

Finding, keeping and losing fathers: Reproductive networking in rural Namibia

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Short abstract

This paper explores some of the hidden dimensions that shape reproduction in many parts of Southern Africa in light of substantial declines in marriage rates and noticeable increases in the number of children being born out-of-wedlock.

Long abstract

Recent demographic and anthropological research has shown a significant increase in both the number of never married people and the age at first marriage in many parts of Southern Africa. Weddings are no longer a seemingly universal ritual experienced by almost all adults in a society. Fertility rates have declined at a much slower pace and reproduction is now largely disentangled from marriage. Thus, the paper asks which hidden dimensions shape reproduction if marriage does not. My interpretations are based on ethnographic census data, archival data on men being sued for child maintenance, and detailed reproductive life histories collected during anthropological fieldwork in rural Fransfontein in Northwest Namibia since 2003. Today only 30 percent of the population 15 years and older is (or has been) married in Fransfontein. An in-depth look at reproductive histories reveals that many unmarried women have a significantly higher number of reproductive partners than married women. While married women have on average children with one or two different partners, unmarried women may have up to five or six reproductive partners. Many unmarried women manage to survive as a result of the social networks they were able to build through joint parenthood with the different fathers of their children, a practice Jane Guyer has conceptualized as 'polyandrous motherhood'. Finding, keeping and also losing a man through joint parenthood has become a very common experience for most unmarried Fransfontein women. The paper will discuss these reproductive dynamics and relate them to other social dimensions like generation and class.