

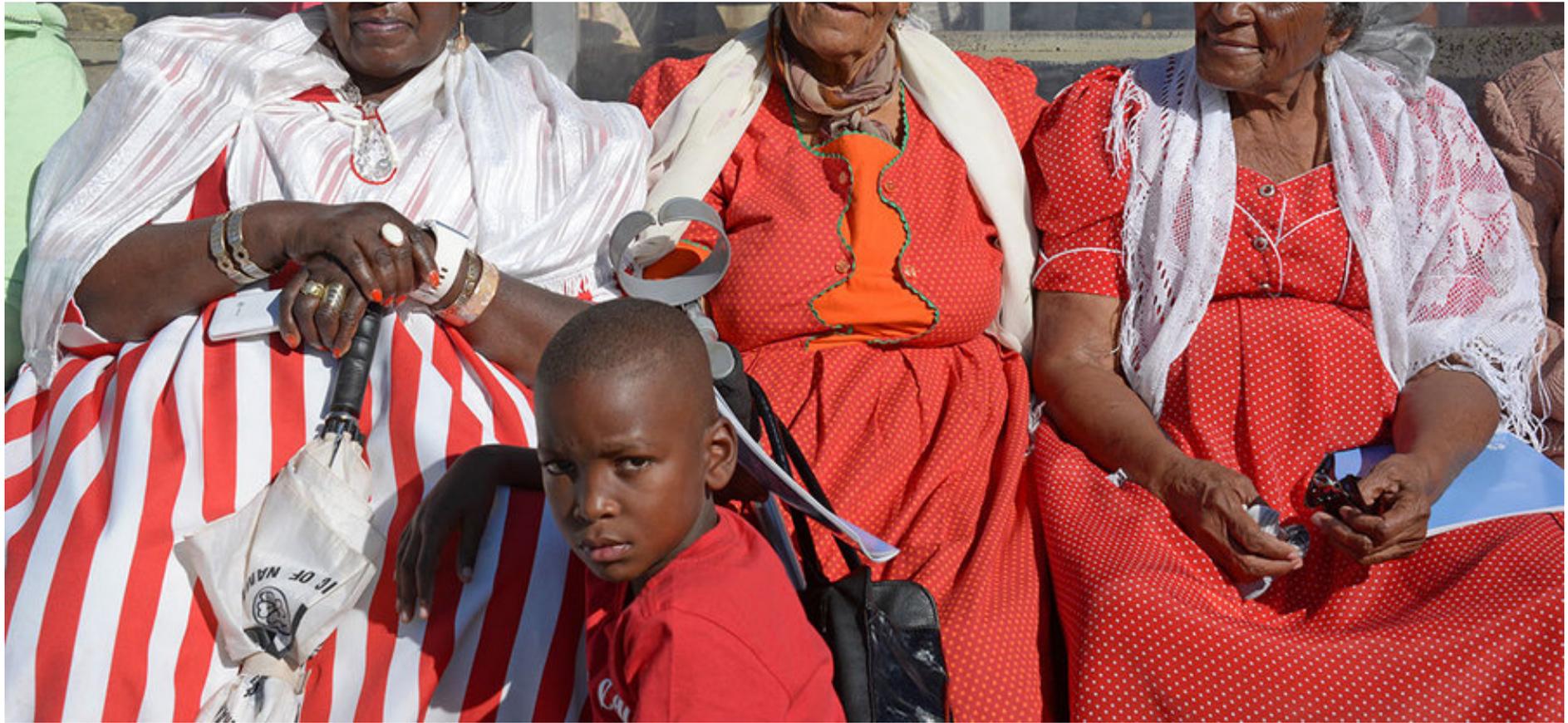
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In Namibia's abortion debate, echoes of a repressive history

PUTTING IT IN PERSPECTIVE Opponents argue the restrictions represent a troubled legacy of apartheid rule, echoing debates around Africa about what to do with laws left over from colonial days. Others say they reflect contemporary views in a deeply religious country.





Gioia Forster/picture-alliance/dpa/AP | Caption



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JANUARY 11, 2018 | WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA — The president's voice came booming in through the open window of Rosa Namises' house, crackling over the speakers from the soccer stadium next door.

It was the early 1990s, just years after Namibia's independence from South Africa, a time when nearly every speech a politician here gave seemed full of outsized meaning – like a series of patriotic “how to” guides on building a new country.

That day in her kitchen, Ms. Namises heard President Sam Nujoma explain that Namibia was a small nation. Too small, in fact. It simply didn't have enough people.

“And so he said to the men – it's your patriotic duty to have children,” she remembers. For Namises, an activist who hoped independence would mean the chance to reform Namibia's strict abortion law, it was confirmation of something she'd long feared.

Now, if she advocated for abortion rights, it wouldn't just be an affront to social norms. “It would be seen as unpatriotic,” she says.

A quarter-century ago, Namibia– a Texas-sized slab of desert on the southwest coast of Africa – was at a monumental turning point. It had finally shaken off white rule and found itself, for the first time in its history, free to choose what kind of country it wanted to be.

But it did so in the shadow of a dark history. For the better part of the century, Namibia had been a colony of white-ruled South Africa. And when it became independent, it still had on the books many of the old apartheid government's laws. Among them was an almost total prohibition on abortion – passed in the mid-1970s amid rising anxiety that the minority white population wasn't having children fast enough to stop itself from being vastly outnumbered by its black underclass.

Like many African countries, Namibia faced a difficult dilemma when it came to colonial legislation, like its abortion law. For many women's health advocates, it was simply one more inheritance from a racist government, contributing to high maternal death rates and unwanted births. But whatever its history, the prohibition also mirrored the views of many Namibians – abortion was a sin. It shouldn't be allowed.

Old laws, new societies

Around the continent, many colonial laws remain in force, and how to deal with them has become a kind of societal reckoning. In some countries, laws' origins have inspired contemporary pushes for their removal. Nineteen African countries, for instance, no longer have the death penalty. Many who pushed for it to be overturned argued that it was a colonial tool of intimidation and suppression that had no place in their free society.

But in other cases, these laws – and the colonial governments who passed them – helped set social norms that persist to the present day. Old British penal codes criminalizing homosexuality, for instance, have been used to suppress LGBT activism in several former African colonies – notably Uganda.

When apartheid crumbled in the early 1990s, South African feminists successfully pushed to have the abortion law changed, arguing that it was part of a history of oppression.

But in neighboring Namibia, where conservative Christian social norms dominated the new government, the old law remained intact, as many similar ones do across the continent. Of the 54 countries in Africa today, only South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and Tunisia allow abortion in a broad range of circumstances, and the region has the highest number of abortion-related deaths in the world. Namibia allows abortion in cases of rape, incest, or when a pregnancy endangers the life of mother or child.

In both Namibia and South Africa, the limits were part of a broader web of restrictions on black women. Apartheid laws rigidly patrolled where black South Africans and Namibians could live and work. When African communities' neighborhoods became desirable to the white population, they were often forcibly relocated – usually to desolate, segregated areas far from jobs and amenities.

In the process, families were often separated, meaning many young women missed the lessons about traditional birth control they'd heard from mothers and grandmothers, says Susanne Klausen, a professor at Carleton University in Canada and the author of "Abortion Under Apartheid." (Today, only half of Namibian women use modern contraceptives.) Beginning in the 1950s and '60s, she points out, the number of unwanted and out-of-wedlock pregnancies rose rapidly.

Those women, meanwhile, were often desperate to end those pregnancies. So as apartheid tightened, the number of illegal abortions ticked upward. In the 1960s, activists estimated about 100,000 South African women – most of them black – were illicitly ending a pregnancy each year. By the 1970s, when the South African government passed the current abortion law, that figure had jumped to a quarter million, according to Klausen's research.

At the time, Namises worked as a nurse in the obstetrics and gynecology ward of a large public hospital in Windhoek, the Namibian capital. Every week, she says, she saw women arrive in the hospital near death after attempting to perform their own abortions – or after paying an “herbalist” to do it for them. The women always told her the same story – that they’d had a miscarriage – and she never asked for more details.

But the more she saw, the angrier she grew.

“This law was never based at all on our culture or experiences,” says Namises. “It was always something imposed on us.”

Current statistics on abortion in Namibia are difficult to come by. However, data from the Namibian Ministry of Health, though based on a sample size of only 60 women, suggests that up to 16 percent of maternal deaths are caused by abortions, and thousands of women check themselves into hospitals each year for “spontaneous abortions” – a term that includes both accidental and purposeful miscarriages. Continent-wide, about 9 percent of maternal deaths each year are attributable to unsafe abortion, and some 1.6 million women are treated annually for complications from the procedure.

Charged debate

Loosening abortion restrictions, however, remains highly controversial. In an overwhelmingly Christian country, many Namibians – black and white – consider abortion a sin.

“Namibia is at its core a very religious nation, and I think for government there was and is quite a lot of weight attached to the church’s views” on social issues like abortion, says Clem Marais, the general secretary of the Dutch Reformed Church in Namibia.

But the abortion law, established under the 1970s-era apartheid government, was also meant to serve a very different purpose: white rule.

“The government saw a moral crisis if white women kept aborting the next generation of the white race,” Ms. Klausen says. “There was a real panic there.”

Since the late 1950s, indeed, South African legislators had been treating the white birth rate as a matter of survival, arguing that white control depended upon “their numbers,” as one MP quoted in “Abortion Under Apartheid” put it. “We shall as a first priority seek to increase our white population.” Having children was framed as the patriotic duty of white families – just as it was for black families in Namibia, three decades later.

Whether or not black women were having abortions was seen as far less consequential to the apartheid government, except in public health costs, Klausen says. When apartheid fell apart, many feminists saw an opening – considering its origins, they reasoned, so who would want to keep it around?

But many post-colonial governments, including Namibia’s, haven’t seen it that way. Instead, taking a firmly conservative stance on social issues like abortion, homosexuality, and the death penalty has become a way to assert independence from a “permissive” West.

“Namibians don’t want abortion,” then-Health Minister Libertina Amathila said amid a debate about the procedure in 1999. “Once we have consulted we are supposed to follow the feeling of the people.”

But for many women’s health advocates, that explanation leaves a tragic problem unaddressed. Namibian newspapers regularly carry stories of “baby dumping,” or mothers throwing away newborns. And the fact that so many Namibians are seeking abortions illegally shows how necessary reform has become, Namises argues.

“At the moment we are frozen,” she says. “Our way of thinking about this is outdated, but we haven’t yet found a way to take it on and change it.”

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