Promoting women’s rights and gender equality in Namibia

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When Namibia became independent in 1990, it was regarded as a role model of hope for Africa’s development, democratisation, and the free market economy. Despite considerable achievements over the past 18 years, however, the country faces major political, economic and social challenges. The predominance of the ruling SWAPO Party, insufficiently developed democratic values, and the marginalisation of ethnic minorities and women – particularly in rural areas – confront the country with political problems.

The economy is still extremely dependent on its South African neighbour, from whom 80% of all domestic consumer goods are imported. The financial and capital markets are also intimately connected with South Africa’s. Namibia’s economic growth in recent years has been 3%, i.e. marginally higher than its population growth of 2.6%. Therefore, one can only assume a very low real growth. Unemployment rate is nearly 40% in the informal sector, and is especially evident in rural areas, where it is dominated by women.

Namibia has about 2 million inhabitants. On the one hand, the country has a comparably high level of development, with an average per capita income of more than US$2,000 per annum. On the other hand, these global indicators disguise some striking social disparities. On an international scale, Namibia ranges near the top of the list when it comes to inequality in the distribution of national wealth. Some 1% of the richest households in the country earn more than 50% of what all the poorest households earn together. Neither large profits in the most important economic sectors such as fisheries, mining and tourism combined – including high transfers of development aid, nor the government’s land reform or Vision 2030 national development strategy have so far been able to adjust the situation significantly in favour of the poor and landless majority. Mismanagement, corruption, lack of efficiency and low productivity severely constrain economic development – as will the effects of the recent global financial and economic crisis.
Gender equality?

Being a signatory to the Millennium Declaration of 2000, Namibia is participating in the process of achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly MDG 3, which promotes equal rights and intends to strengthen the rights of women. The Namibian Constitution guarantees the equal treatment of women. However, the Constitution also states that both common law and customary law in force on the date of independence remain valid until they are amended or abolished by Parliament. Hence, discriminating laws still exist de facto; this affects women in rural areas in particular, by way of having limited control over property, or access to estates or small loans.

Namibia is not defined as a least-developed country but as a lower-middle-income country, and has not developed the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Instead, its Third National Development Plan (NDP3) presents an agenda which contains macroeconomic and structural reforms, in which Namibia commits itself to the principles of sustainable development and concern for the poor (a ‘pro-poor’ approach) and gender equality. Moreover, Namibia has ratified all the major international and regional legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Protocol of the African Charter about women’s rights in Africa, as well as the Southern African Development Community’s various undertakings as regards enhancing the status of women.

Gender equality – as enshrined in the Namibian Constitution, as well as the prohibition of gender discrimination and the aim to ensure equal participation by women not only in politics, but also in the economy and society at large, as expressed in NDP3 and Vision 2030, still pose a major challenge.

Interventions by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation has, for many years, been trying to improve the socio-economic conditions of women, particularly in rural areas. This has been accompanied by systematic actions and activities in order to strengthen the political participation of women. These initiatives in the field of promoting women’s rights in Namibia are primarily implemented by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation’s long-time partnership with the non-governmental organisation, Women’s Action for Development (WAD).

WAD, established in 1994, was registered at the Ministry for Trade and Industry in 2001 as a non-profit NGO. Since then, WAD has received institutional and
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conceptual support from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. There are also a number of other international and national bodies that have meanwhile joined in to support WAD. For example, certain commercial businesses and banks support WAD’s activities and events, and in so doing, get some mileage from WAD’s countrywide popularity.

Within the framework of Namibia’s politics of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), WAD qualified for a BEE partnership with an insurance institution, a bank, and a travel agency, and is already receiving dividends from these partnerships. WAD currently has a membership of close to 40,000 men and women, and operates in all 13 Regions of the country. It does so through bodies known as Regional Community Voices, which work in close partnership with Regional and Local Authorities.

All WAD activities aim to improve the living conditions of the marginalised rural population, especially women. In this regard, two objectives are of principal importance: firstly, improving women’s socio-economic status, and secondly, consolidating their political rights.

Within the scope of socio-economic actions, both women and men receive basic and advanced training to acquire skills in, among other things, computer literacy, office administration, tailoring and catering. Other fields in which training is offered are health, hygiene, birth control, HIV/AIDS prevention, nutrition, and hygiene. The basic training also provides a platform for attending special expertise education in, for example, gardening, handicrafts, technical skills, computing, and office work. The alumni are graduated in ceremonies that seek to point out the significance of the training. Very successful individuals are awarded special certificates.

As a next step, WAD provides materials that enable its members to tackle their own income-generating projects and activities. In order to avoid dependency, these materials are only distributed once. Moreover, WAD accompanies and supports all participants in its programmes by training them until the aim of independence is achieved. Additionally, the participants are taught how they can save money together in groups, in order to be able to finance major purchases. Finally, the participants demonstrate their acquired skills and produced objects (mostly craft items) at special Field Days, which are attended by hundreds of interested people. In this way, WAD also gains additional members and participants for more courses and workshops.

There is a great demand for these training activities, from which the rural population, as the target group, benefits directly. The placement of educated
women can be verified, particularly with regard to the computer courses. In the case of the Hardap Training Centre, for example, which operates under WAD’s supervision, some 5,000 students have received training in computer literacy, while 60% of those who participated in the training have found placements in the labour market.

Furthermore, WAD tries to strengthen the political rights of rural women. For this purpose, bodies known as Women’s Voices were established in the Regions in 1997. In 2008, these were transformed into Community Voices, in order to include an equal number of men. Each constituency in Namibia’s 13 Regions has a voice/representative on the Community Voices body. These representatives are selected by WAD and the various Regional and Local Authorities.

All those who serve as a voice for the community in a constituency assist in identifying their training needs and social challenges. This information is then channelled through to the WAD Head Office for further attention and action.

The Community Voices bodies participate in local development committees, train community members in civic education, and encourage women to run for elections in order to acquire leadership positions in the Regions. The Chairpersons of the 13 Community Voices form the body known as National Community Voices, which, in turn, deliberate and lobby decision-makers on a national level in respect of legislative processes and socio-economic challenges facing rural communities. This means that WAD secures a voice for rural communities at local, regional and national level not only in terms of their socio-economic and socio-political education, but also of their participation with decision-makers.

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 men’s reactions sometimes even led to them preventing the women in their families from becoming involved with WAD. To counteract this, from 2002 onwards, WAD began involving men in its projects. Another inclusive step was to change its regional Women’s Voices project name to Community Voices in 2008, while the national body became National Community Voices.

To accomplish its national activities, WAD has convened an annual conference in Namibia since 1995, where participants from various countries from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) come together to discuss recent developments in topics related to women. The topic for 2006 was “Violence against Women” and the topic for 2007 was “Women in Decision-making”. During the course of the 2007 conference, a Women’s Celebratory March was held, in which 1,000 people – mostly women – took part. The march led through
Windhoek’s city centre, and ended at the Parliament Gardens in front of the National Assembly, where the participants were greeted by a major convention of several ministers, delegates, diplomats, and representatives of civil society. The topic for 2008, “Women and Custom”, addresses the marginalisation of women by traditional law. The annual conference is jointly organised by WAD and KAS.

The large number of WAD members, its well-organised local structures and contacts, and its substantial popularity and media presence have also enabled WAD to give politically marginalised women a voice. In this regard, WAD has irrefutably succeeded in improving the political participation of women. A law regarding domestic violence, which had almost been dismissed by the male-dominated Parliament, was passed after a lobby organised by WAD garnered support for the legislation by obtaining several thousand signatures within the space of a few days. Both the President and the government support WAD in word and deed. Regular meetings are held with high-ranking government representatives, and government cooperation is excellent at all levels – including rural areas. In this context, the cooperation of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister should be commended in respect of training programmes being offered for the San.

Within the scope of WAD’s decentralisation and restructuring process, its training centres have been put under the supervision of local communities since 2007. Nevertheless, through these training centres communities can still obtain funds from WAD (and KAS) for training activities.

Conclusion

The projects which have already been accomplished by WAD since 1994 generally pursue the same objectives as those in national development plans and international treaties signed by Namibia. With its holistic approach, WAD pursues the promotion and consolidation of the political, social and economic situation of women. Through its income-generating projects, women’s socio-economic well-being has improved – particularly in the rural areas, where it is needed most. The former Women’s Voices, now transformed into Community Voices, assist communities in giving a voice to marginalised women.

Beyond these achievements, lies the difficult path of integrating women into the formal employment market, and influencing political decision-making processes for the benefit of women. These efforts have to be pursued constantly and persistently in order to correct the significant marginalisation of women in Namibia. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation is proud to have contributed to this in a sustainable and visible manner, in particular by way of its partner, WAD.