



WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NAMIBIA

NAMIBIA



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Introduction.

Namibia gained its independence from South African occupation in 1990 after a 24 year liberation struggle, but in some ways Namibian women are still fighting their own liberation struggle. Male Namibian politicians have argued that feminism is a western idea and that African culture respects women as mothers, but that men are the head of the house. However, there are many forms of feminism and women in Namibia have fought for their rights in different ways over many years. The growth of women's organizations and the campaign for women's rights in Namibia are not just a reaction to immigrant ideas, but show that Namibian women have organized themselves to make demands about issues that matter to them.

The roots of Feminism

The word Feminism has been described in many different ways based on different understandings of women's identity, but with one common goal which is to improve the human rights of women and to fight for gender equality between men and women. Sex is seen as an factor that can help explain the balance of power within a society:

"In general, feminism asserts that sex is a fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization which, to date, has subordinated women to men. Thus feminism is centrally concerned with sex as an organizing principle of social life and one that is thoroughly saturated with power relations . . . This structural subordination of women has been described by feminists as patriarchy, a concept that has connotations of male-headed family, mastery and superiority." (Barker, 2008: 281)

The women's movement is often linked to the history of the struggle by women in the western world to obtain the vote. The fight for universal suffrage which in Namibia was mainly about racial equality was in early twentieth century Europe a gender issue. In 1909 the British author George Bernhard Shaw wrote:

"If I were a woman I'd simply refuse to speak to any man or do anything for a man until I'd got the vote. I'd make my husband's life a burden and everybody miserable generally. Women should have a revolution. They should shoot, kill, maim, destroy until they are given the vote " (Cohen and Mayor, 2004: 660)

Beatriz Torres Martin stated in her book *A Model of Action* that Feminism has appeared for the first time in the early 19th century. Beatriz further argued that it was the century of large, emancipator and social movements. The first movement that was started in that century was the suffrage movement when women started to organize themselves to demand the right to vote. In the United States the suffrage movement was closely related to the abolition of slavery and religious reformism of moral purity. Women not only demanded for the right to vote but also for equality and called for the genuine universality of democratic and liberal values.

The women's strategy was based on the belief that once they had gained the right to vote and had gained access to Parliaments they would be able to change laws and institutions. If women could vote and would vote together as a group they could change almost anything. The vote was also to bring together women with widely different political views as they considered that all women had suffered similar discrimination regardless of their social class. However one of the constant tensions within feminist thinking has been the argument as to whether women are mainly fighting men for equality or whether the struggle should be seen in the context of a wider economic struggle for justice and equal rights. As early as 1914 Lily Gair Wilkinson wrote in a pamphlet called *Women's Freedom*:

"Vote for women! There is a cracked and treble sound about that the call for votes can never be a call for freedom. For what is it to vote? To vote is to register assent to being ruled by one legislator or another" (she went on saying that the suffragettes) although many of them suffered bravely for their illusions, are but a travesty of true rebel women. Rebel women struggle to be free from bondage and they struggle not against the men who share their interest in life, but side by side with these men" (Rowbotham, 1975: 102.)

Wilkinson was already arguing that women's liberation was not a struggle against men, but a necessary step to men's own liberation from being restricted to expectations in life that were also based on their gender:

"In free communal life it will be found, not that women are not emancipated by becoming lawyers and doctors and whatnot, but that men are to be emancipated by

withdrawing from such abnormal occupation and the returning to home and gardens and fields as the true sphere of human life" (Rowbotham, 1975: 103)

An early example of feminism being linked to a wider range of issues was the Seneca Falls Declaration that was adopted in America in 1848. As Beatriz Torres Martin argues:

"This declaration identified and condemned the many forms of sexist, discrimination in American society which also included the deprivation of the right to vote, civil death and disenfranchisement of married women, monopoly of profitable employment, exclusion of women from certain professions, excluding of women from ministerial priesthood, different codes of morals for men and women, destruction of self-confidence and self esteem and religious and social degradation" (Martin).

The declaration also included a number of resolutions based on the principal that all women are equal to men. Therefore it demanded gender equality, equal payment and work options, the right to freedom, inheritance, property and political action, access to education and above all the end of the assumption of male superiority in all areas of society.

Whilst the first phase of the women's movement in Europe was linked to the struggle for the vote, the second phase in the 1960s and 1970s was linked to sexual freedom. In particular, the key issues were access to contraceptives to allow a woman to decide when she gave birth, an emphasis on women's sexual freedom (including some arguments that lesbian relationships were the only way to avoid patriarchy in the bedroom) and the right to abortion (a woman's right to choose). However, it was these claims to sexual liberation that were criticized by some African women who argued that these issues were not the priorities of African women.

Does Feminism Come in Black and White?

Gwendolyn Mikell argues that: 'The new African approach differs radically from the western form of feminism with which we have become familiar with'. For instance family structures in countries like United States and Britain led to a campaign for female control over reproduction and choice within human sexuality. However on the other hand Africans think of their responsibility as dual. The bearing of children in Africa is a primary responsibility and their

status as a woman depends on this. Women of Africa also believe that their responsibilities to maintain the family, village, community are also crucial.

“African Feminism owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated western feminisms. It has largely been shaped by African women’s resistance to western hegemony and its legacy within African Culture” (Mikell, 1997: 4)

Any women in Africa that fails to bear children and to be an autonomous economic contributor is regarded as not having self respect, that means the relationship between polygamy, the number of children women bear and the type of productive system and the items produced is a important one. African feminists:

“. . . hear politicians grumble that external pressure and support are forcing them to rephrase and verbally pattern their goals according to Western economic, political, and gender models, rather than on their own authentic cultural models” (Mikell, 1997: 2)

However, some African feminists believe that feminists based in the west have been patronising towards their sisters in Africa and that there is some justification to the criticism. For example, Nnaemeka argues:

“The arrogance that declares African women ‘problems’ objectifies us and undercuts the agency necessary for forging true global sisterhood. African women are not problems to be solved. Like women everywhere, African women have problems. More important, they have provided solutions to these problems. We are the only ones who can set our priorities and agenda. Anyone who wishes to participate in our struggles must do so in the context of our agenda” (quoted in Sachikonye, 2010)

Namibian Culture and the Construction of Women’s Roles

Namibia as a country is divided today into thirteen regions containing eleven main ethnic groups, so it would be too simple to talk about ‘Namibian culture’ as a single culture. Namibia is one of the countries in Southern Africa with the oldest inhabitants, the San who, traditionally, lived as hunters and gathers and frequently moved around. Bantu people who migrated from central Africa arrived in Namibia at different times. The Herero who settled in the central and north western part of the country were pastoralists with traditions and rituals

that were strongly linked to cattle. In contrast the Ovambo Kingdoms in the far north, as well as the communities living in the north-east (Kavango and Caprivi Regions today) lived mainly by cultivating crops, which were their main source of food as they were settled in very fertile lands, although they also possessed some cattle and goats and caught fish. The Namas and the Damaras were mainly farmers who lived in a pastoral economy based on smaller animals, mainly goats, and sheep, as they lived in the drier parts of the country.

The largest population group are the oshiwambo-speaking communities who are divided into seven Kingdoms, which each speaks different dialects of Oshiwambo, but who share common cultural characteristics. As I come from this ethnic group I will say a bit more about the traditional culture of the Ovambo, with particular reference to gender.

In the Owambo culture the man was always the head of the house, followed by the wife (or wives in the case of wealthier men who were polygamous) and the man put up most of the house rules, however the house chores were divided among everyone in the house. The boys were responsible for stock herding, heavy agricultural work and most crafts. Women and girls were responsible for cultivation, fishing, domestic work and some crafts like weaving traditional baskets. Each of the communities had their own leader (*Elenga*) who was responsible to set up all the rules for everyone in the community and had all the power and his household and family were more highly respected than others. These 'headmen' (they were usually, but not always, men) gave allegiance to a King (*Ohambo* or *Omukwaniilwa*) When the king died he was traditionally replaced by his sister's son – rather than his own son, as in many other cultures. So this meant that women in the royal family could have a significant influence.

Even though the Man were the head of the house the work of the women was highly acknowledged because the Wife/wives were the backbone of the house. Women had to do most of the work in the house and the whole agriculture production depended on their hard work with the help of the children. That is one of the reasons why polygamy was not a problem in the oshiwambo-speaking community as there was a belief that the more wives a man could marry the more crops could be produced to feed all the children. In customary law the husband was the owner of the wife. Even though men were allowed to marry as many

women as he could afford to support, divorce was not common. However, a woman was not restricted from separating with her husband and women were not excluded from the community if they decided to get divorced. The wife could go with her children because it was believed that the children belonged to the mother's family and not to that of the father but she would not inherit anything from the husband. However, women were not allowed to own their own land or wealth, so divorce would mean that a woman would lose her home and have to return to her parents (who might not be willing to receive her). Divorce was possible. Ilna Soiri quotes the experience told to her by one woman:

"I get married by traditional wedding, during the wedding people were killing cows and making traditional beer. First I was married by one man and we got divorce, then I was married again by the chief then I divorce again then I go to join the church and from there I went to build my own house." (Soiri, 1996: 24).

The *efundula* ceremony can be used as a good example of the way in which power relations were shown through traditional rituals. The *efundula* or *ohango yiitsali* ceremony (depending on which dialect of Oshiwambo that you speak) was a traditional wedding ceremony that all young women were meant to pass through. Any woman could take part in the ceremony, even if they were already engaged to a man. The important point of the ceremony was that a woman was not supposed to become pregnant before she had been through it. In other words it was a way for the community to give their consent and to show their agreement that a girl was old enough to become a mother.

After the ceremony a young woman could obtain a husband and they could start a family. Whilst there was not really a bride payment like 'lobola' in the Ovambo Kingdoms the man had to symbolically provide the bride's family with five traditional hoes and a cow (that was often used for a feast). It is interesting to note that any man who could not afford to provide these gifts would not be allowed to start a family, but would be allowed to marry a woman who already had one or more children. Before the twentieth century it was rare for a young woman to marry a single man. "Most married men who already had several wives and many children. In most cases these men were as old as their own fathers, but because most of them were wealthy it was easy for them to get more young wives whenever they wanted:

(Shigweda, 2000). Young girls have to learn their future roles from their elders by watching and imitating them in all the activities they do. When young girls reached puberty they acquire more skills for their potential roles through traditional rituals and customs. Young girls had to pass through the ritual ceremony to be accepted in the category of women.

Heike Becker in her paper 'rethinking sexuality in Africa' stated that Efundula used to be a very big and well respected ceremony and all parents who had girls that had reached the age of marriage would start with all the preparations beforehand and take their children to get married. The main reason behind the efundula was to avoid young girls from getting pregnant before marriage. Any young women who got pregnant before undergoing the initiation of efundula was still considered a girl and was either burned or stoned to death and it did not only bringing great shame to your mother but to the whole entire community and its leaders in particular, as it was a widely accepted taboo for a girl to fall pregnant before her efundula. The entire community then gathered and witnessed the burning and the shouting of mean words to her and her mother. Mothers always tried to make sure that did not happen.

If then an incident like that happened, for mothers to save their beloved daughters lives, many families reportedly tried (although very few succeeded) in smuggling out pregnant girls to neighbouring communities. In those days clothes were less concealing and it was very difficult to hide a pregnancy for long. If a young girl became pregnant the elders would therefore notify her immediate parents before the pregnancy became visible to the public. When a pregnant girl was successfully smuggled out of her community to another community (e.g Ongandjera or Ombalantu) where such practices were not happening she would then become free and no harm would be done on her by anybody.

The only other way to save the lives of the young girls who falls pregnant before efundula was to turn to a form of abortion, according to the oral history. One of the interviews I had was with an old lady in owamboland who told me that in the past there were several ways to get rid of the pregnancy, one included chewing the seeds of a shrub called olumono a well known plant, but it is said to be very poisonous and one could die if you exceeded the amount that you had to chew. Another form of abortion was carried out by taking a sharp stick and trying to pop the uterus open for the blood to come out which left the girl with a high risk of getting an infection or even cancer. The most commonly used method to abort babies involved

smashing or deep massaging of the foetus inside the mother's womb by using fists or a knee. The process was therefore said to be very painful and could also be life-threatening to the mother.

I researched the subject further in a discussion with a retired teacher from the Roman Catholic School at Dobra in Windhoek. He said he had lived near a village where the practice of burning young girls who had fallen pregnant took place. It was under a tree called (Omwandi gwaasimbakadhona) which simply means "a tree of girls who falls pregnant before marriage". The tree was in a pond which grew so much grass every year and where there were also some palm tree shrubs and the leaves of these young trees were used to tie the girl up. This place is in Otshiku tsyomotutu (now called Etayi Constituency) in Oukwambi, and it was near the boundary between the Oukwambi and Oukwanyama kingdoms. He further said sometimes a girl got lucky when people just came to tie her up and set her on fire, but then left her alone to die, and the palm leaves sometimes got loose and she would then get a chance to escape into the kwanyama kingdom and no one would hurt her again. (Agapitus)

Men who impregnated a girl were always left to go free because he remained the same and did not bear children so with that advantage he would always be looked at as a free man. After passing through the ceremony a young woman could now give birth even if she was not taken yet or having a husband. Some of the attributes of efundula were the attire and an adult woman's hairstyle. The efundula ceremonies were thus a cornerstone of legitimizing female sexuality and reproduction.

Even though the dates of commencement of this ceremony were decided by the king, the rites were directed by the ritual leader who was always a man; his assistant was usually a woman who was the master of ceremony. The ritual leaders were invariably old men who were circumcised and because in the 20th century many of them were from Angola as initiation leaders were from those areas where circumcision was still being practiced and the practice had already died out in the Ovambo kingdoms by 1900. In the cases where there was no circumcised man a woman could also direct efundula if she was a daughter of a man that was circumcised. That meant that the position of omupitifi who was also a traditional healer

(Onganga) has been passed on for generations from either a father or a mother to their son or daughter.

The study showed that tradition had started changing even before the church came into Namibia because even in the early 20th century (before effective colonial control had been established over the Ovambo kingdoms) it was not so easy to find circumcised men to perform the efundula rituals in the Oukwanyama kingdom. Today it is rare to find young men circumcised at all because of the tradition that started dying out and because of the church's intervention.

Becker further argued that if that was the case then the power of a woman were still not recognized and most of these practices were based on masculinity as it was more in favour of men, especially older men.

The Impact of Christianity and Colonialism.

Christianity brought a lot of changes in Namibia especially in our cultures. The first aspect of the social influence of the early mission was on family life, marriage and the position of women. The preaching of gospel brought changes in the position of women in traditional society when they emphasized that the good news of the gospel was also meant for women and that marriage was meant for one man and women only.

Secondly, women got opportunities to attend school and received exactly the same standard of education as men. Women were trained and could work independently in professions as nurses and teachers and they could also play important official roles in churches especially in Ovamboland. Women could read, write, do needle work and obtain household skills. However the mission schools also provided a gendered curriculum. Whilst literacy empowered women as it gave them the potential to access different forms of knowledge, the mission schools also tended to teach girls the skills that they would need to become domestic workers.

Did the Liberation Struggle Liberate Namibian Women?

Just like any other African countries women have played an important role in anti-colonial struggles in Namibia. Mary Nash in her book, stated that Women activists in Namibia

participated in the armed struggle for national liberation within the SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation) and paved their way to the introduction of gender equality in the Namibian constitution.

The women's movement in Namibia started around the 1950's in Windhoek when many women managed to move and settle in the city, but found limited job opportunities. Many of them were working as domestic servants, but others made their own jobs by brewing beer. They settled in the Old Location where there was a mixture of different ethnic groups, with dynamic economic interaction with the whites. During the 1950's South Africa controlled the Municipality of Windhoek and they wanted to demolish the Old Location and build a new township on the outskirts of Windhoek.

Ilna Soiri in her book 'The radical motherhood' stated that the overall plan to demolish the old location was to impose more strict segregation on the different ethnic and racial groups and to forbid the brewing of traditional beer which was the most important source of income to most women and was the only way they could send their children to get education - mainly at the Christian schools. The ban on brewing traditional beer was simply to restrict the economic activities of women.

Soiri further argued that it was then that the women started to organise themselves and tried to negotiate with the authorities but because of the lack of true representation the authorities refused to listen to their arguments and continued with their plan to destroy the houses and people were deported to new areas. A group of women protested on 4th December, 1959 about the valuing of houses as the first stage of the plan to remove them and four women and one man were arrested (Jafta et al., 1999: 29)

A second organized women's protest then took place on the 8th December in the same year when women boycotted the Beer Hall run by the Municipality and organized a protest march which some sources claim involved 1,000 women to demand the release of the women and protest against the community's removal from the Old Location by the municipality. A couple of days later police opened fire on a crowd and the 10th of December today is celebrated as Namibia's Women's Day each year. The shooting killed 13 people (including one woman,

Kakulukaze Mungunda). The old location incident was a turning point in the resistance movement and the starting point for women to become leaders in the organized resistance against the South African occupation of Namibia.

The first reported women to go to exile left in 1963. Even though it was very difficult for women to go to exile because of their family and social responsibilities as well as the fact that traditionally fighting was regarded as a male activity, however many women forced their way through. A big number of women went in the 1970's.

"I went abroad into Angola at that time there was a war of bangas it was in 1963 from there we went to Zaire. I was with my boyfriend we left together. While we were in Zaire we met with the President (Nujoma) in Zaire in 1964 the president organized somebody to present our case when our passport were organized we were authorized to board a plane to Tanzania we were told to go military training it was a SWAPO training camp" (Soiri, 1996: 62)

One of the woman fighters said that she was treated equally to the men because they were only a few and she was allowed to train military alongside men in Tanzania:

I left the country because of colonial oppression I decided on my own to go there were not many women at the time I was treated very well, because many man when the saw that I was the only women among them, they treated me very well in Tanzania there was no other Namibia women there were only two woman, but they were not on the side of military they were more sort of students. (Soiri 1996: 62)

SWAPO penetrated into the Northern part of Namibia and many women started to understand the aims and visions of SWAPO even though they were afraid and terrified by the situation the hatred of the colonial regime was so strong that they overcame their fear and the consequences that came with it.

"You know I use to tell people that maybe I was in my blood there is an injection of politics because when I was a young girl I had high interest politics at fifteen I started to join SWAPO rallies and I became a member of SWAPO youth league. My parents were so worried about me my father used to say.. my goodness.. my daughter is just behaving like a man, I really did but I think what make me to join is my father before I

was born my father was already a migrant worker I said to my father that one day when I get married my husband is not going to work as a migrant labour that really made me join the liberation struggle at the early age because I didn't want my children to grow like I did" Soiri : 69

Women not only cooked for men, clothed, sheltered and gave moral support but they took up the initiatives themselves. Inside the camps women had to feed the children and to treat all the injured soldiers and care for them. Women were behind all the logistics in camps, attended meetings and conferences, making solidarity campaigns at the international level with the aim of mobilizing the international community for political materials and for moral support.

Liberation struggle does not only mean fighting with a gun. Women inside Namibia suffered on a daily basis, especially those who were near the war zones. Women and children were raped and suffered intimidation, arrests, tortured, beaten and cold blooded murder. They were punished even more for the fact that they were mothers to the so-called PLAN fighters (terrorists) and for giving them food, shelter and protection. SWAPO's journal 'The Combatant' claimed that women had to bury their children when they were deliberately poisoned by the South African soldiers with sweets and biscuits and that children were also blown up by explosive toys, like coca cola cans that were left scattered around purposely and blew up on them.

Women and children inside Namibia suffered a lot during the liberation struggle because they made up half of the population in Owamboland at the time and they were left alone at home as many men left for exile and some of them were employed in urban areas and were working as migrant contract labourers. Women and children were left in severe poverty, not because they did not cultivate their crops each year but because South Africans soldiers ran over their crops with their Caspirs and destroyed their houses when they believed women were not telling the truth on the whereabouts of 'the terrorists'. As in most war zones the military conflict was linked to an increase in sexual violence. The Legal Assistance Centre stated that in 1988 the Oshakati State Hospital in northern Namibia treated an average of ten rape cases a month that were alleged to have been committed by members of the armed forces (Herbstein and Evenson, 1989:105)

Women also took steps to support boycotts and sustained their children's protests for the South African military bases to be removed from near the schools, churches and public places. The soldiers did that with the aim of protecting themselves from being attacked by the PLAN fighters and also to seek revenge through children when that happened.

"In October 1987 seven south African soldiers from oshigambo base raided the home of Mr. Philipus David, and raped his two daughters, Cecilia and Tuleingepo, in the presents of the rest of the family. His wife Maria and sons Jeconia and Joel were badly assaulted" (SWAPO Women's League, 1988: 6)

Some of those cases were heavy enough for any mother to experience but even though that happened I believe it made them even stronger to fight back with everything they had.

The SWAPO Womens Council was launched in exile, but whilst women were mobilized the first goal was always the nationalist goal of winning independence for Namibia. Shortly before independence the SWAPO Women's League argued in their newsletter the importance of voting:

"Women in Namibia, make up more than half the population of the country, and as such we will be the decisive factor in determining the future government of Namibia when elections are held . . . No patriotic Namibian woman would want to retain the Boer colonialists in power by voting for its local puppets" (SWAPO Women's Council, 1988: 4)

However it seems that the campaign to get women to vote for the party was not linked to pushing a list of issues as the 'price' for obtaining women's votes. The language of SWAPO in exile was mainly influenced by the Marxist support it obtained from the Soviet Union and Cuba. For example, SWAPO's political programme published in 1976 clearly stated the party's commitment:

"To combat all manifestations and tendencies of tribalism, regionalism, ethnic orientation and racial discrimination" (SWAPO, 1976: 6)

It is interesting to note that there is no mention of combating sexism or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Namibian's women organisations

Sister Namibia

There are several women's organisations in Namibia that were born from 1989 until today. Sister Namibia is the only feminist organisation in Namibia that works directly with women's issues. Sister Namibia is based in Windhoek. Sister Namibia envisions a society that recognizes, protects and celebrates the full personhood of all women and girls including the respect for their dignity, diversity, sexual choices and bodily integrity.

The aim of Sister Namibia is to inspire and equip women to make free choices and act as agents of change in their relationships, their communities and themselves. Sister Namibia works for transformation through education, information collective action and celebrations. The activities of Sister Namibia include publishing a monthly sister Namibia Magazine, presenting a radio talk show on one of our local radio which is also one of the youth and community friendly radio station Base FM. They have also campaigned on women's sexual reproductive health and rights. Sister magazine also use peer to educate other peers like in schools where they are given materials to work with and given questions that they can debate about, especially on issues that are affecting them on the ground.

Sister Namibia also focuses on women in domestic work and agriculture, the right to own land in Namibia as a women is still a battle even after twenty one years of independence. Sister Namibia also works on profiling women who had fought in the liberation struggle of Namibia both outside and inside the country and reclaiming their history. The organisation is fighting for law reform and change of policies and the revising of our constitution to strengthen the protection and the recognition of women in Namibia. This magazine reaches almost every corner of Namibia and many young people use it as a tool to speak out.

"Since my story was published in Sister Namibia, I have been able to confront my past. Although my family was unhappy about what I revealed, I am happy because I have shared my story, my truth. Reader in Rundu (September :9 2009)"

It's such a nice magazine

Namibia's Women's Health Network (NWHN)

Namibia women's health network is a woman's organization that was born in 2008 by women living with HIV who are also members of ICW southern Africa. This organization mainly works with HIV support groups in all thirteen regions of Namibia. Their aim is to educate, provide information, skills and capacity building and to improve the health of Namibian woman, encourage them to know more about their reproductive health rights and how to live a normal life regardless of their HIV status. NWHN is also the organization that is behind the campaign to end forced sterilization of HIV+ women a practice that has been done in some of the state hospitals around the country where a number of women's reproductive rights were taken away by doctors without their knowledge or their consent.

It all started during one of the women's gatherings in Windhoek when one of the women asked the group for advice and brought up the issue that she was sterilized without her consent. It is then when more women came out with the same story and complaint. Further research was done by the NWHN with the help of the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) the organization that is legally representing the women in court at the moment as the case is still being investigated in the High Court of Namibia.

Furthermore NWHN also works with the youth of Namibia, both man and female, and assists them with small grants to enable them to finish their studies or to become entrepreneurs. The grants mostly help young people that have dropped out of school because of financial constraints or after losing their parents due to HIV/Aids, vulnerable children and so on.

NWHN also took up the issue of illegal abortion among young people of Namibia and the dangers that come with it. They have been interviewing young people about their experience of abortion and all the forms/ways that young people are using to illegally terminate their pregnancies if they cannot afford to go to South Africa where abortion is legal at the moment. NWHN with the help of other organizations in Namibia recently published a book on abortion that also includes the testimonials of young women about their experience of abortion either themselves or those of a friend.

Jennifer Gatsi Mallet the coordinator of NWHN stated that even though abortion is legally permitted by the 1975 abortion and sterilization act in case when the pregnancy is a result of rape and incest, danger to a woman's physical and mental health, a threat to the woman's life or in the case of foetal malformation that could result in a seriously handicapped child. Many women still do not know about it and have very little information especially at the grassroots level. Many incidents happen in the rural area where there are also many reported cases of rape not only by boyfriends and strangers but sometimes also by a girl's own father and uncle or even brother.

Women solidarity

Namibia Women Solidarity was launched in June 2005 (*Sister Namibia Magazine : 9 2005*). It is a women's organization that mostly works with abused women and girls in Namibia. Namibia's Women Solidarity founded by Rosa Namises in the 1990's works with many women that have been abused by their husbands and boyfriends and they give not only shelter but personal counseling, training and empower women of Namibia to become leaders and to educate others. Their projects seek to give assistance to women in breaking the chain of violence through education, support, data collection, publicity, outreach work and community collaborations that are necessary to make a difference in someone's life and above all giving comfort to those who have been personally affected such as bereaved mothers as well as supporting survivors of domestic violence and rape. (*Chilombo Mwendela sister Namibia magazine Vol 17 :9 2005*)

Rosa Namises is one of the most active feminists in Namibia and her work has touched almost every corner of Namibia. Her work started long before independence and she was also a member of SWAPO. Women's Solidarity has done a number of regional workshops and campaigns to end violence against women as well as to end gender-based violence among the Namibian youth. Their work includes 16 days of activism where the Women's Solidarity have organized tours around the country spreading awareness and women give their testimonies on what has happened to them, to their children, family members and neighbours in schools, churches, community centres, drinking places (shebeens) and so on.

Namibia Planned Parenthood Association (NAPPA)

“Advocating changing lives”

NAPPA was established in 1996 and their aim is to assist people to safeguard their sexual reproductive health. They offer their services by advocating, training, and through educational programs which are mostly targeting young people in schools and the drop outs on issues based on a human rights perspective. The overall goal of NAPPA is to educate people about family planning.

NAPPA is the organisation that is doing the major distribution of condoms in the country especially to sex workers that do not have confidence to buy or pick up condoms from public places like health centres and shebeens because of the way the community acts towards them as they are discriminated against. They are also strong on distributing condoms among truck drivers who are always traveling in and out of the country who are also reported to have the tendency of picking up young girls on the move. The work of NAPPA also includes talking to parents and training them on how to speak to their children about sexual intercourse and to be open to children when they ask questions of that kind. They teach and do a lot of condom demonstration especially in schools to teach the younger ones on how to use a condom correctly and also to encourage them to try and abstain from sexual related activities until they are done with their education.

NAPPA has also worked with other organisations to advocate on issues like HIV/Aids, gender based violence, and the abolition of the restriction of abortion law. Nappa has distributed a lot of leaflets that emphasises the danger of alcohol when it comes to the spreading of HIV/Aids especially among young people. They further argued that the use of alcohol and drugs increases the chances of engaging in risky sexual behavior as these substances make it harder for someone to think clearly and make responsible and informed decisions. NAPPA said many reported cases of sexual and gender based violence occurred when people were under the influence of alcohol or drugs (*NAPPA leaflets*)

Women’s Action for development (WAD)

Women’s Action for Development is a Namibian-based self-help organisation that is working towards the upliftment of socio-economic and socio-political conditions as well as the advancement of women in rural areas and by political lobbying in Namibia at regional, national



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and local levels of government. WAD has assisted women to acquire skills in among others things, computer literacy, office administration, tailoring and catering as well as to train them to lobby for social change. WAD was established in the year 1994 and works in all thirteen regions of Namibia. Other WAD field activities include giving training in health, hygiene birth control, HIV/AIDS prevention, and nutrition.

During the past few years WAD have been working on empowering and equipping women with the necessary tools to enable them to acquire self-confidence and pride in being a woman and to get their dignity back (that has been lost because of harmful cultural practices and that has deprived them their development). Due to the success of WAD's activities men in rural areas increasingly began to feel threatened by the strengthening of women's economic and social rights. The suspicious reaction of men sometimes led to them preventing their women not to attend activities by WAD.

WAD claims that apart from poverty and the high unemployment among women in Namibia women also lack self-confidence and skills and information especially at the grassroots level. This problem has let women down and made it difficult to get out of their shells and achieve their goals. Women in Namibia are in deep and severe poverty and highly dependent on men, most of them are still trapped by their cultural beliefs and up to now they find themselves spending most of their time in the bush looking for firewood to prepare meals for their husbands, fetching water for them and spending hours working in the fields. Even when women put in effort to make sure that the field is well tilled and producing enough crops to feed every one, at the end of the day when the husband dies she will be chased away from that land. (Ruppel, 1998)

OutRight Namibia

Outright Namibia is the only organization that represents and fights for the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community in Namibia. The organization was born in March 2010 by Namibian LGBTI, MSM and WSW activists. OutRight Namibia provides leadership development, education on issues of human rights, health and legal reform. LGBTI is one of the communities in Namibia facing a lot of such as human rights

violations including homophobia and the lack of access to public places such as clinics and churches. They also find it very difficult to find employment due to their sexual orientation.

Linda Bauman of OutRight Namibia stated that it is often very difficult for anyone from the LGBTI community to report any human rights violations because of the high levels of discrimination against them in Namibian communities, especially in rural areas where it is regarded not just as a taboo but also as a disgrace to the entire family. In most cases people suffer in silence as they no longer have the confidence to speak out in case somebody abuses them.

In an interview with one of the employees at OutRight Namibia they told me that they are only human and they get sick from time to time but because of the manner and the mentality of the people in the public health centre it is very difficult for them to access medical help and they often have to buy simple medication over the counters instead of going to clinics. HIV infection is one of the major challenges within this community as some of them have stopped taking their ARV's treatment due to the discrimination they face at clinics and because of their discomfort and low self esteem. Confidentiality is also a major concern for this community as since it is common for health workers to divulge confidential information.

Campaigns on women's issues since 1990.

Since Namibia gained its independence from South Africa in 1990, the Namibian women's movement have gained some momentum.

Political Representation.

The Constitution of Namibia was created and for the first time women were provided with the right to vote in a 'free and fair' election as well as to run for office. Having in mind the country's discriminatory past the Namibia government have enacted affirmative action policies such as the Local Authorities Act of 1992. The Act of 1992 requires each political party to include at least two women on its list of candidates for each local election. This policy helped women to get 37% of local council seats in the 1992 elections (Becker, 2010: 171)

The women of Namibia have campaigned on several issues that are of concern to their daily lives and also that set the target of achieving their developmental goals.

Married Persons Equality Act

One of the main demands of the post-independence Namibian women's movement was the Married Persons Equality Act. This was signed by President Sam Nujoma in 1996, and then became Act No 1 of 1996. This equality bill did away with the automatic marital power of men and his position as the 'head of the house'.

The Married Persons Equality Act has caused a lot of debate and long controversial discussions in Namibia politics and society. The opponents (who were all men) employed their construction of 'African tradition' and the bible to support their cause stating that women could never be equal to men. However the first Namibian President, Sam Nujoma, threw his personal weight behind the contested reform and so, whether they liked it or not, all SWAPO parliamentarians were compelled to vote in favor of the new law which then finally passed in the National Assembly. People who opposed the bill argued that it would intervene with 'God-given' gender relations which built on the 'traditional' African anxiety about the role of women in society (Becker, 2010: 171)

Marriage as a legal institution has serious implications for women's rights in Namibia as they experience problems pertaining to marriage regimes and the dissolution of marriage. In Namibia marriages are either in community of property where the two couples have equal shares of any property or out of community of property when both partners keep their own individual property rights. However, the problem is that women in the rural areas of

Owamboland believe that they are only allowed to marry out of community of property (Namiseb, 208 :111)

National Gender Policy

The NGP, which was approved in 1997 and adopted by parliament in 1999, examines the origins of gender disparities in Namibia, outlines a framework for addressing the needs of women, identifies actions to be taken to increase women's access to resources, and ensures women's greater participation in power-sharing and decision-making. The NGP identifies ten key areas of concern, the improvement of which are considered national gender priorities. It also serves as a tool for ending gender inequalities and discriminatory practices based on gender, while focusing primarily on women due to their previously disadvantaged positions.

The ten priority areas of concern are:

- Gender poverty and rural development;
- Gender balance in education and training;
- Gender and reproductive health;
- Violence against women and children;
- Gender and economic empowerment;
- Gender balance in power and decision-making;
- Information, education and communications;
- Gender and the management of the environment;
- Gender and legal affairs; and
- Equality for the girl child.

The NGP specifically identifies strategies to address each of these key areas of concern. In addition, the NGP has a list of priorities for law reform, the achievement of which has all but been realized in the years subsequent to the publication of the NGP. Regular evaluations of the impact of the policy are conducted. See, for example, The Republic of Namibia's *Country Report* published by the National Planning Commission in January 2002.

Combating Rape and Domestic Violence

Dianne Hubbard, a lawyer at the Legal Assistance Centre, who specializes on the issue of gender violence has argued that Namibia's Combating of Rape Act (No. 8 of 2000) is ". . . one of the most progressive pieces of rape legislation in the world". She argues that the Act ". . . moves the focus away from the `consent' of the rape victim to the force or coercion used by the perpetrator' and includes a provision to recognize `marital rape'. Namibia has also passed the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (No. of 2003) which makes it easier for victims to obtain `protection orders' as an alternative to laying a charge against an attacker (Hubbard, 2007: 210-211).

Gender Equality

It is a fact that women in Namibia will never be able to gain gender equality in the social, economic and legal sphere of Namibian society without greater participation in power sharing and in decision-making structures. The struggle for gender equality in Namibia is not only played out at the social level and legal level but also in the political arena. In pre-colonial Namibia discussion about alternative political systems (to traditional authorities) and the

sharing of power seems to have been absent (or suppressed) and, today, the majority of people who live in the post-colonial period of post-apartheid reconstruction are poor people living in rural communities. Their voices were silenced under the colonial rule and apartheid and they remain silent in the independent Namibia, even when the use of their right to speak holds the key to shaping and influencing national development that will directly affect their lives.

The Founding Father of the Republic of Namibia, Dr Sam Nujoma, once said when he expressed his commitment to gender equality that the Government of Namibia was committed to the principle of gender integration and the implementation of activities aimed at achieving gender equality. But despite the support of the President there were still a lot of negative attitudes towards gender equality at both the communal and the national level and these continue to present a serious challenge to the implementation of gender policies and programmes. Laws exist on paper, but it requires the active support of the people charged with implementing

them if they are to have the intended impact. Despite the standard-setting international, regional and domestic legal instruments that Namibia had adopted, the position of women in Namibian society remains a challenge.

Most men in Namibia are not happy about the idea of educating and empowering women, therefore there is a high level of resistance from men when it comes to the issue of gender equality, making it one of the challenges women of Namibia has to face. Furthermore men do not like the idea of women's right even when they know that it is a fact that they have to live with. They blame the women's right movement on causing problems in Namibian society. Men feel threatened by gender equality because of the fact that they see it as a threat to their social and economic position.

It is clear that men in Namibia do not seem to understand the concept of 'women's rights' and often believe that women's rights are the right to take care of the house and family, while men's rights are to protect the family, be the primary income earner and to make decisions for the household. This view, which is widespread in Namibia, seems to be at variance with those found in the western concept of women's rights. In addition, some men think that a gain in

women's rights means a corresponding loss in men's rights, while others blame women's rights for the mistrust that exists between women and men.

Namibia's Commitment to International Conventions on Womens' Rights

Apart from the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, which exhorts the concept of gender equality, the government has assented to several international agreements for the promotion of gender equality such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Parliament approved 23 November 1992.

Article 15 of the CEDAW has confirmed women's equality with men before the law and requires state parties to guarantee women's equality with men in areas of civil law, where women have been traditionally discriminated against. Namibia's second and third CEDAW country report indicated that there are still many rural women in Namibia who are severely

disadvantaged in term of access to land, labour, agriculture services and assets, natural resources and employment.

Namibia was able to take part in the fourth world conference in Beijing, China in the year 1995. Namibia sent 56 delegations to attend the conference. In Beijing the delegates touched on issues of violence against women (which remains one of the greatest problems in Namibia even after 21 years of independence), alcohol and drug abuse (especially among young people), teenage pregnancies (which are on a increase especially in the rural areas where there is also a high rate of HIV/Aids among young women), and illiteracy and poverty among rural women. The primary goals of the delegation were to learn from other countries with similar problems and identify a platform of action for Namibia. It is mainly due to the effort and pressure created by the women's movement in Namibia that some changes have come about.

Namibia is participating in the process of achieving the United Nation Millennium Development Goal (MDG) which promotes equal rights and sets a target for Namibia to strengthen the rights of women. The constitution of Namibia guarantees the equal treatment of women, however it also states that the common laws and the customary laws that were in

force out the date of independence would remain valid until they were amended or abolished. These laws affect women especially in rural areas leaving them with very little chance of having control over properties and access to estates and small loans for starting up their small businesses. Whilst the Traditional Authorities Act makes it clear that customary law must not contradict the basic human rights enshrined in the Namibian Constitution rural communities have not used the constitution to make legal challenges against the laws and practices followed by local traditional authorities (Ruppel 2008: 28).

Namibian Feminism- An agenda for fighting for our future.

Namibian women have stated that even after 20 years of independence they still feel that they are treated as second- class citizens, with less access to resources, income, land, decision making, power and personal freedom than those of men. Therefore they have come up with their demands. The most significant major demands are:

1. Freedom form violence and discrimination

- ✓ Respect the human rights of all people including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex. Namibia is one of the countries in Africa that still needs to lean and respect people's human rights as it appears in the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia. The government does not yet fully respect the rights or adequately protect the LGBTI community and they suffer a lot of discrimination on a daily basis. For example, Government Ministers actually make homophobic statements, rather than denouncing them (for example, in 2001 the Minister of Home Affairs, Hon Jerry Ekandjo, spoke at a graduation ceremony for new police recruits and told them that they should 'eliminate' gays and lesbians – see 'Jerry in New Anti-Gay Rant', *The Namibian*, 2nd October, 2000)
- ✓ Implement the Rape Act and the Combating of Domestic Violence Act by providing intensive training to service providers including police officers and judges. In most cases police officers lack knowledge on how to handle and to document cases of rape and domestic violence making it difficult for judges to act accordingly and at the end of the day justice is never served, and rapists roam around freely.

2. Freedom from harmful cultural practices

- ✓ Set a minimum age for customary marriage as has been done for civil marriage. At times young girls are forced into marriage by their parents at a very young age when they are not even done with their education and against their will.
- ✓ Review customary laws and enact laws that protect women and girls from harmful and oppressive cultural practices and beliefs that infringe on the rights and dignity of women and children, such as sexual readiness testing/forced sex, violence during initiation practices, polygamy, child marriages, widow inheritance and widow

cleansing. These cultural practices are common in the rural areas. For example, there is a belief that a woman should first sleep with her father-in-law so that he can teach her how to behave in bed and how to satisfy her husband at all times.

3. Access to Resources and Services

- ✓ Promote employment for all, particularly young people, women and people living in rural areas. Namibia has been rated as a middle income country, as its economy is one of the best in Africa but at the same time, it is one of the countries with a high rate of unemployment among young people and a high number of street kids.
- ✓ Promote women's access to land, live stock, credit, technical and business training, and appropriate technology and guarantee women's representation on land boards. It is very difficult for women to own land in Namibia especially those living in rural areas. It would be good for women to be able to obtain land to enable them to do some cultivation and make it easier to feed their family especially those taking care of orphans and vulnerable children.

4. Freedom from HIV/AIDS

- ✓ Provide comprehensive education on human rights, women's rights, sexuality and gender in schools and in informal and adult education settings. Apart from cultural

beliefs many women in Namibia are not formally educated to a high level, it is therefore very difficult for them to see the importance of discussing sex related issues with their children. The Ministry of Education should include topics concerning sexuality in the school curriculum so that children will learn about sex education at school. By doing so they will then grow up with an improved understanding and will make better life choices.

- ✓ Provide Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) treatment to all rape survivors to prevent them from contracting HIV from infected rapists. Many women do not know about PEP

so even when someone rapes them they will have no idea and therefore do not make an effort to get help from health centres. In most cases they will end up both pregnant and HIV+. It is important for the Ministry of Health to fully educate its employees and also the police officers who handle such cases to make sure that they explain all this information to all the rape survivors at all times.

Conclusion

It is sad to see that even after 21 years of independence most women still feel they are being treated like second-class citizens. It clearly indicates that Women need to continue fighting to obtain their human rights and to make sure that they are known and respected by all. It is time for all women of Namibia to hold hands and fight with one voice. Namibia should realize that enough is enough and the time is here for women and girls to fight for what is rightfully theirs.

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