

*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.

I told my stepfather the child was his, because I need him to support the child as I 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 I 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 I do not have a place to stay.

One day my mother came drunk and told this guy that the child I have is not his, but he did not believe her. I am hurt that my mother would do this because I 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 I was young in an effort to put food on the table.

A source of violence and deprivation

By Vivien Banda With Dinggaan 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 feeds 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 our 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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