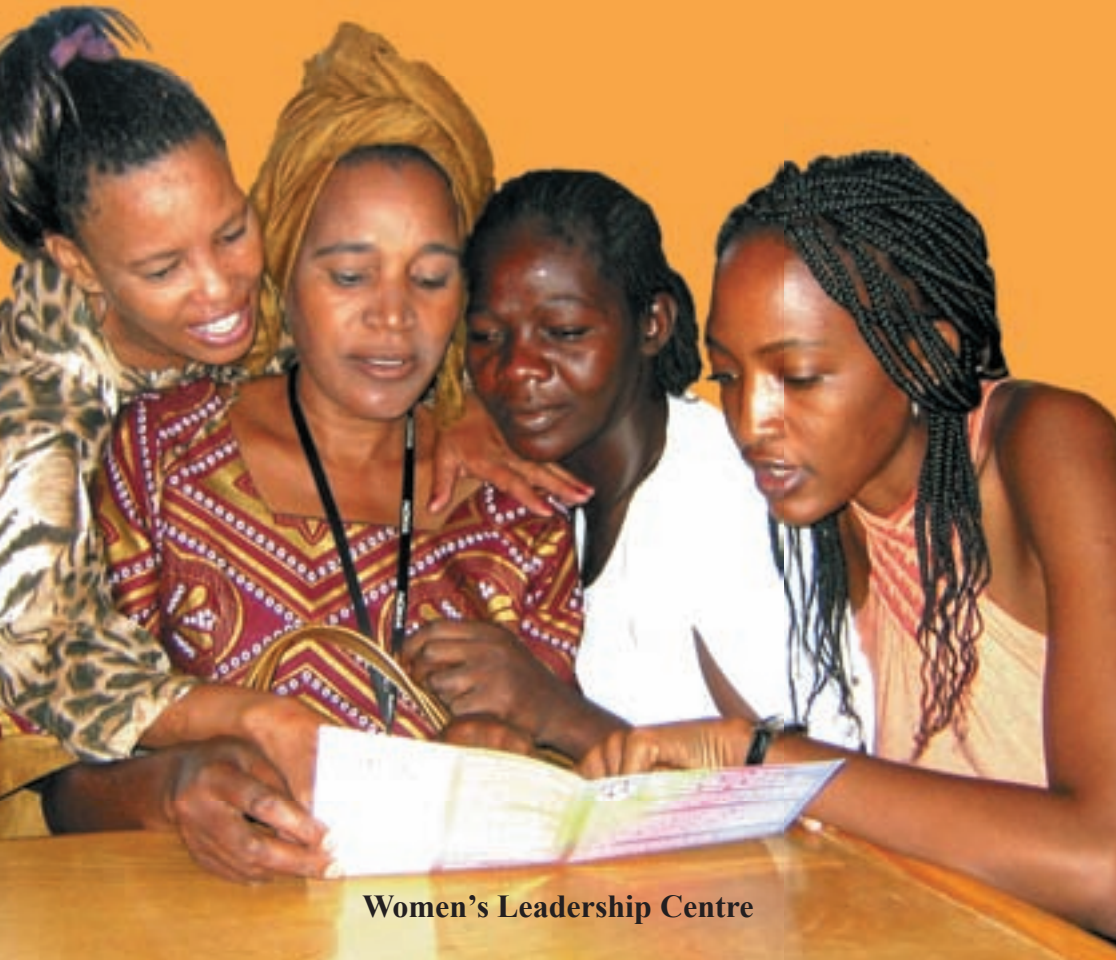


We

**Women and girls of Namibia
claim our right to survive HIV and Aids
by challenging poverty,
oppressive cultural practices
and violence**





“We call on all women and girls in Namibia to take our own lives into our own hands, to know that we are full human beings with full human dignity and rights. Our own lives and our right to live must become the first priority before anything else. To look after ourselves well we have to learn to become strong, independent and self-loving.”

Elizabeth IKhaxas, Director, Women’s Leadership Centre

What is our vision?

Namibia will be a better place when...

- We achieve full equality between women and men;
- We have freedom from hunger, poverty and violence;
- We successfully prevent the spread of HIV and Aids;
- We give all Namibians in need access to treatment for HIV and Aids;
- We offer counselling to, and eliminate discrimination against, people living with HIV and Aids;
- We train, support and remunerate home-based care-givers;
- We guarantee inheritance and property rights for women and girls, and ensure that women receive maintenance for their children;
- We decriminalise sex work and restore dignity to all women, including lesbian and bi-sexual women and women with disabilities;
- We have equal participation of women and men in all spheres of politics and decision-making, and all leaders including traditional authorities and religious leaders champion the rights of all women and girls to equal citizenship and freedom of choice in all aspects of their lives.

To achieve our vision, all elected and appointed officials must develop the political will to work towards full gender equality and women's rights, and to distribute resources equitably to make poverty history in our country.

Why do HIV and Aids have a woman's face in Namibia?

In our country many more women than men are living with HIV and Aids. According to UNAIDS estimates published in 2006, 62 percent of adults living with HIV were women, compared to 38 percent men.

Despite all the prevention campaigns conducted by various agencies over the past years, the infection ratio is not coming down. The national surveys conducted by the Ministry of Health and Social Services among pregnant women show a national average of 19.9 percent of those tested in 2006 were HIV positive, compared to 19.7 percent in 2004.

Figures vary greatly among the regions of Namibia. Caprivi Region is the hardest hit: in the age group 25 to 49 years, almost 50 percent of pregnant women tested in 2006 in Katima Mulilo were HIV positive.

Young women are particularly at risk of new infection, because of the many cultural practices that involve sexual and other violations of their bodies. Girls and young women living in poverty are also exposed to HIV infection through 'sugar daddy' relationships with older men.

Marriage is not a protection against HIV and Aids. Married women now have a higher rate of infection than single women. One of the reasons is that many married men have multiple partners, and are more ready to use condoms in their casual relationships than with their wives. Women are threatened, beaten and abused if they ask for condom use in their marriages. Many of our homes are sites of various forms of violence, including rape, sexual abuse, physical and emotional violence. Girls and women with disabilities are particularly at risk of various forms of abuse and violence.

Culture teaches boys to become men entitled to rule over women and girls and control their bodies. Practices such as widow inheritance, widow cleansing, polygamy, dry sex, lobola, some traditional healing practices and many others contribute to the oppression of women. Culture teaches girls, for example through initiation practices, to become women who are submissive to and dependent on men. Girls are not taught that their bodies must be treated with respect, and that they have the right to make their own choices about their sexuality and sexual partners,

Poverty drives many women and girls into sex work, or traps them in unhealthy and violent relationships as a means of survival.

At the same time, women and girls are burdened with caring for the sick and the dying with little support, while providing for a rapidly growing number of orphans.

We, women and girls of Namibia, must challenge poverty, oppressive cultural practices and all forms of gender-based violence in claiming our right not only to survive HIV and Aids, but to live our lives in dignity, prosperity and peace as guaranteed in the Constitution of our country.

Freedom from hunger and poverty

Government figures from 2004 show that one third of our people are poor. The majority of these are women holding families and communities together through subsistence farming, domestic work, trading in the informal sector, or regular or casual sex work.

Poverty denies women their right to live with dignity, and puts them at risk of HIV and Aids. As more people become infected and ill and the death toll rises, scarce family resources are used up on payment for transport to clinics and hospitals, medication and funerals.

Women leave productive work to take care of the ill. Families lose their breadwinners and sink further into poverty. Grandmothers are left with more and more orphans to care for with their meagre pensions.

We need new efforts NOW to bring our people freedom from hunger and poverty, and enable them to survive HIV and Aids.

What women want now from our government:

A National HIV/Aids Food Relief Programme

We call on government to set up a National HIV/Aids Food Relief Programme immediately to enable poor people in our society to take their anti-retroviral medication when needed, to adhere to the treatment when their health improves, and to be able to feed their families.

Economic Empowerment of the Poor (EEP)

We call on government to institute Economic Empowerment of the Poor (EEP).

Black Economic Empowerment has not benefited poor people, in particular poor women. The gap between the rich and the poor in our country is the highest in the world, and is increasing, while large sums of money are disappearing from government services through corruption! Close to 40 percent of adults and more than 60 percent of our youth are unemployed.

There is an urgent need for a policy, an action plan and their effective implementation to economically empower the poor.

Basic Income Grant

We call on government to institute the Basic Income Grant, which will provide N\$100 per month for each Namibian under the age of 60.

This will make a huge impact on poor households in Namibia, and positively affect the lives of everyone - especially people living with HIV and Aids.

What women say about poverty and HIV/Aids:

People living with HIV and Aids are dying because they are hungry and unable to take their medication.

Black economic empowerment is only for politically well-connected black men and not for poor women!

Introduce feeding programmes in schools so that orphans and children of the poor and unemployed are fed during school hours.

Support self-employment initiatives of women and girls.

Give fishing and mining quotas to poor communities!

Poverty drives girls into the arms of sugar daddies.

There is no dignity in sex work, but I will do anything to feed my children.

There is no political will to eradicate poverty in Namibia.

The Basic Income Grant is more than an income support programme. It provides security that reinforces human dignity and empowerment. It has the capacity to be the most significant poverty reducing programme in Namibia, while supporting household development, economic growth and job creation at the same time.

Bishop Dr. Zephania Kameeta

Extract from the Presentation to the United Nations Commission for Social Development, February 2007

Prevent the spread of HIV and Aids

The “Abstain, Be Faithful, Condomise” (ABC) message has not prevented the spread of HIV and Aids in Namibia. The power of women and girls to exercise their sexual rights to refuse sex or negotiate safer sex practices such as the use of condoms is undermined because poverty makes them economically dependant on men, while oppressive cultural practices teach girls and women to be submissive and give men unlimited access to their bodies.

No information has been provided to women who have sex with women on how to protect themselves from HIV.

Women and girls who have been raped lack information about and access to Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) to reduce the chance of HIV infection through the rapist.

Many pregnant women who are HIV positive lack information about and access to treatment that can prevent HIV transmission to their baby during birth, as well as information and support to prevent HIV transmission through breastfeeding.

What women want now from our government:

Contribution to the development of microbicides

We call upon government to contribute financially to research on the development of microbicides.

Microbicides are products such as gels or creams which are being developed as a new form of HIV prevention. Once available, they can be applied to the vagina or anus to prevent the spread of HIV through sexual intercourse. Women can keep the use of a microbicide secret from sexual partners who refuse to use condoms.

Comprehensive sexuality education

We call upon government to urgently institute comprehensive sexuality education in schools, informal and adult education.

This must be based on a human rights and women’s rights perspective, including education on sexual rights, reproductive rights, and the equal rights of lesbian and gay people. This will assist in preventing new infections and help those living with HIV and Aids to clearly understand their reproductive choices as well as prevent re-infection with HIV.

Comprehensive education on human and women's rights

We call on government to embark on an education campaign on human rights and women's rights in all regions of Namibia.

Women and men, girls and boys need to know the full human rights of all our citizens and to embrace all aspects of gender equality. They need to understand how the rights of women and girls, and also the rights of gay and lesbian people, are violated in particular ways, based on cultural understandings of male superiority and practices of male dominance. Such knowledge is a key tool in ending violence against women and girls as well as against lesbian and gay people. Enforcement of women's and girls' rights is fundamental to the prevention of HIV and Aids.

Denouncing all oppressive cultural practices and beliefs

We call on government to make a clear statement denouncing all oppressive cultural practices and beliefs; to educate girls and women to enable them to challenge these practices and beliefs; and to educate traditional and religious leaders on the rights of women and girls.

The Namibian Constitution protects the equal rights and dignity of all our citizens, and outlaws torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. There is an urgent need to harmonise traditional laws with the Constitution, and to educate traditional and religious leaders to uphold the Constitution and protect the rights of women and girls to take control of their own bodies and make their own choices regarding their sexuality.

Education campaigns should be initiated to teach girls and women to challenge and reject harmful cultural practices such as widow inheritance, widow cleansing, dry sex, and initiation practices involving forced sex and other violations of young women's dignity, physical safety and mental health.

Education for women and girls on the use of femidoms and condoms, and increased distribution of femidoms

We call on government to provide ongoing education for women and girls on the use of femidoms and condoms, and to increase the distribution of femidoms.

The proper and consistent use of male and female condoms prevents HIV infection. Femidoms can give girls and women more control over contraception. Lesbian

and bi-sexual women need to receive information on how they can practice safer sex using condoms and other methods.

Information about and access to PEP

We call on government to provide ongoing information to all our people on the role that PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis) can play in preventing HIV transmission from a rapist to a rape survivor; to encourage all rape survivors or their guardians to report a rape immediately in order to access PEP; to ensure that PEP is available at all hospitals, health centres and clinics; to fully train medical staff on how to administer the PEP treatment; and to ensure that police officers and medical staff inform everyone reporting a rape on the importance of starting PEP treatment within 72 hours of the rape.

The rate of sexual violence in Namibia is one of the highest in the world.

According to a recent study by the Legal Assistance Centre, the vast majority of rape victims continue to be women and girls, while most rapes are perpetrated by men and boys. Children as young as four months old are being raped, and boys as young as 7 years old are committing rape.

Added to the trauma of rape there is now the additional possibility of being infected with HIV by the rapist. Urgent government action is needed to encourage all rape survivors to report a rape, even where the perpetrator is a family member, and to ensure that every rape survivor has access to PEP within 72 hours of the rape so that the medication for prevention can be effective.

Access to Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission

We call on government to provide ongoing information to everyone of reproductive age about methods for Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission (PPTCT) of HIV during the birth process; to roll out this service to every clinic and health centre; and to encourage all pregnant women in our country to use ante-natal services so they can access the prevention methods.

Pregnant women who are HIV positive can receive a complete course of ARV medication to prevent transmission of HIV to their babies, and babies can receive treatment to protect them at birth. HIV positive parents can also access ARV medication for themselves. There is an urgent need for everyone of reproductive

age to receive adequate information on this issue so that all parents can act to protect their babies and receive treatment for themselves.

Information about and support for infant feeding choices

We call on government to provide ongoing information and access to real choices regarding the feeding of infants to avoid HIV transmission through breast milk.

Research shows that the risk of HIV transmission to infants through breast milk can be reduced if women do not give their babies any additional food while breastfeeding. The recommendation is to give four months of breast milk only, followed by a complete change to other foods. However, this is difficult to implement where safe drinking water is not available for replacement feeding, which according to government figures of 2004 is still the case for more than 10 percent of our people. Women are also not supported in stopping breast feeding abruptly, while many women continue with breastfeeding to avoid stigma and discrimination.

What women say about prevention of HIV and Aids:

Even if the research on prevention methods other than condoms is taking place in other countries, our government must contribute financially to show that they take our lives seriously.

As long as our cultures promote male superiority and condone harmful cultural practices, prevention campaigns will not have any effect.

Comprehensive life-long sexuality education is a matter of human rights. All children, young people and adults must receive sexuality education suited to their sexual maturity and personal needs.

Access to condoms does not mean that our men are using them in our bedrooms.

Without upholding, promoting and enforcing women's rights to freedom and equality in all aspects of their lives, we can forget about prevention of HIV.

Eradicate teenage pregnancies! Save our daughters from HIV and Aids!

Women and girls with various forms of disabilities need accessible information on how we can protect ourselves from HIV and Aids.

Access to treatment for HIV and Aids

Currently access to information about antiretroviral therapy (ART) as well as access to the treatment itself depends on where you live, who you are, or how much money you have. People living in remote rural areas, lesbian and gay people, prison inmates and marginalised ethnic groups such as the Himba and the San are especially excluded.

Information and education materials continue to target heterosexual urban youth, while culturally sensitive materials in indigenous languages, as well as materials targeting people in same-sex relationships, are lacking.

Considering the high illiteracy rate among older people and some ethnic groups, there is a need for treatment literacy campaigns to use face to face training and the various language services on radio.

What women want now from our government:

We call on government to educate all Namibians on the ARV treatment available and to roll out the medication to treat HIV and Aids as well as opportunistic diseases such as tuberculosis, so they can be accessed by all Namibians in need. This must be accompanied by the provision of food or grants to those who need them, and the establishment of sustainable income generating projects for people living with HIV and Aids so that they can adhere to their ARV treatment and feed their families.

What women say about access to treatment:

ARVs are not yet accessible for all the people who need them in Namibia!

Why are so many people dying while life-saving medicines are available? Who decides who will live and who will die?

We need more clinics and health centres in rural areas as well as mobile clinics which will dispense ARV medication and improve the general health care of people living in remote areas.

Our clinics only give out aspirins!

Our health system is falling apart, and those most affected are the poor and those living with HIV and Aids.

Access to counselling and elimination of stigma and discrimination

Psychological support services are needed in all our communities for the many thousands of Namibians who are infected and affected by HIV and Aids, including pregnant women, women and girls with disabilities, people living in isolated rural communities and certain ethnic groups, people living in peri-urban squatter camps, and lesbian and gay people.

People are suffering because of stigma and discrimination in our communities. As women are more prepared than men to know their HIV status through voluntary counselling and testing, and willing to protect their babies through preventive treatment, they are often blamed for bringing HIV into their families, while they may have been infected by promiscuous men refusing to use condoms.

Men must be encouraged to overcome denial and go for voluntary counselling and testing in order to take up greater responsibility for preventing the spread of HIV infection in our country.

What women want now from our government:

We call on government to train and employ people infected and affected by HIV and Aids to provide counselling services, and to send a clear message that all forms of stigmatisation and discrimination are unacceptable.

What women say about counselling and stigma:

Poor women have the courage to speak out about how HIV and Aids affects them and their families. Why can't our government and community leaders have the same courage? We need their voices to combat stigma and discrimination!

We infected and affected people are doing the work of counselling in our communities while receiving no assistance from the government. Just imagine how high the suicide numbers would be without us!

Stigma at home and at health centres is a daily reality for people living with HIV.

Support and remunerate those caring for orphans and providing home-based care

Care for the rising number of orphans and for people living with HIV and Aids falls mostly on women and girls. Grandmothers are now raising large numbers of orphans on their inadequate pensions. Most home-based care-givers are untrained and do not know the dangers to themselves and for their patients. Many are poor and do not have the resources necessary to do this work. For example, government figures from 2004 showed that in the Caprivi region, which is hardest hit by HIV and Aids, 83 percent of households had no access to toilet facilities and 24 percent had no access to safe water.

What women want now from our government:

We call on government to provide home-based care-givers with the information and psychological support they need, to give them access to the resources they require and to remunerate them for looking after the elderly, orphans and the sick.

What women say about orphans and care-giving:

Women and girls who are doing care work must be compensated by the government!

I dropped out of school in grade 10 to look after my ill parents living with Aids. We have nothing to eat. If I am paid for the care work it will put food on the table for all of us!

Many people will be willing to look after their ill relatives and other people if they know that they will be compensated for it. People can live and die in dignity knowing someone will look after them until the end!

How can I care properly for my sick father if I have no money to pay for water?

The rights of orphans to love, care, education and a decent standard of living must be protected.

Guarantee inheritance and property rights for women and girls

Although women are guaranteed the right to own and inherit land under the Communal Land Reform Act, they are still affected by biased rulings by predominantly male traditional authorities, as the 2005 national conference on women's land and property rights found. The conference also heard testimonies from women and children who, after their husband or father had died, had been stripped of all their livestock, their homes, household goods and personal belongings by relatives of the deceased.

There is an urgent need to reform laws on inheritance in Namibia, and traditional authorities need training to understand and enforce women's and children's rights to a home, land, property and livelihood.

45 percent of households in Namibia are headed by women, most of whom do not receive maintenance for their children from the absent fathers. In divorce settlements, men are usually granted more of the estate than women.

What women want now from our government:

We call upon government to pass laws and implement policies that will protect the property and inheritance rights of women and children, and to ensure women's access to child maintenance and to a fair share of the estate upon divorce.

What women say about inheritance and property:

All traditional leaders must receive education in how harmful cultural practices violate the Namibian Constitution and the rights of women. They must become women's rights defenders!

Even if a woman was living with a man outside marriage and they built a life together such a woman must also inherit!

The moment my husband died his family came and took everything, even our mattresses and the clothes of the children. We were in mourning and they chased us out of our home as if we were stray dogs!

To break the cycle of poverty girl children must also inherit.

Equal participation of women and men in politics and decision-making

We need leaders and politicians, both women and men, who fully understand and promote gender equality in all spheres of life and who champion women's rights, children's rights, the social welfare and economic rights of the poor, and the rights of people living with and affected by HIV and Aids.

We particularly encourage women living openly and positively with HIV and Aids, and who are knowledgeable about the issues and active in their communities, to stand for election at all levels of government.

Who can better promote the issues of women and girls infected and affected by HIV and Aids than women living with and affected by the disease?

What women want now from our government:

We call on government and political parties to ensure the equal participation of women and men in politics and at all levels of decision-making. All leaders must champion the rights of girls and women. Political parties must encourage and support those active on HIV and Aids issues at community level to stand for public office.

What women say about politics and decision-making:

The time has come for a law to ensure 50/50 representation of women and men at all levels of government.

Both women and men in politics and leadership must champion the rights of all women and girls in our country.

HIV and Aids is not only a health issue, it affects all aspects of development in Namibia. All government ministries must get involved in finding and implementing solutions to this national crisis.

Women, the poor, unemployed youth and people living with and affected by HIV and Aids are the vast majority in our country. We can use that power to vote for real change!

What are our sexual rights as girls and women?

All human beings have sexual rights including all women – young and old, living with HIV or not, differently-abled, heterosexual or lesbian.

Our sexual rights are:

- **Having control over our bodies**

This means that we decide what to do with our bodies, who can touch us and how we want to look and dress.

- **Having sex when, with whom, and how we want to**

We should never be forced to have sex by our husbands, boyfriends, partners, relatives or strangers. Forced sex of any kind is rape. Rape is a punishable crime. We have the right to be protected from all forms of sexual violence.

- **Making decisions about our own sexuality**

We have the right to choose what kind of sex we enjoy and do not enjoy, and who we want to have sex with. Many women are heterosexual and like to have sex with men. Other women are lesbian and want to have sex with women. It is our right to make this choice. We should not discriminate against others' choices, and we should not have to suffer discrimination and violence because of our choices.

- **Having sexual enjoyment**

Our bodies were made to enjoy sex. Sex should be about pleasure for both women and men. Reproduction should be a secondary consideration.

- **Protecting ourselves from unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV**

We need access to non-judgemental sexual health care services so we can share our problems and concerns with health care providers. Sexual health care should be available for prevention and treatment of all sexual concerns, problems and disorders.

What are our reproductive rights as girls and women?

Reproductive rights refer to our entitlement to access and practise healthy and safe contraception, and to experience wanted and safe pregnancy and child-birth. All women - young and old, living with HIV or not, differently-abled, heterosexual or lesbian - have reproductive rights.

Our reproductive rights are:

- Having factual and relevant information about pregnancy, fertility and contraception
- Being able to make choices including whether or not to have children, how many children we want, with whom we want children and when we want children
- Being able to get help to fall pregnant if we are unable to do so
- Having access to family planning options that suit us. We need to be able to choose if we want to use contraception and what contraception we want
- Having good health care when we are pregnant
- Giving birth in a safe environment with good medical care
- Having access to safe and non-judgemental services to terminate pregnancy (abortion). This right is not yet a reality in Namibia.

Currently a girl or woman can request a legal abortion in Namibia if there is:

- a serious threat to the woman's life or health, or
- a serious risk that the child will suffer from a mental or physical defect that will result in a serious and irreparable handicap; or
- where the pregnancy is the result of rape, incest or intercourse with a woman who has a severe mental disorder.

This section on sexual and reproductive rights has been adapted from advocacy materials developed by the Gender AIDS Forum, South Africa.

What all of us must remember...

As a constituency of people living with and affected by HIV and Aids we have power to bring about change in how our government and political leaders deal with the issues raised in this booklet. Let's take action now!

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

If you agree with the demands we have put forward, here are some actions you can take to make your views known and thus make a difference.

- Contact your local political parties and ask them to advocate for these demands to be included in their party manifestos before the next national, regional and local elections;
- Contact traditional leaders and healers as well as religious leaders in your community and inform them about women's rights;
- Write letters to the newspapers or call your local radio or television station to air your views;
- Educate your daughters, sons and other family members about your views;
- Speak to your neighbours and members of your community about why these demands must be met and how they can save the lives of our people;
- Join or support organisations that advocate for social justice and the rights of women and girls.

This booklet was developed by Women's Leadership Centre in collaboration with women and girls from across Namibia.

Members of the following organisations support this booklet:

Women's Leadership Centre · Sister Namibia · Legal Assistance Centre · Namibian Women's Manifesto Network · Evangelical Lutheran Church Aids Programme · Council of Churches in Namibia · Namibia NGO Forum · National Society for Human Rights · Kavango Bridges of Hope · Caprivi United Women · Catholic AIDS Action · Namibia Women's Association · Namibian Girl Child Organisation · Ombetja Yehinga Organisation · Lironga Eparu · The Rainbow Project · Women and Aids Support Network · Namibia Network of Aids Service Organisations · PEACE Centre · Tanidare Empowerment Project · Khomas Women in Development · Namibian Women's Network · Namibia Association of Differently Abled Women · Namibia Red Cross Society · IBIS · Forum for the Future · Namibian Men for Change · Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia · Young Women's Christian Association · International Community of Women Living with HIV and Aids · Parliamentarians for Women's Health · Women's Solidarity Namibia · !NARA Training Centre · Namibia Planned Parenthood Association · Namibia Development Trust · Aids Care Trust · Rise Namibia · Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa · National Social Marketing Programme · Labour Resource and Research Institute · Mapilele Project · Namibia Media Women's Association · Penduka · Community Empowerment and Development Association · Namibia Women's Lobby · Acacia Children's Trust · Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation · Philippi Trust · Victory Women's Movement · Gobabis Concerned Women

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