencing me to enter into polygamy. I belong to the Johane Masowe Apostolic church that heavily subscribes to polygamy as a way of preserving one's chastity and faithfulness. There is no need for one

to be promiscuous in a relationship hence the need to remain loyal and loving to your wives.

I make sure that I competently and effectively provide them with all their conjugal requirements following a well-stipulated roster. Our church doctrine provides for the ex-communication of any sexual offender (adultery) in their statutes. This practice helps us to confine our sexual pleasures to our legal bedrooms only. This may depend as well on one's personal integrity, social and spiritual strength to resist extra marital pressures. I am convinced that I have won that test of character resoundingly.

My first wife, Rosemary, who unfortunately passed away in 2008 at the age of 48, had five children and experienced about five stillbirths. I got my second wife, Roseline, currently 40 years, with the assistance of Rosemary and she has eight children. My third wife, Esinath, is 23 and has two children.

In addition to the social and cultural pull factors listed above, it must be noted that in Zimbabwe, if not Africa, our subsistence type of farming is best handled at a family level by many people who can assist in tilling the land and producing adequate crop levels. As a family, we also venture into the informal sector generating additional income for the family. As head of family, I was taught welding, tin smithing and carpentry skills through the church, which I am exploiting to eke a living with my family.

My wife and children are also involved in buying and selling of wares they procure from South Africa and Botswana. It should be however noted that despite your educational and economic muscle, polygamous spouses should be hardworking in order to survive especially in a volatile economic environment like the one prevailing in our motherland Zimbabwe.

I enjoy the team spirit that characterises my family in the economic front although at times it is taxing just to survive and to send children to school.

Entering into polygamy requires one to be of a strong moral fibre, resilience, determination and diligence in order to stand the heat and challenge that goes with the marriage

institution. Parents should be impartial in dealing with children from all families to reduce or eradicate all the unnecessary animosities. In case of deep-seated disputes, we normally exercise a lot of tolerance and patience as parents.

My wives have learnt to appreciate each other's strengths and weaknesses; hence, they interact freely without many hassles. Psychological and emotional pressures that are man-made can easily be limited in a polygamous family if proper communication channels are clearly laid out and roles outlined.

My children have equal opportunities in most spheres of operation; hence, we avoid gender based violence (GBV) in the family. I even laugh at some members of our community in monogamous relationships who experience a lot of GBV on a monthly basis. If family leadership is weak or dictatorial then GBV is rampant.

It is correct to acknowledge that polygamous families are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS if one part in the relationship turns out to be promiscuous, the deadly disease can wipe out the entire family.

We have been constantly engaging each other in the family on the relative dangers of this disease and agreed to be faithful to our holy matrimony. Our Apostolic church system of passing through prophetic gates also assists us to refrain from sexual immorality. I can safely say we are free from the disease if we continue with the harmony and tranquility that we are currently experiencing.

In conclusion, I want to say that polygamy if handled with care, caution and a high degree of trust, it can work but those who are not strong-willed and self-controlled should not bother trying it because they will be signing their own death warrants. Women should not be coerced into it or manipulated into it as well for this may be a gross violation of their basic human rights of choice and freedom.

Polygamy is no protection from HIV

By Helena Eduardo* with Fred Katerere

My name is Helena Eduardo, I am a 36 year old mother of four living in Maputo, Mozambique. I am also living with HIV.

Growing up in a Christian family, I used to value the institution of marriage and always liked the idea of following in my mother's footsteps. She was married at 20 and had a "white wedding." She kept the memories of that day alive in several photographs that always hung on our living room wall.

For me it was a bit different. At 20, I was finishing my Grade 12 and I was deeply in love with my childhood sweetheart, Armando. Soon after school, I married him in a not so glamorous ceremony, but I liked it because I was to be united with my "sweetheart" and looked forward to days filled with love.

In the first days of our marriage, Armando was always home at night. He knocked off from his office job at 4 pm. He prohibited me from working, as he wanted me to be a full-time housewife. I did not resist his decision, as I knew he would provide for our family.

In the first year of our marriage, we were blessed with out first daughter. I was overjoyed, but failed to read the signs of the trying times of our marriage.

Armando started coming home two hours or three hours after he had knocked off from work. Always he had excuses; there was a lot of work or his boss had taken him to an after work meeting.

When I told my sister, she said it was common with men.

After three years I discovered, Armando had a secret lover who also had a daughter, a year younger than ours. When I confronted him, he did not argue and told me he had also married the second woman.

It was difficult for me to accept it, but when his family asked him to make the union known to my parents, I thought it was my destiny and I did not want to divorce him.

From then on, I started to learn to "share" him with his second wife, Joana, as he would change between the two houses. As we became a family, I grew to have a close relationship with Joana. We decided it was good we take care of our husband.

After some time, we started having problems again. Armando started to have other relationships and he would lie to both of us about his whereabouts.

When I fell pregnant for the third time, I discovered that I was HIV positive after a series of tests. I also recommended to Joana that she take the same tests, which came out positive. Armando refused to take tests. He claimed he was not infected but continued to sleep with us without protection.

Now, after three years of living with HIV, I regret the day I accepted his second marriage.

Armando agreed to take an HIV test last year, and his also came out positive. He has already started taking anti-retrovirals and we take turns to care for him, Joana and me.

For my daughter, I wish for her to never get into a polygamous marriage. To me, it is too dangerous, leaving one vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.



Widowed and living with HIV

By Mavis Muunga with Perpetual Sichikwenkwe

At the age of 29, I am not only a widow, but also living with HIV/AIDS. My name is Mavis Muunga and I am from Milembo village in Chiyobola area, Monze District in the Southern Province of Zambia.

When I was young, we were staying in Kitwe in the Copperbelt province, until my parents divorced. My father brought us to Monze, which was his home village and, in this part of Zambia, polygamy was a normal and accepted way of marriage.

We were four in our family, but two of my brothers died. My father also died in 1993, when I was in grade 10. Since there was no one to pay for my school fees, I stopped school in 1996. In the same year, I started seeing a married man who later made me pregnant and married me as his fourth wife.

Luck was not on my side, my husband and the father of my children died in 2004 after an illness. In those days, HIV/AIDS was not very common at village level and we did not think that my husband could have died from AIDS related illnesses.

After the funeral procession, I was requested to stay with my in-laws. We had a number of animals of which one was given to my mother-in-law; the other was slaughtered for the funeral, while each of the four wives was given one each.

My late husband's brother got the remaining animals. We also had an ox-cart, plough and arrow, and my mother-in-law got all of that. After some time, I was asked to move out of my house. My husband's relatives removed the iron sheets and concrete floor from what used to be my house and took them to their homes.

One day, my late husband's brother came to get a radio, which my husband had left for me. After giving him the radio, he called me, sat me down next to him, and asked me for my hand in marriage.

When I refused his proposal, he became angry. Since then, he hates me. The family even took away the piece of land I used to cultivate to feed my children. The same brother further took my bedding, leaving me with nothing.

Years later, my health started failing me and I decided to go for voluntary counselling and testing (VCT). I tested positive. Since I had not met any man from the time my husband died, I definitely knew where I had contracted the disease, from my polygamous marriage.

I also wondered what would have happened if I had offered a hand in marriage to my late husband's brother. Most likely, him and his wives would also have been infected with HIV/AIDS and later died.

Coupled with my HIV/AIDS, it is difficult for me to survive without a piece of land for farming and without support from anyone. My house has been broken down just as my heart has been.

I was widowed at a tender age with children to look after and, worse still, I am living with HIV/AIDS. I have to walk long distances to the health centre to seek medication. Life is not easy for my children and me.

Provisions on Marriage and Family Rights in the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development



1. States Parties shall enact and adopt appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure that women and men enjoy equal rights in marriage and are regarded as equal partners in marriage.

2. Legislation on marriage shall ensure that:
   a. no person under the age of 18 shall marry unless otherwise specified by law which takes into account the best interests and welfare of the child;
   b. every marriage takes place with the free and full consent of both parties;
   c. every marriage, including civil, religious, traditional or customary, is registered in accordance with national laws; and
   d. during the subsistence of their marriage the parties shall have reciprocal rights and duties towards their children with the best interests of the children always being paramount.

3. States Parties shall enact and adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to ensure that where spouses separate, divorce or have their marriage annulled:
   (a) they shall have reciprocal rights and duties towards their children with the best interests of the children always being paramount; and
   (b) they shall, subject to the choice of any marriage regime or marriage contract, have equitable share of property acquired during their relationship.

4. States Parties shall put in place legislative and other measures to ensure that parents honour their duty of care towards their children, and maintenance orders are enforced.

5. States Parties shall put in place legislative provisions which ensure that married women and men have the right to choose whether to retain their nationality or acquire their spouse's nationality.


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