



# 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.

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