

“Moving Towards Gender Balance in Elected Positions of Government in Namibia”

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Background

It was only with the gaining of national independence from colonial occupation and South African apartheid rule 14 years ago that the majority of Namibians, both women and men, achieved legal citizenship in their own country. A constitutional democracy was established based on the rule of law and regular elections at the national, regional and local levels.

The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, adopted in 1990, includes a Bill of Rights that gives '[a]ll citizens ... the right to participate in peaceful political activity intended to influence the composition and policies of the government', as well as the right 'to participate in the conduct of public affairs, whether directly or through freely chosen representatives', and to form and join political parties, to vote and be eligible for election (Article 17).

Given the history of oppression under colonial and apartheid rule, the restoration of human dignity and the achievement of true equality are fundamental values underpinning the constitution. It recognises that, through past laws and practices, some groups in Namibia suffered special discrimination because of their sex or race, and it allows for parliament to pass affirmative action laws aimed at redressing such discrimination. Article 23 states that: 'it shall be permissible to have regard to the fact that women in Namibia have traditionally suffered special discrimination and that they need to be encouraged to play a full, equal and effective role in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the nation'.

On the basis of the above, parliament adopted an affirmative action provision in the Local Authorities Act of 1992, which stipulated that the first local authority elections were to be conducted using a party list system and that party lists had to include at least two women in respect of local authority councils with ten or fewer members, and at least three women in respect of councils with 11 or more members. This contributed to the fact that 37 percent of the local councillors elected in 1992¹ were women.

In 1997, the Local Authorities Act was amended to allow for a second round of local authority elections to take place in 1998 using the party list system instead of changing to a ward-based system as stipulated by the Act. At this time, the affirmative action measures were further strengthened, specifying that party lists had to include a minimum of three women on councils with ten or less members, and at least five women on larger councils. Both the ruling Swapo Party and the opposition Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) called on party branches to alternate male and female candidates 'zebra-style' on party lists. The total percentage of women candidates was 47. Approximately 42 percent of the Swapo Party lists followed the 'zebra' format, while 20 percent of the DTA lists complied with this principle. This resulted in an increase of women's representation in

local government up to 41 percent. Had the zebra principle been adhered to gender balance would almost have been achieved.

More women have entered office through by-elections, such that Namibia currently has 45 percent women at the local authority level, while 40 percent of mayors are women. The current president of the Association of Local Authorities in Namibia is a woman – two other female presidents preceded her.

In November 2002, the Local Authorities Act was amended again to retain the party list system for all future elections.

Parliamentary debates concerning quotas for the local authority elections were thus closely connected to debates for and against the ward system. In 1992, the Swapo Party made strong reference to the need for affirmative action provisions for women when stating its case for the party list system. This argument was repeated during debates on the amendments of the Local Authorities Act in 1997 and 2002.² In contrast, the opposition parties were staunchly united in their call for a ward-based electoral system, claiming that Swapo rejected it because it would benefit the smaller parties. They highlighted that, if the ruling party was genuine about gender equality, it would implement a 50:50 quota. Some members of parliament added that women should enter politics on their own merit and that quotas were an insult to their capabilities.

Since 1999, the women's movement has also lobbied government and political parties to retain the party list system, fearing that a ward-based system would result in women's numerical representation of over 40 percent at the local level dropping drastically to the four percent level currently experienced at the regional level, where elections take place in constituencies.

At the national level, 29 percent of parliamentarians currently in the National Assembly are women, elected through party lists. In the National Council, in which two representatives are elected from each of Namibia's 13 Regional Councils, only two (eight percent) of the 26 members are women, reflecting the small percentage of women elected at the regional level. Yet women constitute 51 percent of the population and 52 percent of the country's electorate.

As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Declaration on Gender and Development, and with its own National Gender Policy, the Namibian government has committed itself to increasing female participation at all levels of politics and decision-making. The National Gender Policy states that government shall '[s]trive, in line with Article 23 (3) of the Constitution, to establish mechanisms for attaining the goal of gender balance in government bodies and committees, public administration, judiciary and any other decision making organs',³ and refers specifically to using affirmative action to achieve gender balance in regional councils and the National Council. The National Gender Plan of Action 1998-2003 calls for gender balance at all levels of government, including in the cabinet.

The Department of Women's Affairs in the Office of the President was established in 1990 and became a fully-fledged Ministry of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare in 2000, tasked with promoting substantive gender equity by overseeing the mainstreaming of gender issues in all government departments and policies.

However, while the above policies, plans and structures provide a conducive environment for increasing the participation of women in decision-making, access to formal politics is controlled by political parties, which, apart from the newly-formed Congress of Democrats (CoD), have made little effort to promote women within their own ranks and as candidates in national and regional elections. There has been a tendency to blame women for not coming forward as candidates rather than to analyse the many barriers and constraints confronting women who enter the patriarchal sphere of party politics. The endowment of women with the same citizenship rights as men has not addressed the many obstacles preventing most women from exercising these rights, both in the formal political arena as well as in relation to informal politics.⁴ At the same time, women face a difficult choice, since the price of access to formal political power is subordination to male party hierarchies.

Quotas in Political Parties

Swapo Party

At the May 1997 party congress, Namibian President Sam Nujoma proposed that Swapo take a decision to have 50 percent female representation on all Swapo lists for municipal and regional elections. The congress elected a Central Committee with only seven women out of 58 members. However, it passed a resolution calling for women to make up 30 percent of candidates for the Central Committee at future congresses and 50 percent of candidates in future national elections.⁵

At the 1999 electoral congress, Nujoma included 16 women in the party list, utilising his prerogative to name his preferences for the first 32 party candidates for the National Assembly elections. However, his male comrades protested strongly and the final list of 72 candidates included women who were positioned towards the bottom of the list.

Leaders of the Swapo Party Women's Council (SPWC) have also publicly supported moves towards gender balance in government as well as in their party. On the eve of the fourth SPWC congress in December 2001, the SPWC Assistant Secretary for Information, Research and Programmes said in a media statement: 'The possibility of nominating a female candidate to succeed President Sam Nujoma cannot be ruled out'.⁶ Yet the congress did not discuss whether the Swapo wing wanted female candidates to occupy the top party posts, with the newly elected secretary-general stating to the media afterwards that there was still 'ample time' before the party's full congress in 2002 to deal with the issue.⁷ The congress did resolve to 'work on pro-active initiatives to bring about changes to guarantee a gender balanced representation'.⁸

However, the lack of a SPWC strategy to get more women elected democratically to party structures was evidenced at the Swapo Party Congress in August 2002. The SPWC refrained from nominating any female candidates for the top four posts after the party president made it clear that he expected delegates to support his nominations – all of whom were men. Furthermore, women delegates relied on an undemocratic attempt by the party president to appoint personally 21 women to the central committee in contravention of the party constitution, which resulted in major disruptions to the proceedings as well as media headlines. It became clear that female party members were relying on the patronage of a powerful male leader, whose interests they would have been obliged to serve had they been appointed.

Democratic Turnhalle Alliance

Discussion on internal quotas within the DTA has not led to any tangible results. Currently, 37 percent of central committee members are women.

Congress of Democrats

The CoD brought three women and four men into parliament in the 1999 National Assembly elections. Currently, 37 percent of its central committee is made up of women. It is committed to party lists with a minimum of 40 percent candidates of both genders for the forthcoming local authority elections.

The 50/50 Campaign of the Women's Movement

Over the past four years, Sister Namibia has advocated strongly for women's equal representation and greater participation in politics and decision-making, building on research that it conducted in 1998 on the political participation of women in the country's new democracy. It developed a national campaign calling for '50/50 Gender Balance' in elected positions at all three levels of government, which was carried out with broad support in three phases (as described below). Sister Namibia is currently engaged in Phase 4 of this campaign to mobilize women to participate as candidates and voters in the forthcoming local authority elections, and to lobby political parties to put forward gender balanced 'zebra-style' lists alternating male and female candidates on the lists, as well as to include women's issues in their party manifestos.

Phase 1 (1999): Development of the Namibian Women's Manifesto

After presenting the findings of its research on women's participation in politics and decision-making at a workshop in March 1999, Sister Namibia was given the mandate by female members of parliament, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from across the political spectrum to take the lead in developing collaboratively the Namibian Women's Manifesto, promoting its 'gender agenda' and calling for gender balanced 'zebra-style' candidate lists for the National Assembly elections at the end of the year. It produced and published the manifesto in seven languages and conducted a 'Training of Trainers' workshop for female leaders from regional centres and major towns in all 13 regions of Namibia, who then conducted local workshops to raise awareness of women's political and human rights and to popularize the 50/50 demand.

Some of the achievements of this first phase of the campaign are set out below.

Sister Namibia mobilized many individuals and organizations to participate in the consultation process to compile the manifesto, and thereby built broad ownership of this document. The response to the manifesto was overwhelming: participants at the workshops held all over the country took it as their own and began to use it as a tool to voice their concerns and to add concerns of their own. Through the manifesto thousands of women began to realize that they had rights as women, that they were equal to men. The manifesto thereby served as a much-needed tool in the long and arduous struggle to restore women's dignity after decades of apartheid and centuries of patriarchal rule.

Through the Namibian Women's Manifesto Campaign we contributed substantially to the building of a new regional layer of the women's movement in Namibia, and to the formation of a female constituency in elections. We began to train facilitators in regional centres and towns in matters concerning the equal participation of women in politics and decision-making. Together we learnt

and shared new skills countrywide – in regard to lobbying on women's and gender issues. We called ourselves the Namibian Women's Manifesto Network (NWMN).

However, at an evaluation workshop with women leaders in December 1999, we agreed that the campaign had begun too late to have a major impact on the political parties. Most parties had made little effort to promote women as leaders within their own ranks and to nominate them as candidates in the National Assembly elections. We therefore resolved to continue lobbying for gender balance in elected positions of government, as well as to raise awareness of women's human rights and the impact of HIV/AIDS on women. Sister Namibia was mandated to plan and implement programmes relating to these issues on behalf of the NWMN over the next three years.

Phase 2 (2000): The 50/50 Campaign: Women and Men in Government – Get the Balance Right!

Phase 2 of the Namibian Women's Manifesto Campaign focussed broadly on the issue of increasing female participation in politics and decision-making. We designed a pamphlet and two posters to popularize our demand for the equal representation of women and men in elected positions of government. We called on political parties to include 50 percent female candidates on 'zebra' party lists in all future elections, and lobbied parliament to amend the electoral laws to bring about gender balance in elected positions at all three levels of government. We held two 'National Training of Trainers' workshops for the facilitators of the NWMN from the regions, who then conducted their own workshops and lobbying activities using the campaign materials in 22 towns and villages across the country.

At the national level, we held meetings with leaders of political parties and parliamentary standing committees in order to introduce our demands. We also made sure that we received a lot of media coverage of our activities. In addition, more than 2,500 signatures were collected in a short time in a petition calling for laws to allow women to occupy 50 percent of all elected positions in government. The petition was handed to the Speaker of the National Assembly following a march on parliament by the NWMN and many supporting NGOs.

With this campaign we became part of the global campaign entitled '50/50 by 2005: Get the Balance Right!', which was launched by NGOs in New York in June 2000, parallel to the United Nations Review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Two-hundred-and-twenty groups and organizations in more than 60 countries around the world have already joined this campaign to 'get the gender balance right'.

Phase 3 (2001–02): Developing and mobilizing support for the 50/50 Bill

With Phase 3 of the campaign we strengthened our call for parliament to adopt the necessary amendments to electoral acts to provide for gender balance at all levels of government in all future elections. The NWMN commissioned Dianne Hubbard of the Legal Assistance Centre to conduct research on '50/50 Options for Namibia', which were presented and discussed at our First National Planning Meeting in June 2001. Forty town and village facilitators of the network and 30 members of NGOs attended the meeting. Following this, the facilitators conducted local workshops in 39 towns and villages in order to gauge support for the 50/50 demands. They provided positive feedback to Sister Namibia.

Having established wide agreement on the 50/50 options, Dianne Hubbard was commissioned to develop a 'layperson's draft' (called the 50/50 Bill) of the amendments of electoral acts needed to

ensure gender balance in elected positions at all three levels of government. At the same time, we developed collaboratively a pamphlet containing a simplified version of our demands, which we translated into six local languages. Members of 34 NGOs publicly documented their support for the demands contained in this pamphlet.

The 50/50 Bill was introduced to the members of the NWMN and NGOs at the Second National Planning Meeting in October 2001. The 52 network facilitators and representatives of 31 NGOs who were present enthusiastically endorsed the Bill, and agreed to mobilize support for it. Following the meeting, the pamphlet and a signature campaign were launched to attract support for our demands. Among the speakers at the launch were the Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare, Marlene Mungunda, UNAIDS Country Programme Advisor Ms Mulu nesh Tennenegashaw (representing the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)), and the Acting Mission Director of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Kirk Dahlgrin.

The network facilitators then conducted a second round (and some even a third round) of local workshops in 50 towns and villages on the contents of the pamphlet and the 50/50 Bill. They organized visits to schools, churches and local NGOs and met with government representatives and community leaders in an effort to garner support for our demand for women's equal representation at all levels of government.

During Phase 3, the network facilitators conducted a total of 105 local workshops, in which we have directly involved 3,500 people, mainly women, but also a number of men, in discussions on the importance of women's participation in politics and decision-making. These people enthusiastically supported our demands for amendments to the electoral laws to ensure gender balance at all three levels of government in all future elections. Through contact activities at the local level we brought the message of gender balance in government to 70 schools, 88 churches, nine traditional leaders, 17 regional councillors and 32 local councillors, distributed thousands of pamphlets and collected hundreds of signatures. We accessed the media to mobilize support for our initiative and to publicize and report on local events, and we held local marches to hand over the petition to many different local government representatives.

At the national level, Sister Namibia led the NGOs supporting the manifesto and the 50/50 campaign in lobbying political parties, parliamentary standing committees, line ministries and the media. Together we collected signatures, convened a march on parliament and handed a petition and the 50/50 Bill to the Speaker of the National Assembly in March 2002. This led to a fruitful meeting with members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Petitions in May 2002. While committee members from all major political parties agreed on the need to bring about equal representation of women in the interest of gender equality, some questioned whether enough women were ready for political office in terms of their level of education to bring about gender balance in the next elections. It seems that some female members of parliament are now pulling up the ladder behind them in order to avoid challenging male power, instead of helping to open the doors for their sisters. The report of this committee to the National Assembly has still not been tabled more than 18 months after this meeting.

In the meantime, Namibia has achieved almost 30 percent representation of women in the National Assembly, as both the ruling party and the United Democratic Front (UDF) recently replaced outgoing male MPs with women.

Responses from Political Parties

Responses by the ruling party to the 50/50 campaign have been highly contradictory. In 1999, the SPWC publicly attacked the Namibian Women's Manifesto before it was printed let alone launched, because of its reference to the human rights of all women, including lesbians. In a press statement, the SPWC said that: 'It is unfortunate that there are some elements that would like to use gender equality as a stepping ladder to reach their own goals that have no relevance to gender ... the so-called circulating women's manifesto has no other intention but to confuse the Namibian women and divert them from the core concept of gender equality as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Namibian National Gender Policy ... Swapo Party Women's Council calls upon all its members, supporters and sympathisers to remain focused ... and be vigilant against any forces of confusionists that come in the guise of gender equality'.⁹ The SPWC spokesperson said at the press conference: 'Homosexuality should not be linked to the struggle for gender equality, as gender deals with the relationship between women and men'.¹⁰

This language goes back to 1995, when Namibian government and Swapo party leaders who participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing worked hard to keep the issue of sexual orientation out of the Platform for Action. It is constantly being brought up to attack the NWMN in an attempt to divide the women's movement in Namibia. 'The fight to manipulate gender for irrelevant issues has not ended with the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, but those opportunists are still continuing to confuse people by trying to put the issue of gays and lesbians on a par with the struggle for Gender Equality. I therefore warn the Namibian people, women in particular, not to allow themselves to be used ... The so-called Women's Manifesto ... has no other message than asking women in Namibia to promote homosexuality.'¹¹ The attack on the network by the Minister of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare in parliament in July 2002 followed the same pattern: dismissing and discrediting the activities of the network and accusing it of having 'hidden agendas' rather than supporting women in parliament and in the cabinet to implement the National Gender Policy.

The Minister of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare further stated in an interview in 2002 that she viewed the 50/50 campaign as 'unrealistic'. This stands in contradiction to the National Gender Policy spearheaded by herself. In particular, the National Gender Plan of Action calls for gender balance at all levels of government, including in the cabinet, by 2003. The minister further criticized the lobbying and advocacy activities of the NWMN, claiming that it was 'seeking publicity'.

However, many government leaders, including the former Minister of Local and Regional Government and Housing, Dr Nickey Iyambo, the Attorney General, Pendukeni Ithana, and the Regional Governor of Swakopmund, mayors and others have publicly supported the call for 50/50 gender balance, and the National Elected Women's Forum has included this goal in its vision statement.

The two main opposition parties, the CoD and the DTA, recently reiterated their strong support not only for the 50/50 campaign but also for the Namibian Women's Manifesto itself.

Lessons learnt from our 50/50 Campaign

In 2001–02, Sister Namibia conducted research on the 50/50 campaign as part of a project on gender, citizenship and governance sponsored by the Royal Tropical Institute of the Netherlands

(KIT). Its research question was: how did the collective development of gender balance legislation promote the greater participation of women from the grassroots in politics and decision-making, and what impact did advocacy and lobbying by women for law reform have on the awareness of policymakers and the general public regarding female political participation?

We found that broad consultation on the development of legislation designed to bring more women into elected positions of government was indeed a useful tool for mobilizing women, particularly at the grassroots level. We were able to recruit facilitators from 35 towns and villages who between July 2001 and March 2002 conducted a total of 105 local workshops – in two or three rounds – with more than 3,500 participants, mainly women, but also a number of men, with whom they discussed the importance of women’s participation in politics and decision-making. They were able to teach participants about current electoral acts and possible law reform to bring about equal female representation in elected positions of government, and to generate enthusiastic support for the 50/50 Bill.

Good relations established with one of the national radio’s seven language services through the past activities of the NWMN also served the facilitators well, as many were able to mobilize support for their workshops and for our goals by phoning in to this service.

However, our local activities took place mainly in central, western and southern Namibia. We were only able to recruit a small number of facilitators in the north, where half of the country’s population resides. The north is a ruling party stronghold in which political activity outside of the party is quickly labelled a threat to ‘one-party rule’. Civil society is weak and independent women’s organisations almost non-existent. The facilitators we did manage to recruit through other NGOs experienced harassment by local authorities and traditional leaders who spread rumours about the workshops and claimed that their permission had to be sought before such activities could take place in future. The response from the women participating in the workshops was positive, though, with some workshops involving more than 70 highly interested participants. A female traditional leader supported our activities.

The impact of the campaign on the network facilitators themselves was equally remarkable. Through workshops, contact activities, media work and marches they became highly visible as local leaders who could share newly gained knowledge about electoral laws and law reform as well as national and international gender policies and agreements with their communities. Additionally they could lead other women in exercising their constitutional right to participate as citizens with the aim of influencing law reform at the national level in the interests of women. This changed the way in which the facilitators are seen by their partners, families and communities, and opened new doors for them to become active in community affairs.

At the national level, our campaign for gender balance generated particularly strong support from three NGOs whose own work involves promoting political participation, namely the Namibian Girl Child Organization, which trains schoolgirls for leadership, the National Society for Human Rights, which featured gender balance in a recently launched publication *My right to participate*, and Women’s Action for Development (WAD), which trains women for economic and political empowerment.

With regard to responses from political parties, the CoD has offered the most unequivocal verbal support for our demands.

Our media campaign was highly successful because we were able to use our own magazine extensively as well as to mobilise women journalists in strategic positions in both print and electronic media organizations to support our activities. This has resulted in broad public awareness of the need for women's equal representation and participation in politics and decision-making.

Conclusion

This research project taught us to analyze the national and local contexts more closely to assess where there is space for meaningful collaboration between government and civil society and where there is not. At the national level, the ruling party currently holds a majority in parliament of more than two-thirds of members, and party leaders continue to portray opposition parties and civil society as 'the foe', as in the days of the struggle for national liberation – during which Swapo was recognized by the United Nations as the sole representative of the Namibian people. Loyalty to the ruling party prevails in the northern regions of Namibia, and is entrenched by traditional patriarchal structures that oppress women. This has made it difficult for us to have much impact there and we will need to develop different strategies to convince women to become active citizens in their own communities and in their own right in these regions.

We found it easier to work in those parts of the country where other political parties and NGOs are present. Our focus on increasing the participation of women at the grassroots level and mobilizing support across party lines in the interests of women was successful in these regions. We were able to show that it is possible for poor women to engage in law reform processes, and to be involved in the processes of broad consultation, collective implementation and joint evaluation that ensures the maximum participation of women. The campaign itself thus became a vehicle for women to exercise their citizenship, and through their participation they spoke of their image and criteria of what a leader should be. Consequently, leadership was no longer defined by whether one is rich or educated or literate but, rather, by one's work and one's actions in the interests of others.

At the same time, we learnt that the ruling party and the state are not monolithic entities, such that we were able to make contact with government leaders at the regional and local levels, despite the controversies resulting from the campaign by using the issue of lesbianism. More than 45 percent of local councillors are women and they supported the 50/50 Bill regardless of party loyalty, perhaps because they had personally experienced the benefits of the affirmative action provisions in the local authority elections. And while the Minister of Women Affairs and Child Welfare and the members of the Parliamentary Women's Caucus did not see themselves as accountable to grassroots women and refused to meet with the network, we were able to meet with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Petitions due to the standing rules of parliament. Other lessons we learnt are that women's organizations need to know which rules can be utilized to ensure accountability by members of government, and that we need to link campaigns for gender balanced representation with the call for accountability in regard to the gender agenda by those in power.

Finally, we learnt through this campaign that, despite divisive party politics, ethnic barriers and homophobia in post-colonial and post-apartheid Namibia, it is possible to unite and mobilize women around a common issue, such as the 50/50 Bill. Through the sharing of stories of our everyday lives, women got to know and understand each other, build trust and solidarity, and realize that what we share as women is far more than what divides us. We also realized that handing the campaign over to another NGO not led by public lesbians would have served no purpose, as the other women's NGO voicing strong support was said to be working for an opposition party. And

just as women in general have learnt that shelving their demands for gender equality until national liberation is achieved leads nowhere, lesbians are learning that postponing their demands until gender equality is achieved will also lead nowhere. This campaign thus also became a model for integrating unpopular issues and standing firm on the indivisibility of women's liberation.

Endnotes

¹ This includes the figures for Walvis Bay, where local authority elections were only conducted in 1994 due to the delayed re-integration of this harbour town into independent Namibia.

² For a detailed analysis of the parliamentary debates surrounding this issue, see Tjihero, K., Namalambo, D. and Hubbard, D. 'Affirmative Action for Women in Local Government in Namibia. The 1998 Local Government Elections'.

³ 'National Gender Policy'. Department of Women's Affairs. Windhoek. November 1997. p. 23.

⁴ The recently developed EISA 'Gender Checklist for Free and Fair Elections in SADC Countries' indicates what needs to be done before women can participate equally in the election process.

⁵ Tjihero, K., Namalambo, D. and Hubbard, D. p. 16.

⁶ 'Swapo Party Women may Flag Female for President'. *New Era*. 30 November–2 December 2002.

⁷ 'Call for woman president "not on SWC Congress agenda"'. *The Namibian*. December 2002.

⁸ 'Enact Maintenance Bill Early: SWAPO Women'. *New Era*. 17–20 December 2001.

⁹ SWAPO Party Women's Council. 'Press Release'. 4 October 1999.

¹⁰ Xoagub, Francis. 'SWC Unleashes Salvo at Women's Manifesto'. *The Namibian*. 10 October 1999.

¹¹ Statement by the Minister of Women Affairs and Child Welfare (then Director-General of the Department of Women Affairs) to the Elected Women's Forum. 8 October 1999.