

Namibia and South Africa: Women Speak Out

Reports from Southern Africa tend to concentrate on racial and political problems. But how do these struggles affect women? In these two articles adapted from "SPEAK" magazine, two women's voices from neighboring Namibia and South Africa discuss the problems faced by women and their contribution to the struggle for human rights in the region.

Namibia has won independence after years of struggle. The new Namibia was born on March 21, 1990, bringing new hope for all the people of Namibia. Important and difficult tasks lie ahead of the government and the people of Namibia. Will the government be able to see the needs of the majority instead of just seeing to the comfort of a few? What will the position of women be? And how can the people of Namibia make sure that the government is acting in the interests of the majority?

The road to independence in Namibia has not been an easy one. The South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO) spearheaded the struggle for freedom in Namibia and is now a party in the new government. However, they were unable to win a two thirds majority in the elections and hence are limited in being able to implement their policies which are concerned with insuring the majority of Namibians a life of basic comfort and security.

In this article, adapted from an interview with the magazine "SPEAK",

published by the South African women's collective SPEAK, SWAPO member Nashilongo Elogo discusses what the new Namibia means for women. Nashilongo works with exiled women and children returning to Namibia. Before this job she was general secretary of a women's organization called Women's Voice.

Women's Struggles in Namibia

"Women have been part of the struggle for liberation in Namibia for as far back as can be remembered. Women fought alongside men during the time of German occupation and women continue to fight today. In Namibia, December 10 is National Women's Day, a day on which women's role in the struggle is celebrated. Women fought for liberation of Namibia because they felt it was their duty and they were committed. They were not fighting to please men or anybody. Those who went into exile were not pleasing anyone. They felt a deep commitment. As those who remained felt it was their duty to liberate their country. Within that struggle



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was the struggle for recognition of women as equal partners in the struggle.”

The struggle of women to be seen as equal partners is a difficult struggle. Many men in Namibia still see women as inferiors. Nashilongo said, “Women were recognized and treated as equals in terms of the policy of SWAPO. But as individuals you have to deal with those male comrades in senior positions whose attitude may be something else. The person may not even be aware that he is discriminating. He will just think you are a woman. It is like a slap in the face.”

It was not easy for women to question these sexist attitudes of individual men in SWAPO. But SWAPO women in exile were in a better position than to do this than SWAPO women in Namibia. Nashilongo said, “Inside the country women in SWAPO never raised the sexism of men. Maybe SWAPO women in exile did. In exile the Women’s Council was more organized. And they had access to resources. The women could, for example, get scholarships. And these women could come and fill positions in the party.” Their qualifications, skills and positions in the party made it easier for these women to raise problems with the men in SWAPO. Nashilongo says that another reason why SWAPO women in exile could raise sexism with SWAPO men was that while in exile the men and women of SWAPO came into contact with new ideas about women. “Our people in exile had a situation of exposure to the international community and they were very often confronted with questions relating to the participation of women. Not so at home. We were isolated. We did not have as much contact with the international community. In exile men and women shared the responsibility of childcare, housework and such things.” But unfortunately exiles who are returning to Namibia are going back to the old ways. Nashilongo said, “When the exiles returned they went to different villages all over Namibia. And we find that the pressure in society of traditional attitudes

to women is being imposed. People are going back to the old ways of doing things.”

Women and the Constitution

Nashilongo believes that the government has taken an important step in drawing up a constitution giving women rights. She believes that women’s rights were taken up in the constitution because SWAPO was exposed to the ideas of women’s liberation outside Namibia. But changes in constitutions are only one part of the battle. People’s attitudes about women must also change. As Nashilongo says: “Women are still seen as minors by most people. The new constitution of Namibia protects and guarantees the rights of all men and women. The language used in the constitution includes women. But it is not enough having women’s rights guaranteed in the constitution.” Nashilongo told “SPEAK” that women in Namibia feel it is important that all women should understand what the new constitution means for them. “Women’s rights which are a part of the constitution must filter to the grassroots.

“Women have not had a chance to set up their own agenda - the agenda of women has been dictated by men. Any women’s project had to satisfy the needs of men in power. Women must be part of making decisions in the new Namibia. Today in Namibia there are very few women at the top levels. They are very poorly represented in political parties, the church and in places where decisions affecting the lives of Namibians are made.” Nashilongo spoke about the importance of training for women so that they have the skills to be in leadership and play a part in decision-making.

Women Must Organize

“We need a women’s non-governmental organization as a power-house for women, and as a watchdog for women’s rights.



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We need some group from where we can draw energy to put women in important positions," said Nashilongo.

"There is lots of work for women. No one is going to do this for us. The task is a big one. Apartheid has been declared dead, but we still have to address the differences between men and women."

Nashilongo stressed the importance of the women's group being non-governmental and independent of the different political parties. "Women in political parties would advance the ideology of the party. An organization to which all women belong regardless of political party, religion, and so on, will mainly be addressing issues concerning women first. Regardless of differing ideologies."

The women's NGO does not rule out the responsibility of the government to women. SWAPO women had wanted a women's ministry, but they did not get it. Instead women's issues will be dealt with through a women's section in the President's office.

SPEAK feels that many of the things Nashilongo said are relevant for women in South Africa. Nashilongo had this to say: "Women in South Africa have made much greater advances than us in Namibia. We started very late in looking at the constitution and because of this we as women could not make much of a contribution. South African women have an advantage because of the different non-governmental groups to address the rights of women."

Alexandra Women's Congress - Organizing Women for a New South Africa

Sizakele Nkosi is the General Secretary of the Alexandra Women's Congress (AWCO) in Alexandra township, or Alex, just outside Johannesburg. Sizakele believes that women must fight for their rights. Most of all, she sees the importance of people organizing at the grassroots to build strong organizations that will fight for a better life for all. She told SPEAK about AWCO.

An old woman comrade Thoko Mngoma, who was in the ANC Women's League and Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in the 1950's, was an inspiration in forming the women's organization. Sizakele said: "We felt that our women, especially the older women, were not organized, even in civic issues. Women are more affected than men by high rents and high bus fares. We felt that women need to organize to fight problems."

Getting women to join the organization was not an easy job. But the women who decided to start the Alexandra Women's Organization went to find the women of Alex.

"We visited churches, stokvels, burial societies, trying to recruit." Their job was made even harder because this was during

the State of Emergency when the police and the army were in the township harrasing and detaining people. Most of the women trying to build the women's organization were detained in 1986. Sizakele was one of those detained, for eighteen months, but she and the other women who were released came back with a stronger fighting spirit. She said: "When we came back from detention,... members wanted to have a democratically elected leadership, so we launched it in four months - in March 1990. We changed our constitution and we were no longer Alex Women's Organization. Since then we have grown from strength to strength as Alex Women's Congress."

Women Must Organize

Sizakele feels very strongly that women must be organized. She said: "If you look at the participation of women in organizations it is very low. Women don't participate equally with men. They feel intimidated and inferior because of their background. Women are treated as inferior by organizations and society. There are few women in executives of organizations. And when they are there, they hold sexist positions, like secretaries. It is the same with the unions.

Women need to be groomed in women's organizations. To be mentally liberated. Women are also human beings, and must fight to be treated as human beings, before being taken as women. There is a lot of sexism. We can't only blame apartheid. Men who think they are liberated will not allow their wives to get involved in organizations. These men are in meetings a lot, and are hardly at home. It is not right that only South African men decide on the future of South Africa. I don't want men talking about sexism on our behalf."

Sizakele feels that women's issues have to be taken up in all organizations. She said: "Even in the factories women are the first to be retrenched. Bosses use sexual



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exploitation. Men are exploited for their labor. Women are exploited for their labor and their bodies. Women always feel under threat. There is no job security with pregnancy. Pregnancy is treated like a curse."

Alexandra Women's Congress

The Alexandra Women's Congress is made up of a number of groups, including Eyethu Burial Society, church groups and the women's committee of the Self-Help Association of Disabled of Alexandra. And it allows individuals, including men and white women, to join as well. The men are not full members, but they can attend general meetings.

AWCO is open to young women from the age of fourteen. There are four branches of AWCO in Alex; they each meet once a week, on Saturday afternoon, with an average attendance of 100 women. The membership is growing, especially since the unbanning of organizations. AWCO believes that political education for women is very important. And they talk openly about politics in the organization so that women can become involved in the struggle for a non-racist, non-sexist, democratic South Africa.

Sizakele said that women discuss the problems they face as women. She said: "We share our experiences. Not all women are exploited in the same way. It is different with different husbands. There are women who have been raped. There are women with problems with child-care."

Women pay R2.00 a year to join AWCO. AWCO fights for better housing and helps out if there are evictions. AWCO is also involved in the advice center in the township, as well as in the education crisis. Sizakele says that women feel that it is worth the R2.00.

The women are involved in the problems of the township, like health issues for

example. Sizakele said: "Whenever there are problems that the clinic needs help with, our women help. When there was a polio problem in 1986, and again in 1989, women helped to immunize the children." AWCO is very concerned about the problem of AIDS. Sizakele said: "AWCO has got an AIDS committee, made up of ten women who are trained about AIDS by the Alex Health Center and University Clinic. We felt that we should start workshops in Alex to educate people about AIDS.... We have to talk about AIDS... Women have accepted that there is AIDS. But men do not. This is a serious problem because men do not want to use condoms. They do not want to take responsibility..."

Other activities AWCO is involved in include Young Pioneers - training young children from four to fourteen after school.

Sizakele spoke about the AWCO and the ANC Women's League. She said that AWCO will soon disband and form the ANC Women's League. At the same time they are trying to form a co-ordinating group of all the women's organizations in Alex, so that all the women's organizations, both ANC and not ANC will continue to meet together.

Future For Women

Sizakele believes that women have to take up many struggles, both in their political and in their personal lives. She said: "I hope that women will be independent - we should not think that we should get married to get security. We must not live in the shadow of someone else. No-one should decide for women. It is our democratic right to choose. When one woman becomes a feminist she should not be seen as waging a war against men, but be seen as a woman fighting for liberation. I don't want a parliament with men only. People should choose because the person has potential. We want proper representation. We want women's issues discussed equally to other issues. For example, maternity rights should not be a secondary issue. A Constituent Assembly should be drawn up by women as well, so that women's ideas are also carried out. Women must also decide for our country. We are the backbone of the nation."

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