

Pro-Choice vs Pro-Life splits Namibia

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Windhoek – An emotive Bill seeking to legalise abortion, tabled by the Deputy Health Minister Ester Muinjangué in Parliament, has split Namibian society as the pro-choice and pro-life debate takes centre stage in the Southern African country. Muinjangué described the right to choose whether or not to carry a pregnancy through to birth (pro-choice) as the hallmark of a “progressive” nation that placed rights above religion and “morality”.

However, the anti-abortion lobby (pro-life) wants the legislature and government to uphold the 1975 Abortion and Sterilisation Act of South Africa, inherited at independence in 1990 as a Namibian statute, which places restrictions on abortion.

That law says a pregnancy can only be terminated if it poses a serious threat to maternal or foetal health, or when the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest.

In 1996, then Health Minister Nicky Iyambo tabled a Bill that also sought to legalise abortion, but his successor Libertine Amadhila withdrew it in the face of overwhelming social and parliamentary opposition.

Nearly 25 years later, Muinjangué wants the nation to reconsider its position, pointing to what she said were an alarming rate of backyard abortions that were placing Namibian women’s lives at risk.

"Maybe the time is now to be more open-minded and unpack the advantages and disadvantages of abortion and find mechanisms of creating a safer environment to accelerate reproductive health education, sex education in schools, increase pre-and post-natal counselling and psycho-social support.

"Before we take any decision as a country, let this house debate. Let us acknowledge the devastating effects of illegal backyard abortions on girls and women," she urged.

Social media is abuzz with pro-life and pro-choice petitions circulating, with the pro-choice Legalise Abortion in Namibia collecting 41,469 votes out of a targeted 50,000 while Pro-Life Namibia: Rejecting the Legalisation of Abortion in Namibia collected 13,495 against a target of 15,000 at the time of writing.

Elma Dienda from the opposition Popular Democratic Movement said abortion went against her conscience, which was contrary to her party leader, McHenry Venaani, who is pro-choice and believes religious and traditional beliefs should not interfere with women's rights.

"I fully support abortion. I think it is time that this country must rise above the history of the religion and tradition. Women must have rights in this country. If women believe that they want to do it, voluntarily, there is no reason why they should go behind and find a sangoma to get an abortion," said Venaani.

A group called Namibia Christian Women, led by pastor Zelda van der Colf, delivered a petition to the Gender Minister Doreen Sioka saying abortion should remain illegal.

Namibia Christian Women said more money should instead be put in orphanages and children's homes, while the government should also amend its adoption policy to streamline the process and make it easier for children to find homes.

The group is also lobbying for establishment of pregnancy, "Baby Drop" and adoption centres in the country's 14 regions.

Gender Minister Sioka said the decision on whether or not to legalise abortion ultimately rested with the people of Namibia, adding that more would be done to mainstream sex education.

"All I am saying is that we should go to the rural areas, we cannot be making this decision in Windhoek; Windhoek is not Namibia, let us go to the people. I am not going to kill the motion myself but let us go to the people and hear what they want. Let us inform our young girls to take responsibility," she said.

The Legal Assistance Centre this week issued a statement expressing support for law reform which would expand freedom of choice in respect of abortion within the context of women's reproductive rights.

LAC director Toni Hancox said he believed such decisions were matters of personal conscience and could not be regulated by the state, more so in what he called the absence of scientific or a human rights-based consensus on the issue.

"Purely religious views cannot be imposed on the public in a secular state like Namibia. We advocate that the increased scope to decide on whether or not to have abortion should be coupled with improved access to family planning measures for girls and women of all ages," she said.

A First Lady's Counsel

Presidential youth advisor Daisy Mathias used microblogging site Twitter to say Namibia was contending with a in the number of children born out of wedlock, fatherlessness and single parenthood.

"We must reflect on the normalised culture of casual sex, access to info and contraceptives and ultimately personal responsibility, choice and consequence. Termination does not address the cause," she tweeted.

But First Lady Monica Geingos emphasised that the debate should be driven by scientific arguments and an evidence-based approach.

"It has never been about children born out of wedlock, fatherlessness or single parenthood. This is why this discussion needs evidence-based arguments," she tweeted.

In March 2017, then Health Minister Bernhard Haufiku said more than 7,100 women had been treated at public health facilities in one year for complications arising from suspected illegal abortions.

In 2019, a UN World Health Organisation factsheet warned that the risk of dying from an unsafe abortion was highest in Africa and Latin America.

WHO reported 520 deaths per 100,000 unsafe abortions Africa south of the Sahara, adding that mortality from unsafe abortions disproportionately affected women in Africa than women in any other part of the world.

Africa, WHO said, accounted for 29 percent of all unsafe abortions and 62 percent of unsafe abortion-related deaths.