

Chapter 11

The Experience of Women Amakhosi in KwaZulu-Natal: The Conundrum of Gender, Patriarchy, and Struggle for Existence in a Beleaguered Institution

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Introduction

The inclusion of women as *amakhosi* in the traditional leadership fraternity seems forced and done begrudgingly, leading to women *amakhosi* existing in a state of included but-marginalised, and becoming statistical window dressers, whose voices are muted and who have power only in name. The consequence of this is severe and not only for women *amakhosi* as it has implications for the development of society. While traditional leaders generally face the challenge of limited access to resources and funding, this is worse for women *amakhosi*. They have limited political and social influence to acquire the resources needed for the development of their communities. As women, they lack the ability to address gender-specific issues in their communities. During interviews conducted in a study on their experiences in KwaZulu-Natal, women *amakhosi* expressed a desperate need for opportunities for leadership development. The fact that most of the women *amakhosi* interviewed were holding the office (*ukubambela*) for their son or brother meant that their incumbency was not substantive.

The approach of the chapter is to locating challenges faced by *amakhosi* in the history of the institution of traditional leadership; its evolution prior to the colonial onslaught, and its subsequent bastardisation during the colonial and apartheid eras, and the current attempt of the post-1994 regime to include it in governance without properly sanitising it and restoring it to its pre-colonial existence is crucial in appreciating the challenge and recommending solid proposals for amelioration. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, we can work towards inclusive and equitable institutions that value and empower women traditional leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. To address the conundrum women *amakhosi* find themselves in, some recommendations are made concerning policy reforms and legislative changes, targeted education and training programmes, mentorship and leadership development initiatives, representation and voice in decision-making processes, research, and programmes to address cultural and traditional stereotypes and biases.

The challenge faced by women traditional leaders in KwaZulu-Natal is deeply rooted in the intersection of race, gender, and patriarchy, which has led to their marginalisation and exclusion from positions of power and authority. The conundrum is shaped by several factors that include colonial legacy, patriarchal norms, gender roles, racial inequality, and anti-women sentiments. The colonial era imposed a patriarchal system that disenfranchised women from traditional leadership positions, replacing them with male-dominated systems (Maharaj, 2017). The apartheid system cemented this male domination to a point that during the transition, there was no single woman *inkosi* in KwaZulu-Natal, where traditional leadership structures are often based on patriarchal norms that prioritise male succession and decision-making (Mkhize, 2018). Women are often expected to fulfil traditional gender roles, such as childcare and domestic work, limiting their ability to take on leadership positions (Hassim, 2018). The legacy of apartheid has led to ongoing racial disparities in access to resources, education, and political power, further marginalising women traditional leaders (Terreblanche, 2018). Feminist scholars point to anti-women sentiments, arguing that the exclusion of women from traditional leadership is a result of patriarchal power structures that perpetuate gender-based violence, discrimination, and marginalisation (Gouws, 2018). These sentiments provide a solid foundation for understanding the complex intersectionality of factors that contribute to the conundrum faced by women traditional leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. Locating these factors in the history of the institution of traditional leadership; is crucial in appreciating the challenge and recommending solid proposals for amelioration.

Background and Context

The institution of *ubukhosi*, colloquially known as chieftaincy, is a result of a long history of meddling from colonial and apartheid laws. The transition to a democratic dispensation informed by liberal individual rights and capitalist economic organisation unravelled the institution to a point where it is only traditional by name but does not reflect authentic African systems and traditions. For example, the 1878 Code of Native Law, institutionalised:

.... the subjection of the female sex to the male, and of children to their father or other head of their family – primogeniture (the right of succession belonging to the firstborn child, especially the feudal rule by which the whole real estate of an intestate passed to the eldest son) among males as the general rule for succession – the incapacity as a general rule, of women to own property – polygamy on the male side with its accompanying lines of demarcation according to 'houses' in parts of the polygamist's property – adoption or guardianship or other conventional or hypothetical fatherhood ...

Discussions about traditional authority (*ubukhosi*) must therefore always acknowledge the changed institution and that the influence and change is informed politically by the