**We must choose life. Writings by Namibian women on culture, violence, HIV and Aids**

**Compiled and edited by Elizabeth Khaxas, Women’s Leadership Centre, Windhoek 2008**

**Introduction**

With this second anthology produced by the Women’s Leadership Centre, we continue our ‘writing resistance’ project, featuring writings by women and young women living with and affected by HIV and Aids.

According to estimates by UNAIDS, sixty-two percent of those living with HIV and Aids in Namibia today are women and young women, compared to thirty-eight percent men. This reality tells us that the ABC prevention messages that have preached sexual abstinence, faithfulness or condom use over the past ten years and more have not been effective in curbing the spread of HIV in our lives as women and girls. This anthology contains our collective feminist analysis of the situation of women and girls in present day independent Namibia in relation to poverty, violence, oppressive cultural practices and their intersections with HIV and Aids.

**‘Writing resistance’ - the process**

***Inviting women to participate in the writing project***

Our first step was to develop a brochure providing information on how women and young women could participate in this phase of the activities of the Women’s Leadership Centre. The brochure specifically recognises women of all ages and backgrounds as the most affected constituency in Namibian society in terms of HIV and Aids, and presents the key factors, such as poverty, violence and cultural practices, which are driving the high rate of infection and the social exclusion of females in our society. The brochure invites women to write by stating:

*Many Namibian women are brought up to accept and participate in harmful practices and rituals – such as lobola, repressive inheritance customs, forced marriages – which are considered ‘normal’ by women of all ages across many communities, yet which place women at a high risk of infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.*

*These practices define who women are and what they become in our communities and as members of our nation. Women’s bodies and their sexuality are owned, determined, controlled, used and often violated by males within our families, communities, places of work and of worship, educational and legal institutions across society as a whole.*

*A ‘good, marriageable woman’ is believed to be silent, obedient and shy. Research shows that marriage has become a ‘death trap’ for many Namibian women because husbands are often unfaithful, and many women are powerless to negotiate safer sex practices in their relationships. Incest and sexual abuse of girl children and young women by male members of their families is rife in our communities.*

*Most women do not enjoy economic, political, legal, cultural, educational or health resources, and many are excluded from owning land or property. Namibian women are therefore often dependent upon the very people who violate and despise them as women.*

*Become an activist and make a difference!*

*You are invited to actively resist practices that may lead to HIV infection by taking part in the feminist initiatives of the Women’s Leadership Centre. If you are HIV-positive, we appeal to you to share your knowledge and positive life strategies with other women so that their understanding of HIV and Aids can be expanded. Start to advocate and lobby for your sexual and other rights through our educational and training programmes and through in-depth discussions with NGOs, civil society activists, church leaders, policy makers and members of international organisations. Express your thoughts, experiences and artistic talents by becoming involved in our publishing or photographic projects.*

*Every Namibian woman is entitled to a life of safety, dignity and pleasure!*

Twenty thousand copies of the brochure were printed and distributed through women’s organisations, other civil society organisations, school libraries as well as through the participants of workshops on Women’s Rights, Writing, Culture and HIV and Aids. The brochure was also published as an advertisement in the national newspaper The Namibian as well as in *Sister Namibia* magazine.

***Training workshops for women writers***

Although we received many texts through the mail and by email, the heart of the ‘writing resistance’ project were the nine Women’s Rights, Writing, Culture and HIV and Aids workshops which were attended by 250 participants from all over Namibia. The workshops took place in Caprivi, Kavango and Khomas regions. We worked with women who are most vulnerable, most stigmatised and discriminated against in our society. The participants of the workshops were women living with and affected by HIV and Aids, including poor women, young women and lesbian women.

The workshops gave participants the opportunity to discuss in detail the links between gender inequalities and HIV and Aids. At all our workshops a wealth of knowledge and experience emerged on the different cultural norms, values and practices that expose women to violence, poverty and HIV infection ‘in the name of culture.’ Participants and facilitators alike were shocked at the prevalence of so many diverse cultural practices that have become life-threatening to women. Many discussions ensued on the difficulties that women and girls experience in protecting themselves from HIV. Participants voiced their concerns and needs in relation to living with and being affected by HIV and Aids.

In these workshops, women and young women were also trained in various forms of writing, and we used role play and drama to develop interesting dialogue and explore opposing view-points, a successful strategy for overcoming the fear of writing as is evident in the dramas published in this anthology.

The participants came up with ideas on how women can protect themselves from HIV infection, and made recommendations on what the Namibian government can do to protect women and young women. These recommendations were included in our advocacy booklet: We women and girls of Namibia claim our right to survive HIV and Aids by challenging poverty, oppressive cultural practices and violence that WLC published in six local languages.

The workshops served as feminist intellectual spaces where women could politicise and debate culture and ‘write resistance.’ They were also celebratory spaces where activism met community/debates, and where resistance and solidarity were crafted and experienced.

The central question underlying all the workshops was: *Through which practices and discourses did we become the women we are today, and how do these practices and discourses put us at risk of HIV infection and Aids?*

Women and young women in all our workshops agreed that we need to break the taboos and silences around oppressive cultural practices and beliefs. Our cultures and traditions contain many unconstitutional aspects that violate women’s human rights, and sustain and promote inequalities between women and men. With HIV and Aids wreaking havoc amongst our people, we are challenged to address the many areas of inequality and oppression which fuel the pandemic.

More than five hundred pieces of writing were submitted by women of all ages from across Namibian society. From these we made the selection that comprises this powerful anthology.

***Why women wrote their stories***

Below are some of the remarks expressed by participants about writing:

*Our stories will challenge oppressive cultural practices and religions.*

*Our stories will create hope, stop discrimination and encourage people to live. Our stories will bring healing to ourselves and to others and will document our lives.*

*We are not victims anymore. We are changing. We are actors in this change and this is exciting!*

**‘Writing resistance’ – the outcomes**

**Women as knowers and as producers of knowledge**

Through our workshops women from many diverse groups across the country participated in the production of knowledge on the intersections between the violation of women’s rights and the spread of HIV and Aids in Namibia. The outcome is a collective analysis of what it means to be women, young women and girls in the different cultural contexts in Namibia, particularly in relation to the high risk of contracting HIV through the everyday practices in our lives. The workshops raised feminist consciousness among women and young women as we began to examine the many forms of oppression women endure under patriarchal cultural, social and religious domination, and how these impact our agency in protecting ourselves from HIV and Aids. The women also learned that any analysis they want to make has to start with their own life experiences. Their analyses reveal the needs, desires and demands of Namibian women, and show that personal narratives can become a powerful political tool for transforming their lives and their communities.

***Strategising beyond ABC***

The workshop participants formulated strategies that went beyond the prevalent ‘abstain - be faithful - condomise’ prevention messages by suggesting ways in which women can gain more agency:

*Don’t let culture determine your fate. Learn that you can make choices in your life - don’t just accept everything.*

*Develop self-confidence and speak your mind!*

*Educate yourself, become independent and don’t depend on men!*

*Create open communication. Teach men what they can gain from gender equality.*

*Don’t rely on others; talk to your children yourself.*

*Love yourself and know that you are okay just as you are and that you do not need anybody to make you more respectable or more complete.*

*Our own lives and our right to live must become the first priority before anything else. To look after ourselves we have to learn to become strong, independent and self-loving.*

***Developing women’s creative expression and self-knowledge***

The arts in Namibia are still generally practised by white people and black men; few black women are expressing themselves through writing, photography, painting and other art forms. Through our writing and photography workshops, we strengthened the voice of our participants to speak for themselves, write for themselves, and take photographs that are in their own image. These activities built pride and strengthened women’s self-esteem and self-knowledge. The writing, photography and research activities have provided marginalised women with subversive strategies for getting their voices heard, and claiming many spaces of power.

**‘Writing resistance’ – the context**

***Women’s rights are on paper - not in the hearts and minds of our people***

Namibia has a Constitution that guarantees equality between women and men. It has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action as well as the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. We have put in place national legislation such as laws on domestic violence and rape: Yet Namibia remains one of the most violent and most unequal societies in the world. We have laws on paper but these laws do not protect women and girls because they are not implemented. Moreover, they are not in the hearts and minds of our people because black women are not yet perceived of or recognised as full humans and as citizens who deserve the protection of the state and the law. Thus the legal rights gained by women have not led to the transformation of the gender regime in our country. These modern laws provide only the formal declaration of rights which leaves out the cultural systems and practices that continue undisturbed…patriarchy rules unchallenged even in the lives of the most progressive women in Africa! Culture still overrides the law, and through the mobilisation of ‘conventions as customary law’, culture pushes women outside the ambit of even the most limited legal protections and entitlements, mainly through marriage. Thus, it is crucial that women and girls work hard to ensure that our rights become inscribed into the minds and heart of all Namibians.

The stories in this anthology describe how women struggle to be treated with dignity; for their humanity to be recognised; as well as to regain their autonomy, that is the ability to make decisions and choices for themselves as human beings. If we want to reclaim our female autonomy then we first have to trace and examine our ‘herstories’ in order to understand how most black women have become the private property of males in our societies.

When a baby girl is born it should be the responsibility of the family and the community to protect her. However, today we find that baby girls are raped and killed in our communities with impunity, many a times by their own fathers or close relatives. For these men, such a baby is not considered a human being. It is seen as a ‘thing’, an object that can be used and disposed of without any serious consequences for such violent, criminal behaviour.

In some of our cultures, when a young girl is growing up her body is modified and mutilated through female genital mutilation and scarification as a means of enticement and giving pleasure to men, because the female body is defined and constructed as belonging to the males in her family, community and nation.

We still have initiation rituals through which a girl who has started her menstruation is taught to satisfy the demands that males begin to impose upon her body; her body is moulded into submissiveness to please and satisfy the males. Speech is forbidden and absolute obedience is enforced through beatings and punishments to deter transgression of the rule of the father (patriarchy).

She may be sexually violated by cousins, uncles, grandfathers and fathers as a test of her womanhood. Her female body is considered a communal good, whose use can be extended to uncles, cousins, chiefs, healers and others in the community.

She may be given away in child marriage, forced and arranged marriage and traded for cattle. In marriage she becomes the property of the husband, who has unlimited access to her body in all circumstances. He may even claim the right to determine whether she lives or dies. And so women are beaten and raped in the marital home and, in many cases, knowingly and deliberately infected with HIV. If and when he kills her, it is often with impunity and the presumption that he has the right to do this as her master.

When they say “It is our culture” or “We have to return to the old ways of our cultures,” it means that we are expected to uncritically accept all the above practices, through which our bodies become the playthings of males. We know that violence and the violation of our bodies happen because our bodies and sexuality have been appropriated and no longer belong to ourselves.

The laws that are currently in place in Namibia are not preventing the above mentioned practices from taking place; nor are they protecting women and girls from the actual violations that are unleashed on their bodies.

How then do we as women and girls become humans who have rights and dignity? How do we become persons who deserve and receive respect from males, and citizens who are entitled to protections from the State?

**‘Writing resistance’ – words into action**

***Rejecting and resisting cultural practices that objectify and violate women***

First we have to reject all rituals, practices and beliefs that oppress women and deny us autonomy – our right to make our own decisions and choices. As women we must not subject ourselves to these traditions. We must further reject the role of custodian of oppressive practices through which we subject other women and girls to dehumanising, degrading and violent experiences in the name of a culture which exists to please the ‘father’. We have to teach ourselves and all female children that we must reject and resist all the archaic traditions which are intended to tame, mutilate, enslave and violate our bodies in order to pleasure the males in our society.

The responsibility is also on the men to reject these oppressive rituals which violate women and girls, and not to demand and desire ‘tamed’ female bodies and minds.

***Recognising and acting out our agency***

Secondly we have to recognise our agency and act as agents. When we make choices for ourselves we become agents of our own lives; we become people who are in charge of our lives and who decide and choose what is valuable, good and joyful for ourselves.

The stories in this anthology demonstrate the power of women’s agency in difficult circumstances: when women flee violent homes, leave life threatening marriages, stand by their children instead of forgiving rapist fathers, and when girls refuse forced marriages or demand the use of condoms to protect their lives. When we write and tell the stories of our agency, we stir the juices for change and encourage our sisters, daughters, mothers, aunts, friends and colleagues to do the same.

***Making the personal political***

Thirdly, if we choose to live lives of dignity and respect we have to ‘tell all’. This means to break the silences and taboos and speak the unspeakable, recognising that the humiliation, degradation and pain we have experienced is not unique to each one of us but part of the system that makes it possible for men to own and control women.

In this anthology, women and girls tell the stories of what has happened to them, their daughters, mothers, aunts, sisters and grandmothers. This is how women make the personal political. If more and more of us write and talk about our personal experiences in the privacy of our homes, marriages and relationships as well as what happens to us in public spaces such as workplaces, churches, schools, courts of law and other state institutions, we begin to create a collective knowledge and understanding of what it means to be women and girls in Namibia today.

This knowledge gives us power because it tells us what we need to change within ourselves as well as in our society in order for all of us to live wholesome lives. This knowledge is also inclusive. It encompasses all the differences and diversities that make up our identities as Namibian women: lesbian, heterosexual, urban, rural, black, white, rich, poor, old, young…across all our ethnic communities. When we write and tell our ‘herstories’, our experiences no longer remain isolated incidents shrouded in secrecy and taboos. Instead they become a record of the system of patriarchy which rules in our society. When we recognise them for what they are and know the dangers they pose for our autonomy and dignity as women and girls, we can discharge them from our lives.

After we have seen the whole picture of how we have been made into females who are there to serve fathers, husbands and other males through oppressive cultural practices, we acquire the power and regain our agency to discharge everything and everyone who does not act in our interest; anyone who denies our human-ness and leaves us open to violation.

***Becoming autonomous with personhood and integrity***

Then comes the wonderfully creative and powerful part that all women have to engage continuously in our lives: re-imagining ourselves in new and liberated ways. My sisters: we have to feel the power; touch the power; and ‘mine’ the power of female human-ness, within each of our selves. This process begins with the recognition of oneself as an individual human being with rights and integrity. I am me! I can do anything! I can be anything! I can create the world that I want for myself! I have choices! I have entitlements! But first each one of us needs to imagine how she will feel, look like and act when she is in control of her life and then, using this blueprint, build and modify herself slowly but surely. Writing helps us to re-imagine ourselves.

We have to ask ourselves questions like: Who do I choose to be this time around? What will give me joy and peace in my life? How can I be creative in my life? What makes me feel good and ‘lekker’?

Our sense of ourselves as individuals grows and become stronger when we do collective dreaming and imagining about the kind of world we want for ourselves and for others. Then we become part of the feminist sisterhood: the global feminist movement which works to bring changes in the lives of women everywhere.

***Becoming a radical feminist***

Becoming a radical feminist is a multi-faceted decision, process and political life-style, involving every aspect of a woman’s life and being. It is important to understand and accept that not every woman is a feminist, but that every woman can become a feminist.This is a crucial distinction in conceptual and political terms, because within the anti-colonial contexts of struggle against racial and supremacist inequalities in our respective African societies, black women did become incorporated into new expressions of political life and activism. Whether women actively and consciously engaged in political resistance to colonial exclusions (or resisted at an individual/family level), almost invariably, African women became politicised in new and transformative ways within their specific social realities. The engagements of African women with Nationalism as an ideology and as an expression of resistance at a particular moment in our herstory created a consciousness among women everywhere that laid the basis for the emergence of radical identity and activism.

During the struggle for independence, women acquired a sensibility about themselves as political beings which was embedded in the centuries of resistance to patriarchy and male domination. And while most women were shaped by nationalist notions of what was permissible in terms of cultural and other political issues, during these anti-colonial struggles some African women took the next step in this process of political development, and adopted a more radical stance towards patriarchy within the liberation movements and the males who controlled their structures and resources. They resisted sexual harassment, challenged men on sexual violation and other misogynistic, supremacist expressions of patriarchal privilege and power. In so doing, these women moved themselves, in conceptual, identity and activist terms from the narrow confines of nationalist politics to the more challenging, radical politics of becoming feminist.

Feminism is an ideology of resistance to patriarchal privilege and supremacist power. It challenges and rejects the exercise of sexual privilege, particularly through sexual and cultural impunity and the violation of women’s bodily integrity. And, feminism, as an identity and a life-politics, proposes an alternative to patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood, by resituating these sources of identity in a conceptual and lived politics that re-defines and enhances women’s ownership of personhood, bodily integrity, autonomy and dignity as female persons.

While various classes and collectivities of women have adopted ‘versions’ of feminism to suit their specific agendas, usually in terms of how they manage their relationships to males and to the patriarchal backlash (the resistance to women’s freedoms and autonomy), at its core, feminism provides women with an alternative politics, a politics through which women can elect to free themselves, in particular ways, from patriarchal identity, control and domination.

Radical feminism is a stance within feminism as a radical politics. To become a radical feminist, a woman has to take the next step in radicalising every element and aspect of her life. Central to this stance is the understanding, acceptance and implementation of the mantra that ‘the personal is always political, and the political must always be personal.’

Radical feminism is also an identity that requires that a woman name herself feminist, publicly and with pride. To become a radical feminist is not only about having the courage to live the rest of your life in the most radical ways – defending the key elements of your freedom – which are bodily and sexual integrity; personal autonomy, complete and dignified personhood; and your right to total protection (by the State) from any and all forms of violation and impunity. To become a radical feminist is also crucially about always being courageous on every political, personal, cultural, social, economic, legal and other issue.

Being a radical feminist is something you become and are every day of your life, and it begins with the most fundamental step – of loving yourself enough never to let anyone or anything undermine your wholeness and your inalienable right to be free. None of your rights and entitlements (to love, safety, wellness, wholeness - bodily, emotionally and spiritually) are negotiable, ever.

Instead, a radical feminist is a woman who always positions herself outside the status quo; always asks the difficult questions; always looks at the world around her with a critical eye; always and consistently scrutinises patriarchy in all its forms and expressions, and never puts any woman down, regardless of what her politics might be. Critiquing each others’ political choices and actions is important and often necessary. But participating in the denigration of women through an acceptance of the patriarchal backlash and misogynistic stereotypes is unacceptable.

Radical feminism is a Choice. It is the most powerful identity and life­style that any woman can choose. And, it is the most rewarding and most beautiful gift a woman can give herself.

***Holding the State accountable to girls and women***

Sometimes visitors to Namibia ask us: Does Namibia have a women’s movement? My answer is always: Yes, we are here. The Namibian women’s movement may be small, it may be struggling for resources, it may consist of only a few women’s organisations and activists, but it is real, we are here to attest to its existence and vibrancy. It is the women’s movement which facilitates women reclaiming their agency and realising that they can be public and present in our societies. The women’s movement enables women to experience the power to confront and challenge the State. It is through the women’s movement that women have learnt to make the personal political and to fight for laws against rape and domestic violence; laws to challenge and reject misogynist impunity in our lives; it is the women’s movement which critiques the makeup of the public space as only consisting of men and which demands that women be represented and have access to all spheres of governance.

It is from this space that we analyse HIV and Aids as a women’s issue and proclaim that we must be included in the search for solutions to this pandemic. It is from this space that we critique oppressive cultural practices and beliefs that threaten our lives. It is from this space that we critique the appropriation and unequal distribution of the economic resources of this land by white and black men at the expense of the vast majority of the people. It is from this space that we critique the reckless squandering of our resources on superfluous consumption such as the construction of a State House at exorbitant cost in a country where the majority of the people do not have even basic shelter. It is because of this space called the women’s movement that we have become human, and through our agency in this movement we are becoming citizens with rights and entitlements.

I invite all Namibian women and girls to start their own groups and organisations or to join existing organisations so that all of us will become citizens with rights and protections inside our homes as well as in the public spaces of our country.

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