

*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 I 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 I heard from people that my grandfather had passed away.

I went to my grandfather's house and when I got there, they were 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 'Inyangá' 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 I do not want my children to live the life I went through. Until now, I 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 I go to that house, grandfathers' children tell me that I am not needed there and that I am not of that family. Now, I have children who have different fathers. My problem is what will happen to my kids should I die today? Where will they stay because I 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 I now no longer know where I 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 come 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*

