

MY NAMIBIAN WOMANHOOD

by Natasha H Tibinyane • photograph Vida de Voss

In 2005 Natasha Tibinyane was featured as a *Sister Namibia* cover story. Then, as now, she shares her journey as a Namibian feminist. While she may be well-known in some circles as an angry feminist, the backstory of her life sheds light on who she has become.

In 2005 I was featured as a *Sister Namibia Magazine* cover story. It remains one of the most life-affirming experiences in a life that has been affirmed in more ways than I can tell. When they approached me to write something about my experience of womanhood, my first instinct was to write about my experience of womanhood as a Namibian feminist. This, because my journey as a feminist is closely tied to this magazine and organisation, and because my experience of womanhood has largely been empowering and emancipatory as a result of me being feminist.

Let me be clear though, as noted in my 2005 interview, I was born feminist. I was one before I knew there was a thing called feminism. A five or six-year old questioning gender roles, and why women work harder than men, yet still get served last and

with less food, is feminist, surely?

It was not easy being a feminist Motswana girlchild though. In my culture, a woman's humility (read doormat mentality), ability to speak only when spoken to (read voicelessness), and respect (read subservience) for men are highly treasured. I was the exact opposite. Somehow, despite suffering consistent verbal admonishments against what I questioned or stated, my feminism didn't wane. It became stronger instead, and I also became the main disruptor of the serving order at family gatherings. Now they don't even bother to say "men first" when I'm in the vicinity.

Besides, it's not as if what I said or questioned did not have logic behind it. See, my feminism fueled my thirst for knowledge. Many things in my world didn't make sense to me and/or were hurtful. Trying to understand my world, yet escaping it at the same time, became a defining part of my childhood. Reading helped me gain knowledge of the world I live in, critical thinking skills, and an imagination that sometimes blows my own mind. Because of books, I knew for sure that there is more to life for women than what my family and society told me. I am also blessed to be born into a reading family. My mother's books mostly had a white heroine who slayed through her white-privileged life, with one or a few hot men along

the way. I'm named after one of them, she was Russian. My absent, but occasionally accessible, father's books introduced me to politics and patriarchy through the lens of mostly white men.

One of my fondest childhood memories of reading is my maternal great-grandmother and her sister-in law sitting on the stoep at the village homestead 'reading' picture magazines. They couldn't read words, but pictures they could. I loved listening to them using their imagination as they read along.

When I refer to family, I'm not talking nucleus. I'm talking a huge and diverse maternal and paternal extended family that gives you more aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews that you can count. It is a tribe.

This tribe contained many women who in many ways exhibited my girlchild feminism. Although not acknowledged by my family (for this I blame Christianity, but that's for another op-ed), we are as matriarchal as they

come. Women are the heads of households in my family and caretakers of adults, the elderly and children. They were married, single, separated mothers, and childless women. In Windhoek, most of them were employed. In the village, most of them played leadership roles in the community. Their life was more than just keeping up with homestead and agricultural chores. My paternal grandmother was a church leader, famed as the only one in the village who had read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. She was fortunate to have children who could provide her with the resources to care for the needy, and raise the children of parents based in the city, or in nearby villages and farms.

There were countless she-heroes in my family. So, whenever they themselves would attempt to silence my feminism, I would present them with their own lives as examples of why there's no sense to the idea that women are inferior and less valuable





than men. Then they would tell me about the Bible, and I would question that too. They eventually gave up on telling me what I'm saying or doing is wrong. Now they are mostly proud of me.

I was in high school when I found a *Sister Namibia* magazine in the library, that's the first time I was introduced to the idea of feminism. I was not surprised that I am not the only one who thinks this way, but I sure was excited. I read every edition that came to our library and eventually found my way to their office, which had a tiny treasure trove of feminist literature, videos, pamphlets, reports, posters and pictures, AND amazing, diverse women who are there to work, do research, intern, have a meeting, or to return a book. I discovered a thirsty feminist's oasis, and I didn't want to leave at the end of my first visit.

After high school I worked at a hotel where my black feminist self was put to the test. I had

to battle seniors who were not used to engaging with a black female subordinate, assured of her value, and informed about her rights and freedoms. It was tough, the bullying got so bad that my mother called a meeting with my supervisor, my bullies chose to attend too. After that, they never bullied me again. Meeting my mother, they realised that I come from strong and fierce stock that should not be messed with. I was 19.

I wanted to be a journalist since laying my eyes and ears on Christiane Amanpour at the age of 14/15, when shortly after independence, the airwaves opened up. She was a revelation. She had so much power, intelligence, knowledge, and a questioning mind. I could not believe that a woman was interviewing presidents and reporting from war zones.

The hotel job was something to do while aiming for a job in media. At age 20, I successfully applied for a job as a junior

reporter at *New Era* newspaper, and my life changed. I changed. I became a better me because I had a job that affirmed me, as I was affirming it. I was also blessed to be mentored by seniors who were not threatened by me, and wanted to see me flourish. I had a male editor, and he never made me feel my femaleness. In his view, I could do the work, and do it well. Also, I was always willing to do the job, regardless of circumstances. My colleagues always looked at me first when months-long rural trips were raised in agenda meetings. I loved it. Traversing this breathtakingly beautiful country, getting to know its diverse and authentic people, was affirming and healing. Travelling to the Democratic Republic of Congo to cover Namibia's involvement in the civil war there, was a career highlight. I was my version of Christiane, and I revelled in it. After almost three years at the newspaper, I needed a new challenge. By then I was doing the work of a senior journalist, and was also tired of introducing myself as a reporter. My next goal was to proudly claim the professional title: journalist, and I left to study journalism at Natal Technikon, in South Africa. My feminist self tasted freedom in bodily autonomy and identity for the first time, and it was bliss. Being me, without those who know me watching and judging, was so emancipatory. My student years were happy and carefree. I swear I had the best lecturers. My Political Science lecturer was a catalyst in me choosing to become an advocacy journalist.

I completed my six-months internship at *New Era*, and then joined my feminist home, *Sister Namibia*, as a media officer. Yet again I had a work experience that was emancipatory, affirming and empowering in so many ways. I wasn't there long when I became acting station manager

at the Katutura Community Radio (KCR), as part of my duties at *Sister*. I eventually resigned and served fulltime at KCR.

My career is 24-years long and varied. My life has been abundantly blessed and exciting. I've travelled to many countries for work and holidays, eaten an array of delicious food, and danced everywhere I was.

When I travel, I always have a moment or moments when I'm utterly happy to be a Namibian. This because, in that moment, I realise that my Namibian context is the best chance the universe gave me to be the best version of my soul. It's important to note that I'm writing from a privileged black feminist's perspective, and that my life experience is not so common, but it is real.

Namibia provides me with the freedom to be the best feminist version of myself. I currently am the famed Angry Feminist version, and I love her. She frees me from so much bullshit. My feminist self had a chance to grow strong and fearless because I lived in a country where even though a lot of things in my life said that women are not equal to men, these were juxtaposed by my self-awareness and assertiveness; a constitutional framework that affirmed my equality; a government that, in some respects, did commendable work in realising this; access to information, people and opportunities that enhanced my feminist self; working in the media and civil society sectors where my gender is not an impediment; and my freedom and/or ability to fearlessly express myself in whatever way I want, without feeling physically threatened. All of this is A LOT to be grateful for as a feminist, considering the world we live in. My Namibian womanhood has been my emancipation and my strength, and for that, I am eternally grateful. ♀