

by Hildegard Titus • photograph Contributed

THERE ARE MEN AND WOMEN OUT THERE WHOSE SKIN BEGIN TO CRAWL ONCE YOU UTTER THE WORD FEMINISM. A BRIGADE OF PEOPLE WHO HATE THE MOVEMENT BECAUSE FOR A MYRIAD OF REASONS, NAMELY THINKING THAT FEMINISM IS ABOUT MAKING WOMEN MORE POWERFUL THAN MEN, AND MAKING THE LATTER SOCIALLY, POLITICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY OBSOLETE. THESE ARE THE SAME PEOPLE HOW SCREAM BLOODY MURDER WHEN THEY SEE THE HASHTAG #MENARETRASH MAKING ITS ROUNDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA OR IN REAL LIFE. " HOW CAN YOU SAY MEN ARE TRASH," " WOMEN ARE TRASH TOO". " NOT ALL MEN", THE DEFENSE GOES ON, BECAUSE ULTIMATELY THESE PEOPLE DO NOT GET IT.

What they don't understand is that the way that we approach gender in the world, and more specifically in our country is toxic. That the patriarchy and its systems that keep it in place are dangerous, not only for women, but for men. That 'toxic masculinity' is harming all of us, and yes, men it is harming men too. Looking at the words on a sheet of paper, one might think that this terminol-

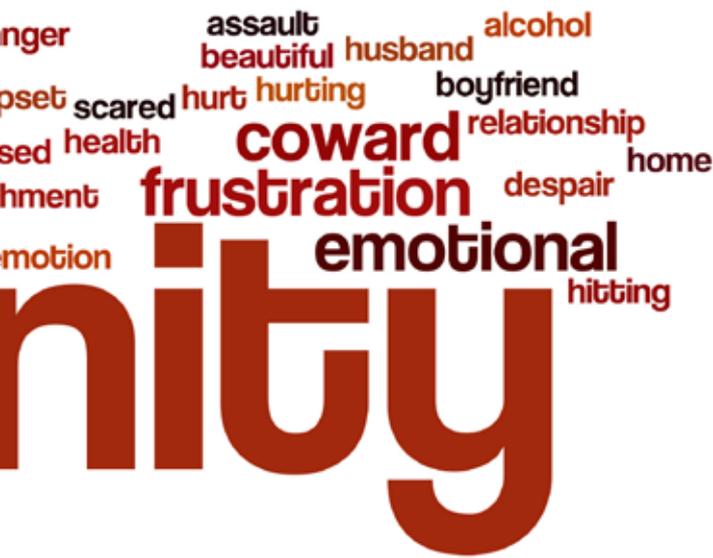
ogy is belittling men and masculinity, but instead it is actually challenging what our society has defined and created masculinity to be.

As feminists we believe that all genders are deserving of being treated with love and respect, and ultimately like human beings, but how can we reach an equilibrium when one gender, particularly the cis-gendered male existence has become to represent extreme violence and oppression against all other genders, and surprisingly to itself as well.

Masculinity has become toxic, because we have allowed it to be. We have allowed the definition of manliness to mean violence, to mean emotionless, to mean not caring, to mean imposing one's authority and crushing the 'weak'. If masculinity is violent it is because we have skewed the definition of what it means to be a man, and if we are ever to see peace and an end to the brutal levels of violence in Namibia, it is up to us to redefine it and unlearn millenia of brutality and toxicity.

Namibia is going through a rather grim and dark time at the moment. Each violent act against women and children is more brutal than the next, and often we find ourselves asking how can the world be so cruel, how can we, Namibians as a people be so cruel as to commit such heinous crimes to the most vulnerable in our society. And the reality is, we are all responsible for it. On one level or another, both through our actions and choices, and through the value systems that we have created as a society.

Think about it, from childhood, girls are expected to



cook, clean, care for younger siblings, and help their parents from a young age. They are bought dolls, and domestic things that from an early age condition them to the role of caregiving, not only for themselves but for society as a whole. Boys are given toys that are destructive, toy guns, instruments that perpetuate violence. From a young age, we already teach girls to be nurturing and we teach boys to be destructive. How did the word domestic become gendered? Is having a home or a family a gendered issue? Do we all not deserve homes?

When a girl is misbehaving, or asserting herself, she is ostracized and told 'that is not ladylike', while the same behaviour in boys is met with a chuckle and 'boys will be boys'.

When a boy is hurt, upset and scared, we tell them 'men don't cry', from a young age, we already tell them that the ability to express and feel emotions is something that is to be ashamed of and a sign of weakness. If boys aren't allowed to cry, and girls are, what message does this drive home? That girls are weak because they cry and boys are strong because they don't. How has our society conditioned half of our population to think that it's tear ducts (gifted to them by science), and ability to feel emotions is a sign of weakness?

Fast forward to school, while boys are penalised for tidiness when it comes to school uniforms, girls are already being subjected to being objectified and slutshaming. When a principal sends a boy home because he didn't shave, the boy is not told that his beard is an "invitation" to girls and female teachers. When it comes to girls they are ostracized for the length of their skirts because it will "distract" the boys and male teachers from carrying on their work.

When women are harassed or raped on the street, people ask first what she was wearing or if she was drinking rather than why somebody felt they had a right to violate her body. From an early age, we are taught that a woman's body is a public space, and if she doesn't want to be harassed she needs to dress and act a certain way. But if that was all it took for women to not get beaten, raped and killed, then girls of all ages, from babies who can hardly speak, to elderly women who have lost their sight or unable to walk would not be victims of rape, but they are. Women who are covered head to toe, to women who prefer to wear shorter clothes are being raped all the same. Women are raped by strangers, women are raped by people they know, by their family and even by their partners. Why? Because the label of woman, has allowed society and men to think of us, our bodies, and our agency and our lives as a public space in which they can do whatever they want to us.

Why is it that stay at home mothers and primary caregivers are not paid for the years of their lives that they spend raising us, feeding us, bathing us? It is because the work that has predominantly be done by women is seen as a given and taken for granted and not considered "important" like the work that men do. It is also not a surprise that jobs that were historically seen as women's work in the country are vastly underpaid compared to work that we see as men's. I.e. nurses, teachers, etc. And when men took on roles of nurses they were somehow seen as less manly.

Even when it comes to our leadership and higher levels of government the patriarchy is upheld. When we have women in positions of power who are too shy and embarrassed to talk about the lack of menstrual hygiene products for school girls that directly affects the girl child's education. To government sanctioned witch hunts to find mothers who safely deposit the babies they can not care for to the state. To our churches and communities that ostracize single motherhood or teenage pregnancies like the plague. To shaming girls for 'getting' pregnant but turning a blind eye to the teachers who have relationships with their students. .

To denying women access to abortions because 'What kind of a man would want to marry a woman who has had two or three abortions' or telling the nation that to combat gender based violence we need to reintroduce polygamy, and women should ask their partners for permission before seeking a job promotion. .

We are a breeding ground for toxic masculinity because our society is centred around it. Pleasing men, rewarding them and protecting them from a skewed and flawed definition of manhood. Where men are too ashamed and embarrassed to express their emotions, talk about their feelings or speak out too when they are the victims of violence, and sexual assault. With our rigid and narrow definition of masculinity, it is not only women and children that suffer, but men too. Toxic masculinity is a nationwide problem, and if we ever hope to see an end to the levels of violence and hatred in this country, it is up to us all to take a long hard look at how we have allowed it to manifest and permeate every aspect of our lives, because at the end of the day. Our collective happiness and well being depend on it. ♀