

Women's Action for Development: 15 Years of experience with customary practice in rural Namibia

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Introduction

There were roars of approval and cheers all round on 21 March 1990, as the South African flag was lowered in Namibia – never to be raised again! The raising of the new flag of the Republic of Namibia was received with great pride and expectation by all Namibian citizens, including women and children. Visitors to the new state who familiarised themselves with Namibia's esteemed Constitution were filled with awe, and saluted Namibia for its achievement. In this supreme law, freedom is guaranteed to all citizens – again, including women and children – but when the ululations and praises died down, the 'honeymoon' was over, and the long, hard road that Namibian women and children still had to go to reach their freedom stretched dauntingly ahead of them.

Women's Action for Development (WAD) was established 15 years ago in the Omusati Region with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung as its main donor, and has since become a Namibian-based Article 21 Company not for gain. Although WAD has progressed to empower both women and men on an equal basis, the original purpose of its establishment was, and still is, to work towards the upliftment of the living standards of impoverished rural women in particular, by imparting knowledge and skills that would enable them to effectively run their own income-generating projects, or to find jobs. WAD and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung specifically focused on women because it is they – with very few exceptions the world over – who are the backbone of rural communities. It is the women who carry the greatest burden with regard to feeding the family and rearing children. Empowering women to become self-sufficient would, therefore, have multiple beneficial effects on the entire household and the nation as a whole.

The humble beginnings of the WAD Training Centre at Omahenene in the Omusati Region were soon overcome by the unprecedented interest from *Oshiwambo*-speaking women, who were prepared to walk up to 15 km a day in the scorching sun, with babies on their backs, in order to attend WAD's skills development training sessions. Needless to say, successful income-generating projects were established in the Region. Today, these still count among the star

projects launched under WAD's supervision, securing thousands of jobs. The phenomenal success attained in Omusati led to the establishment of several similar training centres in other Regions. These have since been decentralised in relation of the Windhoek headquarters to allow communities to make their own decisions, and become self-sustaining and independent. The establishment of such centres in other Regions thoroughly exposed WAD to the diversity of cultures in Namibia – and, obviously, to the plight of rural women.

One thing became clear to WAD: apart from minor variations in the application of cultural practices, all women in a traditional set-up, irrespective of the prevailing culture, were being exposed to oppressive and prejudicial circumstances which severely impeded their development and financial well-being. Clearly, taking into account that Namibian women constituted more than 50% of the population, their continued oppression, denying them their right to make a significant contribution to the workforce and decision-making process, amounted not only to depriving Namibia of a prominent potential contributor to her gross domestic product, but also to depriving women of prominent leadership roles in the country. Thus, with renewed vigour and determination, WAD embarked upon actions that would combat all outdated practices – no matter how firmly embedded – that were harmful to women, but was soon to realise with what fervour and conviction men defended such traditional cultural practices.

Even more surprising, however, was being confronted with a major stumbling block to the pace of change, namely that the women themselves – especially older women – likewise glossed over and justified such practices as iconic symbols of their culture, even though these customs had laid the very foundation of their own subjugation and underdevelopment. It was clear that harmful cultural practices impeding the development of women had been instituted by men for their own convenience, and for the expression of power over women. It was also clear that the idiosyncrasy of women, defending practices to their own detriment in the name of culture, could only have come about through having been indoctrinated over generations, being stripped of an own opinion, a voice, a choice, their dignity, or any claim to human rights.

This leads to mothers faithfully rearing their daughters to adhere to the customary laws of their culture and to submit to the supremacy of their brothers. Sadly, therefore, traditional mothers become the perpetuators of the system which, unchallenged, becomes firmly embedded in rural households, and is later referred to in fancy terms such as *cultural heritage*. The problem is that, even though the Constitution serves as the supreme law of the land, and customary laws that conflict with it were outlawed upon its inception, many of the old practices are

maintained in rural areas, where no one has heard that some of the old ways of doing things have meanwhile become illegal. The lack of knowledge of the contents of new gender-related laws, which outlaw age-old customs and create an equal dispensation for women, is a very serious limitation for rural women in respect of enjoying equality in marriage and exercising free choice.

Cultural practices that potentially impact women negatively

The following section present some examples of the negative impact of ordinary customary practices which further seriously impoverish rural communities, knowingly or unknowingly.

The first example concerns large, expensive weddings, irrespective of one's financial standing, which are strongly traditional in rural areas. Unlike more affluent communities, weddings in poor rural settings are massive, and are attended by just about everybody in the village, whether invited or not. This places a tremendous financial burden on already struggling parents and wedding couples, who are just starting off in life. They are required to have very large wedding entourages, all of whom need very expensive clothes and accessories, besides providing huge amounts of food for everyone celebrating the wedding. Indeed, the trend seems to be the poorer the family, the larger the wedding. This causes poor couples to deplete their savings, leaving them with large debts to pay. For young couples, such weddings present a backlog even before they start off in life! One person, who has in the meantime become a WAD staff member began his married life with a wedding-related debt of N\$40,000 which he could not pay because he was unemployed at the time.

Funerals are other avenue of impoverishment for the poor. In poor rural settings, funerals are attended by large crowds of people, many of whom attend merely for the post-burial feast, rather than to support the bereaved family in their loss. This places a tremendous financial burden on bereaved families, who already have expenses like having to purchase a coffin.

Another aspect of impoverishment is having large families. This situation is aggravated by having to accommodate the children of extended family members, resulting in too many mouths to feed. WAD's experience in rural communities has shown that there are a very high number of single-parent households headed by women who, by the grace of God and through their own perseverance, manage to keep their offspring alive. This is largely due to irresponsible fathers who avoid paying maintenance for their children, breaking the Maintenance Act¹ in doing so. They leave their children with unemployed mothers or grandparents,

¹ Act No. 9 of 2003.

callously turning a blind eye to them. With little assistance from the children's parents, the lives of pensioners have become a nightmare and consist of a daily battle to feed those many hungry mouths. Such pensioners go hungry themselves rather than deprive their grandchildren of food. They have no time for leisure, no time for self-development, and no time to exercise their own rights, largely because it is widely accepted that it is a grandmother's responsibility to raise her grandchildren if they are born outside marriage.

The worst of it all is that older girls in such a grandmother-headed household are expected to leave school at a tender age to care for their younger siblings and other children sharing the home. This ties in with the age-old belief that girls need not enjoy secondary education. This was reflected by the decreasing number of girls in higher grades at school compared with boys, whereas girls are consistently more in number at school entry age. This situation has fortunately changed positively in recent years to narrow the gap. At WAD's training centres and workshops, however, greater numbers of girls are reporting for skills development sessions, although the organisation took a conscious decision in the past to empower both women and men on an equal basis. Feeding and clothing large families is no joke; neither is enabling all family members to get a good education and so unleash the potential that is dormant in Namibia's rural communities. Thus, for any of these talented children to rise to prominence from the flat plain of their impoverished existence, the chances are rather slim.

Poor people's obsession with large families, irrespective of their levels of income, is problematic for the families themselves but also from a demographical perspective. Africa's explosive population growth is dragging it down as population growth has the potential to deepen poverty, neutralise development assistance, and accelerate environmental degradation.² The phenomenon of large families places a heavy burden on women in particular, since it is cast in stone that it is the women's responsibility to feed the family.

This accepted cultural tradition severely impedes a woman's freedom to partake in any self-development activities, since she is mostly confined to domestic duties like food preparation, fetching water, walking long distances to collect fire wood, finding transport to buy ingredients that are not produced by the homestead, and working the fields. It speaks for itself that women, who spend all their time on the basic chores of caring for large families, are denied their basic human rights to grow and to broaden their horizons. They remain the victims of customs which prescribe the format of their lives. Needless to say, such a one-track life for women is absolutely unacceptable to WAD. The real cause of the problem, namely families that are too large, therefore deserves to be addressed forthwith.

² Cf. UNFPA (2007).

The impact of HIV/AIDS

Impoverishment through HIV/AIDS is another serious factor about which WAD is gravely concerned. WAD's experience is that an increasing number of mature women are forced to stay away from our training programmes because of their responsibilities to care for AIDS orphans and extended family members who are sick with AIDS. This situation is a large contributor to impoverishment in Namibia, and has deprived the economy of a valuable workforce.

Furthermore, HIV/AIDS deprives a family from income if the mother falls ill or has to care for sick relatives. Unfortunately, by tradition, the mother is again the one expected to care for the sick. Males in the traditional set-up would definitely not look after sick people, as it is regarded as a woman's task. WAD's training programmes empower women and inform them of the equality of men and women. Therefore, women are now starting to speak out about their unequal roles in the cultural context, which, in turn, causes conflict in the home. Because of their fear of contracting HIV/AIDS, female WAD members have also started to demand that their husbands use condoms, without which sex is refused. This leads to women being beaten up because, from a cultural point of view, women are expected to be obedient and subservient, and are not supposed to refuse men sex. Because of long-established customs, women find themselves in a precarious situation of being between the devil and the deep blue sea. If they submit to their husbands for unprotected sex, they may contract HIV/AIDS; if they do not submit, they get beaten up. WAD's answer to this serious problem facing women is to attract more men to join debates and sensitisation workshops on equal rights within marriage.

The impact of other social problems

Another social problem facing women is the fact that many who have been married under customary law have no written documentation to prove their marital status. The result is that their husbands are free to marry other wives. The lack of such documentation causes problem when the husband dies, however: purported and actual members of the deceased's extended family descend upon his to grab his property. Partly because the wife married under customary law cannot prove her status, property grabbing goes on unopposed. This practice is particularly prevalent in remote rural areas, where it has been a custom for generations; people are also simply not aware of any law which prohibits property grabbing. Women and their offspring are then usually also driven from the land that they had tended together with their late husbands.

For fear of witchcraft and the danger of revenge by their in-laws, few women report such cases. The rights of women so dispossessed are of little consequence to the perpetrators, and since such cases are difficult to police, the practice simply continues to happen with impunity. The general lack of education among rural women plays a direct role in their dependency and unassertiveness, which, in turn, makes them easy victims for oppression. Therefore, to stay out of harm's way, they have to submit to the wishes of men, whose actions are justified by cultural traditions. It is not strange, therefore, that in some Namibian cultures, girls from as young as ten years of age are under obligation to prove their fertility. This leads to a state where uncles have babies with their nieces – and since the fertility of those girls is proven through the birth of the babies, the issue of possible incest or rape is totally irrelevant, as are considerations like the right of choice or the right of the child. A very 'traditional' view of my own, to put it bluntly, is that there is no such thing as *rape* in cultural practices like these, since any girl belongs to any man and should, therefore, feel flattered if a married man has a child with her.

Women's Action for Development is often confronted in its conferences with reports of the unabated continuation of domestic violence in the country. But women who have the courage to go to the Police draw a blank, since the Police Officer, who is often a man who follows these very cultural traditions, may refuse to open a case docket as the incident is brushed aside as a 'domestic affair'. The irony, as our own members inform us, is that such policemen are often themselves guilty of the crime of domestic violence. A further irony is that wife battering has, among some cultures at least, been seen as an expression of love – so much so, that women from such cultures have been heard to claim that their husbands no longer love them when the beating stops. This is a clear example of the justification of a negative cultural tradition by those who fall victim to it, and also a voluntary renunciation of claims of equal rights within marriage.

Another issue is the misinterpretation of the Bible. Because it determines the husband to be the head of the household, men often use this to justify actions that may infringe on the rights of women. Recent research commissioned by WAD, in partnership with the University of Namibia and the Ministry of Safety and Security, to determine the root causes of violence against women among convicted perpetrators of violence, found that boys witnessed how their fathers, in a state of intoxication, beat up their mothers, and how these witnesses eventually became deaf to their mothers' cries of agony and pleas for mercy. Indeed, boys who were exposed to their fathers calling their mothers the most degrading and derogatory of names caused them to develop a distorted perception of women; they ended up believing that women actually deserved such harsh treatment for daring to question or oppose the superior ruling or opinion of their fathers.

From many discussions with men who follow traditional lifestyles, WAD has come to the conclusion that such men, since childhood, have never learned to deal with emotional trauma. They were taught as boys that a man never shows his emotions, and in particular, that a man never cries. A boy is not permitted to subject himself to feelings of sadness, because he should always act like a man and project a macho image. This inability of men to work through their own troubling emotions has left them with only one way out in terms of dealing with trauma, namely by using violence.

How polygyny affects women

As far as WAD could ascertain, polyandry is not practised in Namibia, although polygyny is. The latter is closely associated with the wealth and status of a man who chooses to share his life with more than one wife. Polygyny is mostly practised by chiefs and wealthy businessmen in Namibia, who can afford to pay the marriage consideration (bride price, or lobola) every time he adds a new wife. Although women in such polygynous set-ups are proud to have been chosen as the wife of a chief or wealthy man, they are in fact merely additions to their husbands' inventory of possessions. Each wife's claim to love and attention can only constitute a fraction of their husband's time; but usually the first wife acts as the go-between in respect of the husband they share. The rights and freedoms of wives in polygynous marriages are limited by their status in the harem. For WAD, as a campaigner for women's rights, this claustrophobic situation is totally unacceptable. WAD campaigns to liberate women from any form of bondage they have to endure because of poverty, and consequently, the organisation rejects the right accorded to men in customary law to entrap women in a polygynous marriage.

From the few examples cited above, it is clear that long-established cultural traditions have, from various angles, severely limited the potential for women to excel. The girl child starts off by receiving little schooling, which leaves them ill-informed and with few marketable skills. Poorly trained women, in turn, will not easily find a profitable job, and this enhances their dependency on their male counterparts. If they are dependent for material means, they can more easily be subjected to oppressive treatment by their providers. Claims of own rights and human dignity by dependent women can hardly feature in such situations.

Turning to witchcraft

A further element which ties in well with little or no education is the unquestioning belief in the supernatural powers of witchcraft. This is a controlling force in the lives of many rural people, and no less so in the lives of rural women, who are easily blackmailed due to their generally low level of education.

The fear of a spell being cast over her or her family by a witchdoctor³ is so real that a rural woman would do anything to avert such evils. The unconditional fear of witchdoctors, who dress up in cowhide, are often under the influence of alcohol while ‘treating’ people, and who call up the ‘spirits’ of ‘the ancestors’ to advise them on how to treat people, is the ideal platform from which to extort cash, material goods or even sexual favours from gullible women and young girls.

WAD has received too many reports from its members in the past that witchdoctors have cheated them, that they have destroyed peace and harmony within families and rural communities, and that they have stripped people of their dignity. Witchdoctors also foster suspicion and mistrust among families through false allegations. Reports further have it that some witchdoctors even claim to be able to cure AIDS, and thus rob people living with HIV/AIDS of their hard-earned money.

The burden of lobola

Making provision for a marriage consideration (bride price, or lobola) is probably the most well-known customary practice among some Namibian cultures with regard to marriage, and is observed even by those who have largely adopted Western lifestyles. At the same time, the cultural tradition has probably undergone so much change that getting married has become more of a liability than an asset for young couples today. WAD members have, on many occasions, declared at our conferences that the financial burden which lobola placed on young couples might be the reason why couples prefer to cohabit as husband and wife, without entering into any traditional or official form of wedlock. Most women feel that the large dowry required by the father of the bride, especially when she has a good education, drains away a significant portion of the savings which a young couple might have to start off with in life. Younger women in particular believe that lobola may be one of the reasons why men start beating up their wives if they consider them as having been ‘disobedient’. These younger women believe

3 A clear distinction is made here between *witchdoctor* and *traditional healer*. The latter have done much to complement what mainstream health professionals offer in terms of tested traditional medicines.

that, once the man has paid the marriage consideration, they feel that they own their wives like slaves, and that they are at liberty to treat them as they see fit. It stands to reason that WAD cannot condone the principle of lobola in its present form, irrespective of the honourable beginnings it may have had. Under no circumstances should women ever become tradable commodities – which even become more expensive by value addition through education. The latest shocking tendency that has come to the organisation's attention is that not only is value added tax (VAT) being charged on such 'sales', the VAT is not even paid over to government!

Being aware of many examples where lobola is blatantly seen as buying/selling and, thus, owning a wife – a stance which inevitably leads to wife battering, WAD rejects the principle of the marriage consideration. WAD fully agrees with its younger members who believe that lobola impoverishes young married couples starting off in life. Such monies could have been utilised far more effectively to buy the numerous items new households need. Furthermore, WAD perceives lobola in its present form to be an institutionalised discrimination against women: why else is it that lobola is not required for young men? WAD consequently speaks out against lobola and intentionally influences its younger female members not to allow their parents to sell them off to men who may treat them as they please.

Conclusion

Namibia is faced with a long road of development to liberate women from negative customary laws that have been in force for generations, and which have become deeply entrenched. In many such customary laws, the rights of women are prejudiced, while those of men seem to be favoured. In all cases of disparity, one can discern a point of departure that a woman is of lesser status and unequal to a man. Certain cultural traditions deem it inappropriate for a woman to talk in the presence of men of the same culture, let alone to be allowed to defend herself adequately, irrespective of the injustice committed against her. Therefore, she is unilaterally charged and convicted. The message conveyed in the Constitution, namely that men and women are equal before the law and that both genders enjoy equality within marriage in terms of the Married Persons Equality Act⁴ has by far not reached the outskirts of cultural spheres of influence; and where it has, the law is simply ignored.

4 Act No. 1 of 1996.

WAD and customary practice in rural Namibia

Since rural women are often uninformed of new laws, besides being unassertive in tandem with cultural traditions, they continue to endure the injustices that have been perpetrated against them for generations. Unfortunately, the forceful dissemination of information regarding the relief for women, brought about by new laws and the policing thereof, does not seem to be a pressing issue, especially in the far-flung corners of the country where customary laws constitute the order of the day. Since the prevalence of such laws restrain the development of women to their full potential, it stands to reason that the country will still for a long time have to forfeit the benefits of fully developed human capital.

Be it as it may, Namibian women are extremely fortunate compared with their peers in other African countries. Here they live in a peaceful country, where women's rights are legally acknowledged and protected. In this context, WAD acknowledges, greatly appreciates, and commends the Government of the Republic of Namibia's favourable stance towards women's rights and the advancement of women in society. This can be seen in the promulgation of the various pieces of legislation that involve the protection of women's rights and gender equality. Thus, despite the challenges which still exist to bring the contents of these laws more effectively to the people on the ground, may these strides forward continue to inspire society at large in its efforts to improve the human rights and present situation of women in Namibia.