

STATUS OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP IN NAMIBIA

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It is my pleasure indeed to address you today on the theme: "Status of Women in Political and Economic Leadership in Namibia". The fact that you have chosen this theme is very encouraging. As an economic society you are probably aware that balanced development of a country depends on the intelligent use of all its potentials, including human potentials, and more particularly the potentials of women who represent more than half of our population.

Women emerged on the political and economic scene of this country only 14 years ago. Before that they were men's shadows, invisible, without rights, treated as minors.

Whether women are formally employed or not they are always the backbone of economy, because men's work is not possible without them. Women keep the house, raise children, and do all kinds of domestic chores, thereby enabling men to dedicate their time to professions and careers. But women's work wasn't recognized, and they themselves were voiceless and powerless. Since independence, the situation started changing. The Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, which means that sex, colour and race cannot be used as grounds

for discrimination any longer. The situation of Namibian women has greatly improved since 1990. Through the Constitution, Namibia acknowledges and encourages equal power relations and treatment of women and men in all spheres of social, legal and economic life.

At independence there were thirteen laws that favoured men over women. Many of them have since been changed, but not without resistance by men both in Parliament and at the community level.

Some of the laws that have substantially improved woman's standing in society are:

- * Married Persons Equality Act (1996)
- * Affirmative Action Act (1998)
- * Combating of Rape Act (2000)
- * Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003)
- * Maintenance Act (2003)

Recently, amendments to Labour Bill were adopted to include greater benefits with regard to maternity leave, while the Child Status Bill and Vulnerable Witnesses Bill are still in process to be adopted.

The process of legal reform is going on. At the moment customary law remains largely outside it, and we all know that many prejudices against women are embedded in tradition and custom. Among the first things to be tackled in that area are property and inheritance and divorce.

In the field of education, there is greater openness of the community towards educating the girl child. Girls are in the majority at the beginning of the educational process and many other indicators of their performance are good, except for the percentage of drop-outs from grade 7 onwards, probably due to early pregnancies. At the university level girls are represented in almost equal numbers as boys,

although they are still shy to opt for certain sciences traditionally considered a male domain, like medical and health sciences, for example. But generally, women and men are pretty equal in the education process. You'll be able to see some statistical data and graphs a little later.

In employment, we are still confronted with serious imbalances between women and men. It is much more difficult for women to get formal employment and if they do get it, they'll be found in lower paid and lower ranked jobs. In subsistence farming with pay, men are represented twice as much as women. In subsistence farming without pay women are far better represented. In Government employment (18.8% of the total employment) there are slightly more women than men, the ratio being 19.2 (28,375 women) to 18.5% (22,274 men). But, when it comes to management cadres, female representation is less than a quarter of the total number, which simply means that the managers are predominantly men. The greatest imbalance is in the private sector which employs 42.7% of workforce, out of which 48.2% are men and 35.7% are women. When it comes to family workers without pay, women have the "privilege" of being far better represented.

Overall employment statistics show that in a ten-year period between 1991 and 2001 there was a considerable increase of women's employment in urban areas and a significant drop of women's employment in rural areas. Male's employment in both urban and rural areas is slowing down. Similarly, overall employment for both women and men has fallen from 58 to 54 percent of the total workforce. Some of these statistics can be explained by the strong migratory trends from rural to urban areas.

Since the establishment of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare, which in itself is a proof of the GRN's commitment to women's empowerment, great efforts are being invested in further redressing the imbalances inherited

from the past. It is seen as a part of the democratic process characterizing the whole post-independence period.

Since attaining their voting powers, women and men equally take part in the voting process. In the proportional electoral system political parties put forth a party list of candidates, while a fair women's representation is largely achieved through the "zebra system" that gives pretty equal chances to women and men to get elected. SWAPO Party in particular is seriously committed to ensuring gender balanced representation in government.

Namibia ranks 23rd in the world for women representatives in Parliament, which is a rather good result having in view that we are relative newcomers among independent states of the world. In the National Assembly women constitute 23% of the MPs, while at the National Council there are only two out of 26 members. The forthcoming elections should be seen as an opportunity to reach 30% women representation in Parliament, which is the target set forth by the SADC Head of State and Government Summit held five years ago. In the Cabinet there are 5 women out of 27 Cabinet members.

Within regional councils women are underrepresented, with only 7 women out of 102 regional councilors. They are better represented as local authority councilors (135 or 44%) compared to 169 (56%) men. There are 7 women mayors and 20 deputy mayors.

It is also important to have a look at parastatals to assess women's decision-making role in economic life. There is very little to be proud of there. Among CEOs, there is only one woman out of the total of 12. Among senior managers, there are 7 women out of 64. There are no accurate statistics for the private sector, but one can pretty safely assume that the situation is no better than in the parastatals.

If we are to answer the question – Where are the women in Namibia when it comes to decision making and power-sharing, I would say that they are still in some sort of transition. We have achieved a lot, but not as nearly enough as we would have liked to. There is still a long way to go to emancipate women, empower them and liberate people's minds generally so that a more favourable atmosphere for women's promotion is achieved in the society. I attach particular importance to the change of collective consciousness. To achieve that, we need to explore all available routes, from the role of the media to traditional authorities to literature and art to political tribunes to political parties. We must be innovative and creative in making the "women's issues" everybody's issues so that the whole society can develop and progress in a more balanced way and faster.