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THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS IN NAMIBIAN PATRIARCHY



If you're a woman, a child, a gay woman or man, disabled, or transgender living in Namibia, accept as a fact that you were born into a patriarchal society and that you were and will be socialised (or 'groomed') to uphold and support patriarchy.

Patriarchy is a form of social organisation that promotes and maintains the advancement, power and privilege of adult heterosexual men, or, cis-gendered males, in matters of the state, economics, culture, the family and household. Patriarchal power structures are in place and apparent at every level of modern existence and is commonly characterised by unequal power relations between men and 'others'. Due to the fact that patriarchal societies are specifically engineered and organised to meet the material, psychological, physical and social needs of adult heterosexual males, it finds its perfection in the nuclear or elementary

family unit consisting of heterosexual parents and children (a father, mother and their offspring), typically a legally married couple, where every man is the 'king of his castle' and may do as he pleases. International researchers, anthropologists and sociologists are in agreement that no single event can historically be isolated for being the beginning of patriarchy which leaves us only with the fact of its existence and the justifications for its continued existence.

Being a predominantly Christian country, the biblical justification for patriarchy is currently most common in Namibia and asserts that God, as the Creator of all, revealed Himself as male

and created men after His own image, and woman, thereafter, from man's rib. Throughout the ages, biblical justification has drawn on the religious authority of God to assert that things (situations) are thus because it's the 'Will of God' based on the belief that God is the source of all authority. It similarly dictates that a man is the head of his household and that his wife (or wives) and children are therefore subject to his authority; their welfare and status determined by his.

Namibia was heavily patriarchal prior to gaining independence in 1990, more so than today, and Namibian society was deeply divided along tribal and racial lines. And even further back, prior

to the introduction of Christianity into Namibia, every local community in the country had concrete sets of gender roles based on traditional notions of culturally enforced stereotypes. These roles included how women should behave and what is expected of men. In their seminal study, *Women and Custom in Namibia*, Lotta Ambunda and Stephanie de Klerk demonstrated that regardless of tribal or racial affiliation, final decision-making powers (in all matters) rested with men prior to 1990; women, like children, were relegated to the status of dependants. To properly illustrate patriarchy in Namibia, a brief overview of the traditional organisation of households is necessary.



In Oshiwambo-speaking communities, heterosexual males are symbolised by axes and pangas, and women by claypots. Similar to biblical patriarchy, husbands are regarded as the heads of households and where there is no husband, decision-making falls to the eldest son. Males in this local Namibian community are also always considered to be 'older' than all women, actual age regardless, to ensure and maintain male privilege and authority. In the Zambezi region, heterosexual males are automatically assumed to be the heads of households and owners of land, cattle, harvests, women and children. With exceptions, male privilege and power is generally further extended into the public domain, where women are not welcomed nor encouraged as participants in social and political matters. Interestingly, the justification for patriarchy in the Zambezi region is based on the perceived biological differences between men and women. In the Damara communities of Namibia, women are called 'the right hand' of men and although women may share in the workload of men such as farming and livestock management, their decision-making is limited to

overseeing children, and confined to matters concerning the household. In the Nama culture of southern Namibia, adult heterosexual males are referred to in seniority as 'father' and are the heads of their households. Women are symbolised by eggs, for their fertility, and are referred to as 'mother' or 'sister'. They are expected, in biblical terms, to function as caretakers of the entire family, including husbands, manage the household, and be helpers and advisers to men.

Given the above, it is inevitable that within patriarchal social organisations, designed specifically to serve the needs of and benefit the heterosexual male, there should by necessity exist a hierarchy of 'others' who are not heterosexual men. These 'others', so-called second-class citizens consisting of women, gay men, transgender people, disabled persons and children, are groomed and socialised from birth by their communities to serve as agents and functionaries to uphold and maintain male privilege. Second-class citizens may potentially enjoy relative economic prosperity and freedom via the enabling mechanisms of dependency relationships around powerful and resourceful men, in order to gain, in a vicarious manner, access to resources and privileges normally beyond their direct reach because of their status in this hierarchy. However, the power and privilege bestowed upon heterosexual men, entitlement, in other words, including racial privileges, had devastating effects on Namibian society. In patriarchy, the 'others' suffered large-scale, pervasive impoverishment, low literacy

and education, and are prone to gender-based violence, brutality and abuse, sexual exploitation, financial and economic deprivation and exploitative, unreasonable and coercive political pressure, human rights violations, and contracted life-threatening diseases such as HIV. To this day, the poorest in Namibia are women with children in rural areas.

Since 1990, Namibia has made tremendous progress to address the gender inequalities entrenched in every local community, a necessity because out of a population of around 2,4 million, 51,5% of the population is female (approximately 70 000 more women than men), and the registered voters' roll is 53% female. In 2011, 44% of Namibian households were headed by women where women were also the principal income providers. The life expectancy at birth for women in 2016 was 65 years, well above the sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) average of 46. In 2016, the HDI (human development index) for Namibian women was only 1,4% lower than the HDI for Namibian men (the Sub-Saharan Africa average is 12,3% lower for women). In terms of the GII (Gender Inequality Index), Namibia scored 0,47 (ranked 108th/159) behind Botswana at 0,43 (ranked 95th/159). Basic literacy rates for women currently stand at 88% for the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic). With the national roll-out of ARVs (anti-retrovirals), Namibian women are better able to cope with the devastation that accompanies contracting HIV which in turn, helps reduce the health burden, death toll and the number of

child-headed households in the country. Increases in the old-age pension grant and the establishment of food-banks help alleviate the domino-effect of a global economic downturn, because 60% of the population above 65 years of age are Namibian women who also take care of school-going children. In that time, Namibia's Gini coefficient (inequality and poverty indicator) shrank with 25 points to 0,57, which is acceptable for a developing economy, but not a developed one. Many more examples can be produced as proof that Namibia has not only performed extremely well in terms of improving the general quality of the lives of its women but is also doing better on average than much older countries on the African continent.

Despite all of the above, at its core, Namibia remains a patriarchally organised society, and in two major respects, most noticeably: the rights of women to terminate unwanted pregnancies in case traditional contraceptives fail to prevent pregnancy and, the social status of the most marginalised 'others' in patriarchal Namibia, the LGBTQ community. These two areas, one a right to access, and the other a recognition of rights, trouble the future for this admirably blossoming country. Perhaps we should ask the increasing number of abandoned newborns, or the more than 40 babies flushed down toilets every month in Windhoek alone, or the gay couples who wish to adopt children but may not, if they consider patriarchy as harmless. ♀