



# 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.

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.

### **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."

*"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

### **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.

