

South Africa - Zuma Polygamy Drama: Anti-feminist Myths Addressed

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Much has been said in the media and private conversations on the latest revelations of the South African president's paternity of a child "out of wedlock" and polygamy.

Myth 1: It is a private matter.

Jacob Zuma is not a private citizen, he is the President of this country and his sex and love life have implications for the rest of us. He pledged loyalty to certain principles, and it is the duty and right of the citizens to question his office when he is seen to transgress or jeopardise these same principles.

When citizens think the president speaks with a forked tongue on gender equality, on HIV/Aids (risk/prevalence) and regarding consistency this is not a private matter. When citizens' taxes pay for an increasingly expensive Presidential family, they have every right to speak their minds on the matter.

Myth 2: Zuma's critics romanticise monogamy, his defenders romanticise polygamy.

Debates on single versus multiple partners are such old hat for most feminists that many of us are at a loss for words when forced to explain why anti-feminist rhetoric insists on equating a feminist critique of Zuma with a feminist celebration of monogamy.

Feminists have argued that monogamous heterosexual families are very often at the heart of patriarchal exploitation of women's sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, reproductive and intellectual labour for centuries.

Feminists have insisted that most women experience rape and other forms of violence from their intimate male partners in officially/formally monogamous contexts (and this has been a basic feminist premise for at least 50 years). Feminists have asserted that institutionalised monogamous heterosexual practices are about controlling women, containing women's sexual desire, and policing women's reproductive capabilities.

Feminists have also said (again over and over again - across history and continents) such homes/families/ households are the battleground when white supremacist heteropatriarchies exert violence - hence the devaluation and legalised separation of African/ Native American/Asian families through practices such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid.

African feminists especially have said that most monogynous heterosexual relationships benefit the man at the expense of the woman in it, and that multiple partner relationships can be about much more than oppression.

Again, much creative knowledge exists on the interesting ways in which multiple-partner relationships can be affirming and interesting spaces for women. Yes, many feminists also disagree with some of the above, but it's patriarchally inconvenient to deal with any of the above.

Myth 3: The issue is polygamy's legality and validity, both of which are under attack.

All the people who are saying "it is my culture" to practice monogamy [polygamy?] mean it is their culture for a man to have many women as partners, a practice which is referred to as polygyny. They are also saying that their culture is static and we should all respect it without question, even if and when it speaks for us too. But, as feminists we insist that if it is ours too, then we can question, change, lay claim to it and question how it is being misrepresented. Every single proponent of the "culture" plus "polygamy" argument in South African media has refused the same courtesy to women with multiple partners, whether these partners are men, women, intersex and/or trans-people, or a combination. So, they're saying "it is my culture to practice polygamy" but what they mean is "it is my culture to enter into polygyny". And there is nothing specifically African about polygamy - people all over the world practice it.

Myth 4: It's "unfair" to focus on Zuma and leave the women who are his partners out of public criticism.

When one of these women is an elected public official, she will be subjected to as much scrutiny from those of us who think that public responsibility matters.

Myth 5: Feminists ignore that women choose to enter into polygamous relationships.

See comments under "Myth 2". There is nothing automatically feminist about either monogamous or polygamous relationships. Women will choose relationships with differing degrees of choice given that we live in a patriarchal and therefore unequal world. Not all women are feminists. No oppressive system has ever succeeded without the complicity and active support of members of those classes/ groups it seeks to oppress. This is part of why the personal is political.

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P.S.

* From Amandla! website and:

<http://pumlagqola.wordpress.com/2010/02/10/zuma-polygamy-drama-myths-addressed/>