

USING COMMUNITIES' CREATIVITY TO CHANGE THE CULTURAL PRACTICES THAT VIOLATE BODILY AUTONOMY AND INTEGRITY

Since September 2020 *Ti Soros Ge*, a joint initiative from an ARASA-supported coalition of Namibian civil society organisations Positive Vibes, Young Feminists Movement Namibia (YFem) and the Women's Leadership Centre (WLC), has been working with women and girls from indigenous San communities and the Zambezi Region, using traditional song, dance, poetry and storytelling to challenge harmful narratives and practices that violate bodily integrity and autonomy.

"We want to inspire these communities to take up different kinds of spaces, to use their voice and their creativity," says Florence Khaxas, Director of YFem.

"Our focus has been to influence [women and girls] to take up leadership, so they are able to articulate their issues and speak out more about the discrimination, stigma and violence they face...by giving participants the power to express in their own languages what bodily autonomy means to them."

Addressing marginalisation

The women and girls that the campaign works with come from some of the most marginalised communities in Namibia. San communities, who live in parts of Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, face extreme levels of poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination. San girls and women experience multiple layers of discrimination and oppression, including rape, early pregnancy and child marriage.



MY BODY IS MINE

You do not have any right over my body
 You cannot decide anything over my body
 I have the right to express myself
 I have the right to say no
 My body is not the church bell
 Do not touch me without my consent
 Until when will I allow myself to be quiet?
 Until when will I cry in silence?
 Until when will I allow myself to be destroyed
 by your harmful words?
 My body is mine.
 Even if I am differently able (disable)
 Even if I am HIV+
 Even if I am a lesbian (moffie)
 Even if I am poor
 Even if I am young or old
 Whatever my class, race, sex, colour, ethnic
 origin, religion, social and economic status
 My body is my body.

*[Poem by Irene Garoës and Nadia April
 written for the ARASA-supported "Ti Soros
 Ge" Coalition on Bodily Autonomy and
 Integrity in Namibia]*

Girls from Namibia's Zambezi Region face similar issues, alongside harmful practices such as coerced initiation into 'good womanhood' (sikenge), which teaches girls to be submissive and obedient to their elders, their future husbands and their in-laws. Girls are physically prepared to please men sexually by having their labia elongated, engaging in dry sex and accepting scarification.

As a result, women and girls in these communities have high rates of maternal and child mortality, HIV, AIDS and tuberculosis. In Katima Mulilo in the Zambezi Region, for example, 20-24% of adolescent girls and young women are living with HIV, more than double the national average.¹

Community ownership

Changing harmful narratives and practices is a challenging, long-term process that must be driven by community members.

YFEM
Young Feminists Movement Namibia

Feminist GOSPEL
live SHOW

EVERY BODY COUNTS

Sunday
12 Sept
2PM - 4PM
ELCRN Bet-El (Dolam)
ENTRY: FREE

#TiSorosGe #Stand4BAI #ItsMyBody

by an all women band from all over Namibia

For more information contact: 081 448 2684

The show will be live-streamed on the Y-Fem The Young Feminists Movement Namibia

“In San communities we were working with 12-16-year-old girls so we wanted to make it fun and use a language they understood, and this language was dancing, which is how information is passed on from generation to generation,” says Nadia April, programme officer at WLC.

“It was very important for us to know where these communities were coming from, what language and strategies [they use], and how they understand the world, so the messages weren’t being imposed on them but something that they owned, acknowledged and saw themselves.”

Activities began in January 2021 with seven San villages, and the scheme was then extended to eight villages in the Zambezi Region. To date [July 2021] around 200 adolescent San girls and 140 girls and women in the Zambezi Region have been reached. Since then, the campaign has been extended to the Erongo Region, working in informal settlements in Swakopmund city, and to the Omaheke Region.

“In the Zambezi Region, girls are taught and told what to do with their bodies. Dancing is mostly for pleasing men, and is often taught to girls before and during initiation, as it is a ‘dance’ that is meant to enhance pleasure for men during sex,” says Nadia. “The question was how do we transform that? How do we make it so they can dance for themselves, to use dancing to be proud of who they are and how their body is, and to tell stories of what happens in their daily lives.”

¹ Figure taken from the 2017 Namibia Population-based HIV Impact Assessment, as cited by WLC [‘Zambezi for Women’s Rights Programme’](#) [webpage, accessed July 2021]

Members of local women's groups were recruited to facilitate activities. The idea was to bring 12 community facilitators to Windhoek for training, but Covid-19 restrictions made this impossible. Instead, a training video was made, which included a dancing tutorial from dancer and choreographer Hillary Uno Shiimi.

The use of video brought challenges, as some participants did not have a screen to watch it on, so arrangements were made for people to watch the video together in places with a screen. This has been a key learning, and the coalition is now incorporating access to technology, for example the provision of a communal screen or data, into the programmes' next phase.

A total of 15 community meetings were held with San and Zambezi participants to build their awareness of human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), children's rights, and the rights to bodily autonomy and integrity, and to practice dances, songs, poetry readings and storytelling that would later be shared with the wider community.



The power of storytelling

Although the stories speak of gross violations of the rights to bodily autonomy and integrity, such as rape and violence, they also speak of menstruation, friendship and the idea of bodies at peace. Economic freedom, and how being economically dependent makes girls and woman suppress rather than raise their voice, also came to light.

Initially, the work in Zambezi focused on 16-18-year-old girls but later included mothers and grandmothers. Extending the age of Zambezi participants brought challenges, as adolescent girls felt less able to speak out in front of their mothers and grandmothers. But slowly, conversations opened up.

“With the older generation they are more in denial, they're the ones maintaining these practices. But this created [an opportunity] for them to have a conversation and really see what these practices mean to the mothers and the girls... and see how harmful these practices are,” says Nadia.



Taking the lead

One of the biggest impacts was the change among adolescent girls and young women.

“Before we started most of them were shy and didn't want to talk. Now you see a change, them taking leadership,” says Nadia.

“They are not only taking the lead in the programme but in other issues. Where there have been new cases [of violence] they are the ones taking the cases to the community leaders and the police. It has been very powerful for the community to

have the girls speak out because there's always a culture of silence.”

Reforming policies

The stories from San and Zambezi girls and women will be used to influence national policy. Content analysis has been conducted on the stories and from this common themes have been identified. These themes will be used to create messages to inform a media and advocacy campaign.

This campaign will be used throughout the project to engage parliamentarians and other national decision-makers on the lived realities of women and girls from these communities. Covid-19 restrictions allowing, the coalition plans to present the evidence to the National Assembly subcommittee that works on SRHR later in 2021.

“Previous feedback from decision-makers and lawmakers is: ‘can we personalise the academic’ [theories and statements made about bodily autonomy and integrity]? These poems and stories are helping to bring that lived experience... It provides us with more of a heart connection,” explains Abigail Solomons, programme manager at Positive Vibes.

“What organisations like WLC and YFem have really been successful in doing is...bridging the major gap between the decision-maker and communities. It’s about building empathy and building the literacy of parliamentarians, highlighting who is vulnerable and who is marginalised within the SRHR response.”

Building a broad movement



Developing leaders from these communities is part of wider strategy to build a diverse feminist movement in Namibia around the rights to bodily autonomy and integrity.

“We want to build a feminist movement that is broad, and we want to bring in more key influencers so that they can actively participate,” explains Florence. “It is really important for us to have diverse voices speaking out... Collectively, we will have a much stronger voice to influence policy reform.”

Work is now underway to produce two anthologies from the stories that women and girls in the Zambezi and San communities have told, which will then be used to create a training tool.

“We want this tool to be something women and girls can use to continue to change their culture for themselves,” says Nadia. “[We want them] to be able to express themselves and be proud of themselves... to pass the dances they've created down to younger generations to be shared throughout history.”

