For most South Africans, like many of us all over the world, marriage is a topic of constant interest. People speak about the good and the bad in their own marriages, weddings they must attend, and what kinds of decisions their children will make as they grow up and contemplate marriage.

Scholarly work on marriage in the academic literature is also easy to come by. Clinical psychologists write about couples and marriage counseling; conservative academics focus on what they see as the disintegration of marriage and the subsequent degradation of society; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) activists and scholars explore issues such as the right to marry and costs and benefits of legal marriage. In addition, many researchers from an array of
disciplines are studying social problems that are related to marriage such as intimate partner violence, men as perpetrators of violence against women, and the spread of HIV, especially in the context of South Africa. What has been less attended to, however, is the essential question of the problematic character of marriage itself and how is it implicated in serious social issues such as interpersonal violence and HIV. This special issue of *Agenda*, entitled *Marriage: A risky business or safe place?* takes on the challenge by presenting a variety of articles that problematise marriage and aim to get at the particular aspects of marriage that make it more of a risky business rather than the safe place that many of us assume it to be.

For feminists, marriage has long been viewed as a site of reproduction of gender inequalities and an “important tool that holds patriarchy in place and is a key vehicle for policing ‘normality’ among sexualities” (Msibi, p. 22), and I would also argue policing normality among people in general, not only with regard to their sexualities. This issue consists of 15 pieces including a short editorial and a lengthy introduction. Aside from the editorial and introduction, the pieces are categorized as briefings (4), which are not heavy on theorising; perspectives (2), which are more personalised narratives; focuses (3), which emphasise one particular aspect of an author’s research and; articles (4), which offer empirical data and theorising. All but three of the papers present research in South Africa. Ellece reviews constructions of marriage in Botswana; Rambe, Chabaya, Wadesango and Muhuro provide a briefing on marriage and rights in SADC countries; and Chireshe and Chireshe explore marriage and HIV in Zimbabwe. Although not all of the authors explicitly state that they have taken a feminist perspective in their work, it can be inferred that all of the authors have taken such a perspective from the discussions and the situating of the topics presented, as well as from the fact that all the pieces are critical of marriage in various ways.

The issue begins with a brief editorial from Laverne Gething outlining the contents of the issue. Following this is Catherine Collingwood’s special briefing, *Agenda’s organisational change process*, which consists of a lengthy and detailed account of Agenda’s organisational change-over to an international publishing house. This briefing would be of interest to emerging feminist organisations or organisations going through a re-structuring process. Next, is Devina Nadarajan Perumal’s valuable introduction, *The ties that bind: Marriage – a risky business or safe place?* Here Perumal sets the stage for the collection of articles, explaining the necessity of a special issue on marriage. She goes on to give helpful summaries of each paper including explanations of how each one contributes to the theme of evaluating the safety and risk of marriage. Her introduction provides a useful orientation for readers, guiding them toward pieces that suit particular interests. In general, although there is overlap, the papers can be categorised under the following headings: Sexualities, violence against women, HIV, and law and rights.
Sexualities

Thabo Msibi’s briefing, entitled They are worried about me: I am also worried, reflects on his thoughts and feelings when his family and colleagues questioned his sexuality and the fact that he is a successful adult, yet unmarried. He writes about the problem of how, “marriage is forced on people” (p. 27) and how that reinforces heteronormativity and hides other sexualities. Msibi maintains that forcing individuals into heterosexual marriages causes many people, including those who identify as LGBTIQ, to lead dual lives or lives that are unrecognised or ‘abnormal’. On the other hand, Mikki van Zyl’s article, A step too far? Five Cape Town lesbian couples speak about being married, addresses how marriage facilitates belonging and certain privileges that were once only available to those in heterosexual marriages. In doing so, it becomes clear how marriage, just not the heterosexual kind, may offer the possibility of changing and challenging inequity and heteronormativity.

Violence

Mlondi kaNdlondlo’s perspective, When sacrificing self is the only way out: A tribute to my mother, is about how women, his own mother in particular, internalise messages causing them to stay married despite abuses and even to cherish unsafe marriages because marriage acts as a “form of currency” (p. 19) not just in terms of being provided for materially, but in terms of being a woman who can ‘keep a husband’ and remain undefeated by marriage. kaNdlondlo provides a thoughtful and creative tribute detailing how self-sacrifice in marriage becomes a source of identity and pride for some women. His conclusions (suggesting that patriarchy be dismantled by Christian messages and education) however seem weak in comparison to the thought-provoking poignant picture he paints of the struggles in his own mother’s life.

Four additional pieces offer new insights on and analyses of the problem of violence against women. Thabile Mbatha’s focus, In and out of polygyny: A case of black South African women’s experiences of marriage, highlights polygyny as it is experienced by women and how this type of marriage acts as a site of exploitation, inequality, and HIV risk. Sibonile Edith Ellece’s focus, “Be a fool like me”: Gender construction in the marriage advice ceremony in Botswana – a critical discourse analysis, takes a close look at the inequities in marriage advice for women compared to men, where women are advised to become submissive and silent, and men are encouraged to be non-violent, although, “simultaneously represent[ing] the wife as the lesser partner in the marriage” (p. 50). Ronica Mudaly’s perspective, Dangerous alliance: Constructing marriage on the fault-line of gender, highlights women’s contextualisations and descriptions of their ex-husband’s use of violence in their marriages and charts the women’s progressions out of those violent relationships.
Finally, Maheshvari Naidu’s focus, *Indian women in marriage: When the sacred marriage thread becomes a noose*, provides an ethnographic account of violence in Indian women’s marriages, and finds that men’s violence does not simply come from men, but may be reinforced by individuals outside of the marriage, in this case, mothers in law.

**HIV**

There are two important pieces related to the problem of HIV in this issue. The first is Shakila Reddy’s briefing, *Young women’s understandings of (future) marriage: Links to sexual risk and HIV prevention*. Reddy finds that young women describe marriage as a defining part of their future, offering them cultural tradition, economic security, and romantic love. Because these meanings are positioned within a “normative patriarchal heterosexual framework within which gender inequalities are reproduced” (p. 41), however, problems arise such as the link between gender inequity and HIV risk. The second piece, an article by Excellent Chireshe and Regis Chireshe entitled, *Monogamous marriage in Zimbabwe: An insurance against HIV and AIDS?*, is also related to the notion of marriage being a site of HIV risk. Chireshe and Chireshe report that the women in their study experience gender inequity in marriage, including making it impossible for married women to insist on condom use with their husbands. As a result, single women are safer than married women in terms of HIV because they are more likely to be successful in condom negotiation and single women have the choice of walking away from men who will not use condoms. However, Chireshe and Chireshe’s recommendations of “curbing promiscuity” (p. 99), and HIV education and testing may not be effective because they appear to be rooted in Christian values, values of which many of the women in their study were critical and to which they pointed as the very reasons why marriage is risky and inequitable for women.

**Law & Rights**

There are two pieces that focus on law and rights as they relate to marriage. First is Symphorosa Rembe, Owence Chabaya, Newman Wadesango, and Patricia Muhuro’s briefing, *Child and forced marriage as violation of women’s rights, and responses by member states in Southern African Development Community*. This briefing outlines harmful practices such as abduction marriages and child marriages which cause significant harm to girl children yet are still taking place in the SADC region. Rembe et al. describe the measures taken nationally, regionally, and internationally as efforts that look good on paper, but since they are never successfully implemented, violations against girls and young women continue. The second, Mothokoa Mamashela and Marita Carmelley’s article *The Catch 22 situation of widows from polygamous marriages being discarded under customary law*, explains the complexities of
previous and new law regarding women in polygamous marriages. Although men who marry multiple women are required to follow certain provisions regarding multiple marriages in order to protect the women, many men fail to do so. In the event of the man’s death, for example, his failure to have put protective provisions in place, results in devastating consequences for wives other than the first wife, or the ‘discarded wives’, as the subsequent marriages are not considered equal to the first marriage. Even though the fault may lie with the individual men, the equally significant or perhaps even more important problem is the failure of the legislature to protect the rights of women in polygamous marriages.

**One that doesn’t fit**

Finally, there is one piece, an article by Dorrit Posel, Stephanie Rudwick, and Daniela Casale entitled, *Is marriage a dying institution in South Africa? Exploring changes in marriage in the context of ilobolo payments*, which, at first, does not seem to fit with the other articles in this issue. This article documents the trends in marriage rates in South Africa and points out that while marriage rates for whites are on the rise, fewer and fewer Black people are getting married. Posel et al. present evidence that the reason for this trend is because of changes in the practice of ilobolo over the years and that many Black South Africans are now finding themselves unable to afford the price of ilobolo and, hence, unable to marry. This article intends to point out how poverty is an injustice in this case, preventing individuals from marrying, something they are perceived as wanting to do. However, had the authors gone a step further, the findings could have been more interesting. This entire issue of Agenda points to real danger and injustice in the institution of marriage as it currently exists. The Posel et al. article points towards changes, although maybe for reasons other than to challenge the institution of marriage, in the number of people getting married. Another way to look at the declining trend in marriage rates among those who cannot afford ilobolo, is to see it as a crack in the structure of an institution which holds in place inequity and danger for so many women and which limits the ways in which women as well as men are allowed to live.

Although some of the findings of some of the pieces in this issue of Agenda are limited in their conceptualisation of the issues and in their suggestions for policy change, this issue stands out as noteworthy. The issue challenges the fundamental character of marriage, something that most of us take for granted as a normal part of life. Scholars and those of us outside of the academy find problems related to marriage such as violence, HIV, rights, and more, but rarely do we trace these back to what now appears to be obvious – the construction of marriage as a place off-limits to criticism and challenge, but also a place which was designed and destined to be a site of inequity and injustice. The work appearing in this issue opens doors to new research questions and critique of the specific aspects of marriage that render it a risky business rather than a safe place.
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