

by Elsarien A. Katiti • photographs Contributed

A CHAT WITH A BROTHER



AS A YOUNG FEMINIST THERE IS A LOT I NEED TO LEARN ABOUT FEMINISM AND THE PROGRESS WE'VE MADE IN THE PLIGHT FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN NAMIBIA. SO I SOUGHT COUNSEL FROM AN EXPERT WHO FOR LONG HAS LED THE CONVERSATION ON GENDER MATTERS, PLUS I WANTED TO INTERROGATE MALE FEMINISM AND TOXIC MASCULINITY. IN ORDER TO INVESTIGATE OUR CURRENT STATUS OF GENDER EQUALITY WE NEED TO KNOW IF IT CHANGED IN ANY WAY FROM THE PAST. HERE IS OUR CHAT WITH NGAMANE KARUAIHE-UPI,

SISTER: What progress have we made in achieving gender equality?

UNCLE GEP: Gender equality in Namibia has not moved much. In particular because we have dual identities in Namibia, wearing two heads; one civil and the other traditional. We are very civil minded people, by accepting that we have governing legislature, but we are also very traditional and abiding by stern gender roles. You speak to people and they can speak to you were a civil matter is concerned, which is our constitution and our policies and rules and regulations as well as that gender equality is the thing to do and so forth.

However, the same person will turn around and say "I'm a Herero and as a Herero I need me two women". That's where we are, our position is that we are neither this nor that, the wedge between the two is what we need to bind and that's the direction we need to take. We have a government that has rectified rules and signed declarations, but not living it out. To break it down we have people who from 8-5 are well composed in terms of law, but after five take on traditional roles of woman is this and man is that. Most of our cultures and religious belief systems oppose gender equality and we are caught in the

middle of civil rights and gender-biased tradition. We have strongly entrenched systems that still support gender inequality.

SISTER: What are your views in light of the recent GIMAC award?

UNCLE GEP: The award was given to highlight Namibia's progress in gender equality and promotion of women in key high political positions. As flattering as it might be, that is all a façade, because having a 50/50 representation is but a numbers game. If we had gender equality we would talk about gender issues, like the sanitary



pads, at the moment we have female parliamentarians uncomfortable to talk about an issue that affects the nation and zero male MP support. We still need to be expressive enough and openly talk about female issues that needs national attention. In Namibia we have 86 cents to a dollar disparities in earnings, and we have female parliamentarians who do not tackle and challenge gender issues in parliament. Until both men and women can freely and without shame discuss issues concerning women in Namibia we still have much to do, not to mention that we still deny other sexual minorities rights of recognition, marriage and other benefits.

SISTER: There is a lot of misunderstanding and negativity around claiming to be a feminist. How do we bring in bystanders to support feminism?

UNCLE GEP: The people on the margins should be asked if they agree that

everybody should be treated fairly and equally, and if their answer is yes, then they are feminists in denial, because being a “feminist” is not a woman’s word it’s an ideology of equality and fairness. If as a men you care about your daughter getting the best of schools, getting the best environment to live in, getting the best of salaries and benefits out of life, you are a feminist. One feminist may be fighting in politics, another in religion or whatever they take a stand on regarding for equality between men and women and others not identifying as male and female too.

SISTER: What is the role of the current generation of gender activists?

UNCLE GEP: Our role as current feminists and gender activists is to streamline the promotion of mainstreaming of gender, practical implementation and the nationalisation of gender concepts. Living it out, personalising it, meaning we cannot be

lip-service gender equality promoters. We need to take it home and to church and not continue conforming to “culture” and society’s prejudiced gender roles. Gender equality should be infused in daily life and in every single societal aspect. Gender equality makes no exceptions, no exceptions for men to marry two women but women cannot, no exceptions for men to be the head of household but women cannot, none. Our role is to practice and transform the status quo.

SISTER: Since culture or the status quo perpetuates toxic masculinity, how do we recondition it?

UNCLE GEP: We need to understand that it’s toxic because it poisons men against themselves, men are misled by the notion of they are “head of the household”, that they are automatically leaders because they are men, that “men do not cry”, and sadly as a result they have the highest suicide rates, they commit the highest violent acts, all this because they took on roles they did not prepare for. How are you leading if your children are afraid of you, if you don’t protect those most vulnerable, and if you father many children you cannot all be there for? Non-toxic masculinity is about being carers, nurturers and about engaging in social change, not about expecting royal treatment and occupying a power role because you are a man.

Reconditioning requires that we have these conversations daily, because forging change demands constant exposure to the issue that needs changing. It must become normal daily conversation so that we can plant seeds and nurture them. Currently that’s part of our problem, we invite people to one or two day workshops and expect to recondition them, whereas they are exposed to toxic ideologies every single day, retaining the status quo is something that we can do readily because the environment allows for it, but changing it requires exhaustive dialogue.

We need to work and embrace positive masculinities, just because we are conditioned to look at things from a patriarchal view does not mean it is to our benefit. Life has changed and continues to and as a nation we cannot afford not to change with it. ♀