

Sister Namibia: Fighting for all human rights for all women

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Sister Namibia (sister@iafrica.com.na), a feminist women's rights organisation based in Windhoek, Namibia, was founded in 1989 on the eve of national independence to give women a voice in the building of a democratic post-colonial society. For the first ten years, the main activity of the organisation was the production of *Sister Namibia* magazine. From 1999 onwards, we began to broaden our scope. We now engage in the fields of media, education, research, advocacy and cultural activity in order to promote women's human rights and full equality in a world free from violence, discrimination and oppression.

Through our bi-monthly *Sister Namibia* magazine we raise awareness among women, men and young people of the ways in which political, social, cultural, legal and economic systems of power control girls and women. We also profile women leaders in all fields of society, advocate for and inform about gender-related law reform, and oppose and challenge all forms of sexism, racism, homophobia and other discourses and practices that oppress and divide people. We print 10 000 copies of each edition and distribute them nationally through NGO networks, as well as to subscribers and libraries around the world. A website and electronic newsletter are currently being developed to further our information-sharing activities.

Following research on women's political participation undertaken in 1998, we developed the 50/50 Campaign for Women's Political Empowerment, based on the Namibian Women's Manifesto. This document was developed collaboratively with women in government, political parties and NGOs in preparation for the 1999 National Assembly elections. Our aim of uniting women across party lines through this manifesto was thwarted when leading women from the ruling SWAPO party withdrew their support on the grounds that we had included respect for the rights of lesbian women in this document. These were the women who had lobbied hard to keep references to lesbian rights out of the Beijing Platform for Action, insisting that this was not a gender issue. The story of how Sister Namibia mainstreamed lesbian rights into the 50/50 Campaign

and gained the support of many ruling party members at national, regional and local levels, in spite of regular homophobic attacks by government leaders, is documented in a number of publications, including a case study, *Written out: How sexuality is used to attack women's organizing* (Rothschild, 2005). We ran the campaign for six years, from one national election to the next, and were able to maintain support from both our NGO partners and women in communities across the country to keep the reference to lesbian rights in the revised Namibian Women's Manifesto of 2004.

Through our networking around the 50/50 Campaign, Sister Namibia has become the lead agency for those NGOs working together as the gender sector of the Namibian NGO Forum (NANGOF). We have initiated many public activities to get women's voices heard on gender-related law reform, including the Children's Status Bill currently before parliament.



The current focus of Sister Namibia's work is on helping women to survive the Aids pandemic. Over the past years, more than 40% of pregnant women have tested HIV-positive during routine testing in Caprivi region, the hardest hit area of our country. Young women are twice as likely to be infected as young men. For a new campaign on women's rights to sexual autonomy and choice, we are developing a *Sexuality Resource Book for Girls and Women*. This will target women and girls with information about the biological aspects of conception, contraception, abortion and so forth, as well as uncovering some of the socio-cultural discourses concerning questions such as "What is a woman?" and "Who owns a woman's body?" This resource will be based on field research on sexual norms, values and practices conducted by us in Damara, Owambo and Caprivi communities. The book will be translated into the major Namibian languages, and we will use it in workshops targeting other NGOs, teachers, youth workers and social workers, as well as women and girls across Namibia.

In partnership with the Women's Leadership Centre (wlc@mweb.com.na), a new organisation started in 2004 by Elizabeth /Khaxas, we have conducted writing workshops for women living with and affected by HIV and Aids, to begin to break the taboos and silences around the many patriarchal cultural practices that deny girls and women sexual autonomy and choice. The Centre's core activity is women's writing as a form of resistance, with the aim of developing feminist analysis and activism in Namibia. Later this year, the Centre will publish a book of women's writings, examining the intersections of culture, poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS as they affect women and girls in

the different Namibian communities. The book will call on readers to take on the challenge of cultural resistance and transformation regarding the human rights of women and girls. This will be the second publication by the Women's Leadership Centre, following the publication in 2005 of *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings by Namibian Women*, which brought together stories and poetry dealing more broadly with women's oppression through patriarchal cultures (/Khaxas, 2005).

In Sister Namibia's Lesbian Support Programme, we have run local and national workshops and outreach activities for women with alternative sexual and gender identities. Critical feminist analysis is used to understand and challenge the discrimination against and oppression of sexual minorities, and in particular of women, as part of patriarchal culture and rule. In response to the hate speech and public expressions of homophobia orchestrated by senior government leaders, including the former state president, Sister Namibia was instrumental in establishing the Rainbow Project (TRP) in 1997. This is a human rights organisation that defends the rights of LGBT people in Namibia. Together we have conducted annual LGBT awareness weeks, including panel discussions, film festivals, and storytelling evenings. We have organised marches for "All Human Rights for All", and entrenched the rights of LGBT people in the human rights discourse of Namibia. And possibly most important of all, we have nurtured a new generation of young lesbian women who are prepared to speak publicly for their rights.



Sister Namibia has also been instrumental in the revival of Katutura Community Radio (KCR), targeting audiences in the townships of Katutura and Khomasdal, through which we have created space for alternative voices. In 2004 KCR won two awards for best community media, and the winning programme, produced by TRP, was on being transgender in Namibia!

At the regional level, Sister Namibia and TRP were involved in a major research project on same-sex practices among women in seven southern African countries. This research was presented at the "Sex and Secrecy Conference" of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality and Culture in Johannesburg in June 2003, and led to the publication *Tommy boys, lesbian men and ancestral wives* (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005), reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

This research project also gave birth to the African Lesbian Alliance, later renamed Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL), which was initiated by Elizabeth /Khaxas among the women who had participated in the project. In August 2004,

Sister Namibia, in collaboration with the Women's Leadership Centre and the Rainbow Project, organised a strategic planning week, which was held in Windhoek with women from 13 African countries. The organisation was officially launched during the first seven-day Lesbian Leadership Institute held in March 2005 in Windhoek, with coalition members from Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Sadly, Sierra Leone was not represented, following the brutal murder of Fanny Ann Eddy. This took place shortly after her attendance at the CAL strategic planning, where she had been elected onto the Steering Committee, and we still grieve her loss. The organisation she started continues to be a member of CAL, whose other steering committee members hail from Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The director of Sister Namibia is the Chairperson of the CAL Steering Committee and is currently engaged in fundraising for the organisation.



The overall goal of CAL is to work towards the creation of equality for African lesbian women in all spheres of life, to be achieved through the following strategies:

- advocacy and lobbying for the political, legal, economic, cultural and sexual rights of African lesbians by engaging strategically with African and international structures and allies;
- building and strengthening the voice and visibility of African lesbians through research, media and cultural activities, and through participation in local and international forums;
- building the capacity of African lesbians and their organisations to use African radical feminist analysis to uncover the intersectionality of their oppression and identify strategies and partners in their struggle for dignity and equality;
- building a strong and sustainable lesbian coalition supporting the development of national organisations working on lesbian issues in every country in Africa;
- supporting the work of these national organisations in all the foregoing areas, including the facilitation of the personal growth of African lesbians and the building of capacity within their organisations.

During 2006-7, CAL plans to hold three more African Lesbian Leadership Institutes, conduct research and documentation on the lived realities of lesbian women in the 11 member countries of the coalition, and produce a variety of electronic and print media to support our lobbying and advocacy work and promote the visibility of lesbian women in Africa.

References

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