

Veronica Mangcanga

You have three children of your own, one of whom you are still breastfeeding. Why did you choose to adopt another?

'In my culture, as a woman, I am a mother to my whole community, not just the children I give birth to. I was travelling in a taxi one day in Johannesburg when I looked out the window and saw one of the women who was begging on the street hitting a little girl. She was screaming at her and slapping her with such anger that something welled up inside of me and I couldn't contain myself. I asked the taxi driver to stop and I got off. I headed straight for this woman and confronted her. Trying to instil discipline is one thing, but abuse is another.

'I asked her, "Don't you want this child?" "No," she replied, "I don't want her; she's a hindrance to my life; she causes nothing but trouble. You can take her if you want!"

'It didn't matter to me at the time whether she meant it or not. Without giving it a second thought, I took this child's hand and I carried her home with me. The next day I went back to the same spot to get her identification documents, but the woman was no longer there and nobody even knew who she was. I left my details there with one of the vendors and said that if she ever wanted to get her daughter, this was where she'd find me. That was over a year ago.'

And your husband? Weren't you worried about what he would say?

'Not at all. He does the same thing all the time! "You did a good thing," he said. I know he also loves to do good and we support each other in what we do.'

Where does such compassion come from?

'Children have not asked to be here. When I see neighbours not caring for their children it hurts me deeply, because that was my story growing up. If I had things my way, no child would grow up without love.'

Four women share their experiences on the pride, courage and sense of responsibility that come with being an African woman, wife and mother

Words Thami Ngubeni

Photographs

Pippa Hetherington

They are the custodians of Africa's cultural heritage and this continent's hope for the future. But for the 'daughters of Africa', as Madiba has called them, every day can be an uphill battle. Through video documentaries and photographs, The Daughters of Africa Project strives to bring some of these everyday heroines into focus so we might better understand where we come from and where we are headed. For more information about the project, call (021) 789-2858. →

Daughters of Africa

Noseti Makhubalo

Do you think there's a difference between African women and women from other nations?

'Oh, definitely! First of all, our cultures are different, so the rules regarding women will differ. As a Xhosa woman, for example, I'm not allowed to go to emhlanti, which is the place of the ancestors. It's a respected place and only men can go there. Also, married women in some societies can wear pants, but for me that would be a disgrace. I always have to wear a skirt or a towel around my waist and my head must be covered at all times.'

Do you find all these rules inhibiting?

'If anything, they give me freedom! Other men need to look at me and know that I am a married woman, that they must leave me alone! Also, we married women love being distinguished from the young girls; it gives us dignity.'

What are your views on marriage?

'Marriage is about partnership. I've been married for 17 years now and I've realised that even though we women are stronger than men, we still need them. Being in a trusting relationship can bring

so much joy. Marriage also brings stability and a sense of rest. You don't have to worry about sharing your man with another woman. You have someone who has chosen *you* to walk through this life with. And that is a very special feeling.'

You have chosen to be a mother six times over. Why?

'Actually, I chose it five times. The last time I got a double whammy! That's when I decided enough was enough. Now I have half a dozen breakfasts, lunches and dinners to prepare. My husband is the seventh one because he needs just as much attention. Maybe he is the boy I've always wanted. Each time we tried we kept on thinking "just one more time", but we kept on having girls... The twins are five now.'

Why the desire for boys?

'I looked forward to being one of those mothers celebrating the return of their boys from circumcision school. It's a proud moment that every Xhosa mother looks forward to, but I've made peace with that now. I've given away so many presents, and now that my tubes are tied, there go my chances of getting a single present back.'

'Other men need to look at me and know that I am a married woman, that they must leave me alone!'



Queenie Msizi

What is it like for you to be a woman?

'Phew. I feel like I have gone through so much as a woman in the last 33 years of my life. I've been married; I've buried my husband, my mother, my sister; and now I'm taking care of my sister's son, Nkululeko. He is the one thing that brings me the most joy, but he's HIV-positive and the pain that he goes through when he falls ill is unbearable. He often breaks out with sores all over his body and his skin has now changed. It's wrinkled. The kids at school tease him and call him "Grandpa".'

Do you have any kids of your own?

'No. I wouldn't know how to provide for another child. I don't get a grant for Nkululeko because he's not my own child and the money I make has to support my sister and her little baby too. We also have rent to pay, food, and school responsibilities to take care of.'

How are you coping with being a young widow?

'My husband died last year; we had been together for 10 years. The doctors say it was double pneumonia; he was a very heavy drinker. He used to get himself into debt all the time and I ended up having to go to his creditors and ask them not to lend him money any more. But I loved my husband. He had his weaknesses, but he was a good man. My husband and I didn't do things the traditional way and that has caused many problems.'

What are your dreams as a young woman?

'I wish to see Nkululeko grow and live a healthy, successful life. I also want to improve my life. I love sewing and I'm great at replicating clothing designs, but if I had to dream beyond my wildest dreams, I'd like to be a broadcaster. Perhaps reading news. All these challenges can only make me a stronger person.'

Nonzi Mei

What does being a mother mean to you?

'Motherhood involves many things, including being dedicated. You have to be understanding, and sometimes you've got to be firm. Sometimes you have to be compromising, but most of all, I think, you must love.'

What do you think is different about growing up as a woman in a rural area?

'Having grown up in a rural area, I was made aware of my gender at a very early age. There were lots of rules on what we could and couldn't do as girls, and when we became women. From the way we walked, to the way we sat and ran our homes. We grew up quickly; our mothers needed our help in and around the house.'

'There were five kids in my family; I was the eldest and my mother relied on me most of the time to manage the running of the house. My father worked in Cape Town and would send money home. My mother always made a point of putting a little of the money aside for when he came home to visit, so she could buy a cow or a sheep... to prove to him that she was responsible.'

'I also knew she wanted to show her children what responsibility meant. If you are a woman, you must be responsible for your daily life... you must be prepared to take and to give. Sometimes you have to endure challenges, like when your children make bad decisions... But what can you do? Throw them away? You are the first and the last to decide how to guide them.'

Mrs Mei's message to other mothers:

'My message to other mothers and women of Africa is to face up to the challenges that they are met with. They must not run away from the problem. [They should] find the strength in themselves, know it is there – we all definitely have the strength within.'