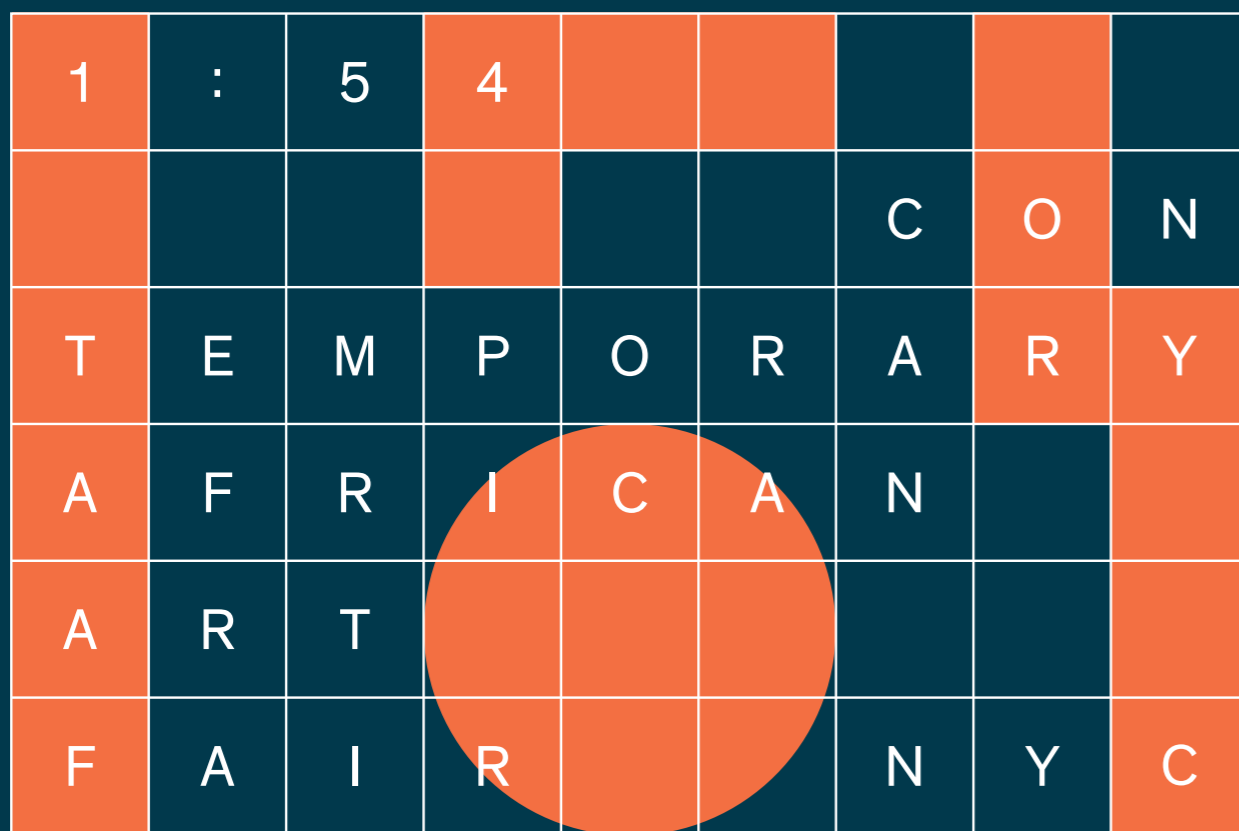


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HOT ISSUE - POLYGAMY

# POLYGAMY, PATRIARCHY & WHAT WOMEN REALLY WANT!

It may have been dismissed as tabloid gossip, but the issue of polygamy once again grabbed column inches as local and global media speculated on why and how, one of South African president Jacob Zuma's six wives (4 of them pictured with him below), was expelled from the polygamous leader's shared homestead of Nkhlanda. Why does the topic generate so much interest? As **Wilhelmina Maboja** reports, polygamy is like a two-sided coin. On the one side, it's been a life choice that has deep roots, some cultural, some religious – on the other, it's a tradition that is highly outdated and, in some cases, fuels the flames of a number of social ills.



## Hot Issue - Polygamy

**S**OUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma, husband to six wives, is just one of the many polygamists that also happen to be in public office. The tale of Kenya's Asentus Ogwella Akuku, for example, better known as Akuku Danger, makes President Zuma's marriages child's play.

Akuku Danger married and lived with an alleged total of 130 wives between 1939 and 1997 in Ndhiwa district, Karungu, in Kenya. According to reports, Danger had 210 children. When Danger died in 2010, at the age of 92, he had outlived a few of his wives but left behind 100 widows. Regarding the current crop, King Mswati III of Swaziland boasts 14 wives, with every possibility that at only 46 years of age, he is not done yet.

But what does polygamy say about the state of women's rights, freedoms and equality in Africa's current political and social landscape?

For Moagisi Sibanda, a 31-year-old media manager and part of the Motswana culture from South Africa, while the practice of a man having more than one wife may be a part of her culture, it has no space in her life.

"Polygamy is a part of my culture, but I have not come across it in my immediate or

extended family as far as I know," she says. "I have met people who grew up in polygamous families though, and their stories range from the joys of a big family, to jealousy amongst siblings and the sometimes-there-sometimes-not father."

A few years ago in a feature on this very subject, *NAW* explored the reasons why some women wilfully participate in polygamous marriages? Phyllis Ndlovu, a South African-based clinical psychologist argued then: "The practice affords women socio-economic stability... for those women who find elevation in marital status, even a polygamous marriage affords them that status... it gives them a sense of acknowledgement, and recognition, as well as good standing in society. This has almost certainly been the case with Zuma's wives."

Apart from multiple wives and children, at the heart of polygamy is the issue of gender equality. More often than not, it is women who get the shorter end of the stick.

According to the 2014 United Nations Gender Inequality Index, African countries only begin to rank below the 50th position, out of 187 countries. Libya starts off at 55, Mauritius at 63 and Tunisia at 90.

Further down the rung is Algeria at 93, Botswana at 109 and Gabon at 112. Europe

dominates the top 15, with Norway in first place, followed by Australia and Switzerland in second and third.

The index does, however, take into consideration that low development countries would tend to rank lower on the index, and high development countries such as The Netherlands sit high up, but what lingers among all the figures are the traces of patriarchy that are still at play.

Attorney and tax specialist Arlette Manyi, who is a married mother of two and of Congolese background, explains that polygamy is still a practice within some tribes in her culture, although it is not as common as it was in the past. Arlette prefers to use her Christian faith as more of a guide and measure than the cultural practices in her background.

"I am not really cultural but have some Congolese cultures that I observe," Arlette adds. "I am a Christian and practise bibli-

**Would-be royal wives? Young women go on parade to be inspected by Swaziland's King Mswati III (second right) during the annual 'Umhlanga' reed dance ceremony. Opposite page – what does polygamy say about these women's rights?**



cal values and [polygamy] goes against my Christian beliefs about marriage."

Arlette and Moagisi could be an example of a new generation of women who have been raised in an environment where their cultures have evolved and adapted over time, and where religion can sometimes take a higher standing than culture.

Polygamy is, however, not as rare as one would think, and is not only culturally acceptable but also acknowledged in law. In Kenya for example, polygamy gained President Uhuru Kenyatta's stamp of approval in 2014 when it was signed into parliament.

The law has been applauded by some as it formally recognises polygamous unions, which had previously not been regarded as typical marriages. As a result, marriage certificates could never be issued to legally prove this particular union. The applause, however, has been greeted with tight fists of anger among women locally and internationally.

A clause in the law that further adds to the rage is one that allows for a man to marry as many wives as he pleases, without the need to consult any of his other wives, including the first.

Jamilla Kahora, a 26-year-old Kenyan

## THE BLANKET EXCUSE OF 'CULTURE' IS OF CONCERN

student currently studying a Bachelor of Commerce degree, is deeply disappointed in the entirety of the law.

"It's not even about the fact that the first wife has no say in the next wife her husband marries, the entire [practice] of polygamy is a real problem for Kenyan women as a whole, especially in the rural and poor areas," says Jamilla. "Some women, because they are poor, look for polygamous marriages because they assume that a man with many wives must be wealthy, otherwise how else would he be able to have so many wives?"

Jamilla adds that real intimacy between a man and a woman, in the case of a polyga-

mous marriage, can never truly exist as long as her husband stays married to his other wives.

The subject of intimacy is something Moagisi finds paramount in relationships, and regards as the foundation of any relationship between a man and woman.

"I'm a very loyal individual and expect it from others, and in an intimate relationship this also means exclusivity. Relationships are so dynamic and require time, effort, and compromise and I couldn't imagine having to give of myself like that to more than one person or even sharing," Moagisi explains.

For women in regions such as Kenya, South Sudan and even in the Middle East and Asia, polygamy is as common as the furniture in the homes.

While the belief that polygamy is a hindrance to women's socio-political progress, the fact that its roots stem from perceiving numerous wives and children as a symbol of wealth and power cannot be disregarded.

Nevertheless there is no space for polygamy when it becomes a crucible for abuse, ill-will and hatred between wives, and even harm towards children due to jealousy and the pressures of a shared marriage. But the fact that it remains a fixture in law, religion and culture means that polygamous unions will not fizzle out any time soon.

"[Some women], because they don't know any better, will just accept being in a polygamous relationship either because 'it's in our culture' or because they have no way out," says Jamilla, who adds that polygamy is part of her family history, although many decades ago.

"I feel polygamy suppresses particularly poor women, because they think they have a way out through the marriage to one man, and will have a lot of 'sisters'. But if you're not bringing anything to the table in a marriage, in any marriage, except you being able to give birth, then how do you grow and improve as a person? You can't. You can't be independent. Being able to give birth is not enough these days," she adds.

Perhaps the words of one of our correspondents, Luso Katali Mnthali, are worth revisiting: "The blanket excuse of 'culture' and 'consent' is cause for concern. If women were truly emancipated, the practice of polygamy would have been outlawed and outmoded by now. In essence, women will continue to be stuck if the prevailing sentiment is that they are not valued as much as men are in society. If one way they can attain value is to marry a man who cannot commit to only that one woman, then the society will remain one of repression and unequal rights."

