

OPENING UP ADULT EDUCATION: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN NAMIBIA

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Introduction

Country brief

The Republic of Namibia (known as South West Africa prior to Independence) lies on the Southwestern part of Africa. It has an area of over 824,269 square kilometres. About 22 percent of Namibia's total land area is covered by two major deserts. The country is bounded along the entire coast by the Namib Desert and by the Kalahari along the Southern and central-eastern border. Namibia shares its borders with Angola and Zambia to the north, South Africa in the South, Botswana to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the West (UN:1990). Namibia was colonised by Germany in 1884 and in 1920 the League of Nations assigned Namibia to South Africa as a Class C mandate which required that it be administered in a manner that promoted the general well-being of its inhabitants (Katjavivi: 1988). After intensive diplomatic campaigns and liberation struggle and war championed by the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), Namibia became independent on March 21 1990.

According to the 1991 count, Namibia has a population of over 1.4 million people comprising of about 680,927 males and 720,784 females (EPZ: 1995). The population rose to about 1.5 million in 1997 (Angula et al: 1995). Namibia is blessed with eleven (11) ethnic groups who live mostly in rural areas pursuing essentially subsistence economic activities in agriculture, livestock and fishing.

The Educational System

Education was also an instrument of oppression during the colonial and apartheid rules in Namibia. During Germany's colonial rule schools were built only for the white. History has it that the "...Germans, in fact never came to grips with the objectives of education for the Africans" (UNIN:1986) even in the rare cases of trickled-down education; opportunity for Africans in education

The German Administration did however ensure that the kind of training made available (only) served the needs of the masters of the country: a source for servants and labourers (for) African education was designed (merely) to keep them inferior and to avoid inculcating such mischievous and intolerable ideas as democracy, — human freedom and the like (Angula et al: 1997)

The apartheid regime of South Africa continued the unequal and oppressive educational system which the Germans bequeathed to them. The apartheid regime further ensured a racial segregation of the educational system to the detriment of the blacks (UNIN: 1986, Amukugo: 1995). The apartheid educational system ensured that the State had:

... an effective white control over the education of Africans for the promotion of ethnicity and the ensuring of the maintenance of educational facilities for Africans at a level much lower than that for the whites (UNIN: 1986) Angula et al (1997) further give an insight into the oppressive Bantu educational system. According to them: *Bantu education ... was aimed at the subservience and subjugation of the Africans on the one hand, and (the) inculcation of racial bigotry on the other....*

Thus the colonial and the apartheid educational systems were what Fareire (1972, 1974) variously described as "domesticating", "dehumanizing" and "oppressive". This Bantu - educational system was particularly oppressive to females. Girls and women were not encouraged to seek education since the purpose of education then was the production of labourers for the apartheid economy. Consequently, majority of the illiterate population in Namibia then were females. It is also pertinent to note that the colonial administration almost

totally neglected the area of adult and non-formal education. It was not until 1971 that the Namibia Literacy Programme started as part of the Johannesburg-based Bureau of Literature and Literacy. It was later registered in 1984 under the company Act as the Namibia Literacy Programme (N L P): Prior to this, adult and non-formal education was provided by mainly churches and SWAPO in exile. It was later in the early 1980s that a sprinkle of NGOs were established with the aim of supporting community development and providing some form of non-formal education. Thus the combination of unequal provision, neglect and discrimination in education of females in pre-independent Namibia set the stage for a predominantly illiterate women population in independent Namibia. So, the Namibian woman at independence was socially, politically, economically, psychologically and educationally brutalized, dehumanized and disempowered.

Women in Namibian Society

In examining the role of women in Namibian society, we shall briefly consider their roles in pre-independent and post-independent Namibia. Prior to colonialism - the Namibian woman was like most women in most indigenous African communities in most indigenous African communities were governed by religio-cultural norms and Customary laws. Such laws were usually in favour of men. It is the fathers for instance, "who have disproportionate custodial advantage. They are often regarded as the 'owners' of the children" (Mazrui: 1991). This and other considerations lead Mazrui to conclude that "African Customary laws exaggerates the rights of fathers and may therefore be guilty of malignant sexism". This form of sexism was said to be the most pervasive and most insidious in African traditional societies. In a further analysis of this form of sexism, Mazrui (1991) contends that in most societies malignant sexism "subjects women to economic manipulation, sexual exploitation and political marginalisation".

Some authors on the women question in Namibia (Mbuende: 1990, Becker: 1995 and UNAM/SARDC:1997) all admit the role of customary law in indigenous Namibian society and how it affected women. Although there are variations between Ovambo women and the Herero and or the Nama women, the common thread of malignant sexism was apparent. The crux of the matter is that Namibian women in traditional communities prior to colonialism experienced the fundamental aspects of malignant sexism. These fundamental aspects, "concern differences in empower between men and women, both politically and economically" (Mazrui: 1990). So, in relation to the male counterpart, the Namibian woman of indigenous Africa, was disempowered to a reasonable degree.

The advent of colonialism and apartheid introduced new dimensions to the plight of women in Namibian society. While the general population suffered all forms of inequality, deprivation, violence and injustice, women were doubly affected by these and more. It is important to point out that there were two classes of Namibian women during this period. One class was at home and this class directly bore the burden of all the dehumanising laws and practices of apartheid. The colonial system worsened the socio economic situations of women by weakening the traditional extended family system which provided some economic protection for women. The notorious **contract labour** further worsened the economic conditions by recruiting males from the agriculture based rural areas. Consequently women were left to provide for family members left behind in the homesteads. Bad as the contract labour system was, it further subjected women to male domain in its "Masters and savants Act" which stipulated that:

"Contracts may be entered into with any native above the age of fourteen years, male or female, married females require the assistance of their husbands (Protectorate of South West Africa: 1916; emphasis added).

Thus even in the unfair economic system women were legally discriminated against in the area of employment. They were restricted to the "homelands" because they hardly got contracted to do any jobs in the urban areas. This further restricted rural women's access to economic ventures in the cities and to money. This fact was underlined by Moorson (1989) when he asserted that "—one of the most striking features of the contract labour system that was constructed in Namibia was its attempts to exclude all rural women from wage labour". The few women who got contracted worked as servants and domestic slaves who had no legal protection from inhuman treatment by their employers. They worked for poor wages with no retirement, social security or other benefits. Their "benefits" were long hours and sexual harassment (Cleaver, T and Wallace, M: 1990). On the political scene women - both white and black - were disenfranchised by various colonial laws. The political arena was a male domain while women's place was the "home" As Straudt (1985) asserted, "implanted upon turn-of-the-century Africa, along with notions of men (initially European men) in 'Public' or political sphere and women in the 'private' or household sphere". This statements apathy sums up the Namibian political context. Women's role was one of exclusion and relegation.

All was not however a gloomy picture of women during the colonial period. It is on record that exile Namibian women studied abroad and received academic and professional training and qualifications. Women were also actively involved in the liberation struggle. In fact, "women underwent the same training as men in SWAPO and occupied positions at all levels. ... they fought along-side the men and many were trained in typically male-dominated occupations (UNAM/SARDC: 1997). Even women within Namibia, especially those in the northern war zones were involved in the liberation struggle. They were said to have provided material assistance and moral support to the Namibian liberation fighters.

All in all, today's Namibian women have emerged from a history of suppression, discrimination, disenfranchisement and general disempowerment. It has been argued that most women's woes in Namibia today economic, political, social and legal - are aftermaths of the discrimination entrenched by the apartheid system (UNAM SARDC: 1997, Kaufam: 1998). Now let us briefly examine the role and status of women in Namibia since the country became independent in 1990.

On a positive note, women in Namibia have made notable leaps since independence. These leaps are significant when compared with the status and role of women both before and during colonialism in Namibia. One notable giant leap was the adoption of a democratic constitution that guarantees equality for all people. Specifically, Article 10 of the Constitution, on "Equality and Freedom from Discrimination" stipulates that "all persons shall be equal before the law" and that "no persons may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status" (GRN: 1990). So, the constitution opened the gate to equal status before the law. This also includes voting powers, the right to contest public office and equality of women and men in marriage. With this constitutional and legal framework in place, Namibian women movements have steadily moved towards re-defining and reaffirming their status and role in independent Namibia. In the light of the above, women have become visible in public life and are daily increasing this visibility by exerting their influence in social and political spheres. Besides, women organisations, NGOs and individuals have intensified efforts to seriously address women's economic plight. Consequently many training efforts have started. The women movement in Namibia has become a strong force that is challenging fundamental stereotypes and patriarchal structures inherited from an undemocratic past. One event which the women's movements in Namibia record as singular achievement was their participation at the Fourth World conference on women in Beijing. Namibia's 56 person delegation to that conference presented areas where the women question in Namibia need utmost attention. These include violence against women, poverty and illiteracy among rural women, alcohol and drug abuse, the girl-child and teenage pregnancies. Since the China conference and now more NGOs, donor agencies and interested individuals have become more involved in the issue of women empowerment. Workshops, conferences and seminars are organised on regular basis to generate new ideas and plans of action. There is a multi-media campaign on violence against women and children. Within a short period of eight years women in Namibia have at least focused attention on the gender question and have made inroads into male exclusive domains of politics and public office. Although there has been no "landslide" achievements, the present tempo is quite encouraging. Hence one is apt to agree with Becker's (1995) conclusions that:

Though only few concrete improvements for women have been achieved in spheres of power other than political society so far, the significant fact can be stated that gender-based concerns of women have at least been recognised as legitimate-important-political claims and there is a lively discourse on these issues in Namibian politics and society

In spite of this conclusion there are still problematic issues to be tackled and a lot of gaps to be filled. We shall return to this shortly. First let us briefly look at government efforts in addressing the question of women empowerment in Namibia.

Government and Women Empowerment

The policies and programmes put in place by the Namibian government have been well documented (GRN: 1995, UNAM, SARDC: 1997 and Girvan: 1994). However, the most comprehensive document in terms of articulating government position is CEDAW (1995). In addition to constitutional and legal frameworks, the Government of Namibia has floated policies and Programmes that point to how serious the women agenda is considered. The first major step was the establishment of the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) in the Office of the President to ensure a smooth link between women and government. Furthermore, a chapter on Gender and Development (GAD) is included in the First National Development Plan.

The following gender-specific sectoral objectives and strategies are highlighted in the Plan:

Integration of Women in Development (WID);
Increasing awareness about practical and strategic needs of women;
Reconcile existing customary laws and practices with the provision of the Constitution and CEDAW;
Recognise, accept and appreciate the significance of women's role and contributions to food production---;
Increase women's physical accessibility to health facilities---;
Reduce female illiteracy by more than half its current level---;
Create awareness among women of the significance of commercial undertakings---;
Increase the number of women in wage employment; and
Create more awareness among policy makers, planners; implementers, women and the general public on issues relating to the environment.

Furthermore, Namibia ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1992 and submitted the first country Report to the UN. The Government further demonstrated its commitment to Women empowerment by adopting a National Gender Policy (NGP) and a National Plan of Action on Gender (NPAG). Both documents came out this year and have a comprehensive coverage of all areas of human endeavour where gender issues need attention. To ensure success of the National Gender Policy, monitoring units have been put in place. These range from Gender Focal Points, Gender Sectoral Committees, Gender Network Co-ordinating Committee and the Gender Commission.

These policies, programmes and ideals raise a lot of hope in respect of the issue of Women empowerment in Namibia. However, there always exists - everywhere- a gap between laws and their enforcement, between policies and actions and between the ideal and the manifest. These gaps have so far stood between efforts by government and the rapid amelioration of women's plight in Namibia. Of course it may be argued that the Republic of Namibia is still young and hence needs more time for its policies and programmes to take firm root. Yes. And this explains why the government must be commended for having done so much within so short a time. More focus has been brought on the women question and there now exists a remarkable and clear difference between what the gender question was under apartheid and what it is today. However, there are still problematic issues that continue to linger and there are gaps to be bridged.

Problematic Issues

In spite of all the efforts so far, there are still a myriad of problems confronting Namibian women today. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on just one or two problematic issues. The problems which still cast a heavy cloud on women empowerment in Namibia include:

Lack of or low participation in decision-making;
Lack of access to credit;
Poor employment in the formal sector;
Prostitution;
Alcohol and drug abuse;
Teenage Pregnancies;
The girl - child; and
Illiteracy and Poverty.

There are germaine problems that need serious attention from all. The core thorny issues which this paper wants to highlight are:

Attitude
Violence

The problem of attitude is a major stumbling bloc in the sense that most women have internalized the oppressive, male-dominated **status quo** as what should be.

This problem is compounded by the fact that most people believe that the gender issue is women's problem. This attitude is one which negates the necessary psychological foundation for women empowerment. Consequently, the first major huddle which this paper identified is the need to convince people (female and male) that change is necessary and that change of the oppressive gender situation is possible. It's sad to reduce a societal problem to a women's problem. Of course, it may be argued that there are a good number of women movements and so there is conviction about the gender issue. The fact is that most of those involved in and concerned with women's empowerment in Namibia today are the few successful, educated city ladies, described as "honorary male" or "token female" within the patriarchal system (Longwe: 1998). The rural women, who constitute the majority are still mostly in the dark about the problem. Hence "the spokespersons for Namibian women's organisations are mostly members of the minority of educated, urban, middle-class women" (Becker:

1995).

Violence has been part of the Namibian society since apartheid and the liberation struggles. However, it is sad to note that the degree of violence especially against women and children seems to increase on a daily basis. Because of the economic situation and the aftermath of the liberation struggle, many men do not feel in control, they feel inadequate and incomplete. Consequently they resort to the use of physical power to establish their presence. It is therefore disturbing to read, almost on a daily basis, reports of rape of women and children, sodomy, sexual assault, wife-battering and child abuse. Some of these violence result in deaths. Does adult education have any role to play in solving the problems? Yes.

Opening Up Adult Education

The provision of Adult Basic Education in Namibia is rather on a high side with Government, NGO's and various donor-Agencies being seriously involved. The National Literacy Programme in Namibia (NLPN) was launched in 1992. There is a Directorate of Adult Basic Education (DABE) in the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture. Furthermore, the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) was established in 1994 and fully became operational early 1998. The University of Namibia recently established a Department of Adult and Nonformal Education which will start offering courses from diploma through doctorate levels in January 1999. All the above are in addition to several training institutes engaged in adult education in Namibia. So there is no problem of availability of learning centres. In terms of access, there are more women enrolled within the NLPN than men. So, access too, as far as women are concerned, is no problem. What then do we need to open up in adult education? As is usually the case, adult education for women in Namibia revolves around literacy training linked with some information on income-generating, health and family planning, civic responsibility and similar issues. This limits adult education to the same old **status quo** agenda. This is a 'closed' agenda that puts women under oppression. It continuously reinforces women's traditional domestic reproductive, and community helper role" (Leach: 1998).

Adult education in Namibia must understand the women question from the perspective of oppression. This oppressing is all embracing and is applicable to the male-dominated society that operates on values and structures that promote female submission, silence, sacrifice, inferiority and total obedience. If we grant the above, then it becomes imperative that adult education in Namibia has to open up to a pedagogy of liberation. This pedagogy, according to Freire (1972) is a painful childbirth which goes beyond reading and basic skill acquisition to include transforming experience and reconstituting relationships with the wider society. Thus, adult education in Namibia must open up its content and process to the reality of the concrete power structures, concrete dominant relations of production and distribution of resources, of violence against women and of all forms of inequality within society. This opening up, in Freirean terms is a method which equips the oppressed learners (and the oppressors) to gain awareness of their dehumanising situation. This opening up is a way of empowering women to reveal and make conscious efforts to eliminate the underlying features of oppression within their community's and nation's decision-making and power structures.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to present a Namibian story of the women question. The focus has been primary on highlighting the problem areas from the traditional society through the colonial period to the present day. The problem is really gargantuan especially in the area of attitude. There are a lot of spirited efforts on the ground but these have not seriously involved the majority of women who are direct victims. We have argued that a radical pedagogy of adult education is a veritable tool of empowering women and men to eliminated the unjust and oppressive situation.

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