

WOMEN IN Namibia

FALL 1995

Namibia on my mind

by Judith Ann Diers

Something told me not to worry, even though no one had met me at the airport and I was now riding in a strange car, through darkness. Maybe it was the confidence of the Zambian woman sitting next to me. When no driver turned up for me, she insisted I join her. I could also attribute my peace of mind to that sense whites seem to have: that anything can be conquered. We move confidently into new situations and even newly independent black countries.

Another reason for my sense of security was that this far-off land had become commonplace in conversations around our dinner table, in sermons and classes at St. Paul's Church [Waverly, Iowa], and the divestment campaign at St. Olaf College. I welcomed the chance to finally see Namibia, the country I had come to love from a distance. It would be three years before I returned—and many more before I fully admitted what I had learned and refused to learn from my gracious hosts. For this is the story of a white woman who lived for three years in an all-black township.

Katutura

For most, the Katutura township represented a coerced location. Thirty years earlier, Namibian blacks were forcibly removed from town and given barren land far from ancestral homes. As South African officials bulldozed houses, the people protested, hundreds with their lives. The name given to their new "home" reflected the history: Katutura

means "we have no place to stay."

For me, moving to Katutura was a choice. Knowing this, I saw the contradictions of solidarity. While I was "standing with" my neighbors, I always had an escape route. Clearly, the experience was more important to my growth, than to their struggle for justice.

The segregated housing scheme closely resembled the South African system. Most major towns were exclusively white before independence. Black men seeking urban jobs left their wives behind to raise the children, crops and animals. A large black community sprung up outside the white town to serve whites.

The apartheid system was not simply a "black and white" construction. The "gray" areas were also crucial to the control system. A large population of "colored" Namibians, who had migrated from the Cape district of South Africa, were assigned a township between the white town and black township. This population acted as a "buffer," physically and socially, within white society. They worked in the banks, shops and offices of the white community; the gov-



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ernment also built them better schools and homes—creating resentment between the black and "colored" communities—a carefully orchestrated strategy.

The architects of apartheid made this a model township. In line with attempts to divide the black community and create tensions, the township was divided into ethnic groups. Each house had a code, painted clearly on its door: "O" for

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Owambo-speaking persons, “H” for Herero, or “D” for Damara>Nama.

Even with an address representing the area’s history, I remained a white middle-class German-American woman. I wondered whether my presence could ever represent anything but oppression.

I quickly became “Auntie” to approximately 20 children in the neighborhood. My house became an “English Only” zone to work on their school lessons. Some days, we’d talk, sing, cook and dance, too—often simultaneously. Their English improved dramatically, according to school reports. I was often seen with five or six kids in town—at the swimming pool, ice cream shop, or the movie theater. They became my Namibian family.

My little house had bars on all windows and doors, due to escalating crime. But no one else had a cadre of children guarding their home. The kids’ biggest concern was that I had neither a man nor a gun to protect me.

Still, I underestimated my personal risk as a single, white female in the township. Friends continually pleaded with me to move into town and warned: “Don’t assume that your whiteness will protect you there.” After six months alone and an attempted break-in, Telequey, a 16-year-old girl, moved in. It was lovely having company and she was thrilled to have her own room, after sharing one with four brothers and sisters.

Full of idealism, I sought a “new way” for white and black women to relate to one another. My neighbors knew white women as “madam,” so changes came gradually. One day, I joined the women for a cup of tea, sitting on overturned oil buckets. They couldn’t stop giggling; finally, one said they’d never seen a white woman sit on a can. We all laughed, and the gathering became a weekly ritual.

To supplement their wages as domestic workers—about \$15 per week for full-time work—the women sewed garments, sold flavored ice to school children, and hot food along the road.

Soon after I moved in, my next door neighbor asked whether she could wash my clothes for me. This was out of the question—until the day she asked to borrow some money to buy food. It was a small amount, but more than she could readily repay. Rather than have the debt



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weigh on her, I suggested she wash my clothes in exchange. And so I began—or continued—the cycle of service to white women by black women.

As one of the few car owners in the neighborhood, my economic status was even more blatant. Along with it, came very clear expectations. My emergency duties usually came in the middle of the night: a woman in labor, or someone hurt seriously in a street fight. The road to the Katutura hospital became very familiar. Weekdays in the emergency room were quiet, but a weekend night could be gruesome. The effects of the system’s violence—alcohol abuse, gunshot wounds, and the anger and pain of young unemployed men—were laid bare in that room.

After two years of independence under a democratically elected government, the basic tenets of my neighbors’ lives remained intact. “Not much has changed since independence,” they’d claim. If employed, they worked for a

wealthier family in town, which now included a few blacks employed in government. But life was still about basic survival. Two separate economies continued to function: one in the town and the other in the township. Few Katutura residents could afford to shop in town. The informal sector grew out of the need for survival. It provided basic services and goods to the community, as few people had gained the economic independence necessary to participate in the formal sector.

Without economic power, political independence meant very little to most Namibians. Many gave up childhood—and the chance of an education—to take up a gun for the struggle; they now sat on street corners, waiting to be picked up by a white farmer or construction foreman for a day of casual labor. Unemployment soared to almost 40%.

As in South Africa, a whole generation of youth were lost to the struggle—if not physically, then emotionally. Survival had required the quick use of force. I wondered if the cycle of physical and psychological violence would be broken for the children in my neighborhood. Does independence bring new paradigms for dealing with conflict and injustice? Is so, who will teach them?

“You don’t have to be white to be right”

For whites to begin discovering our complete humanity, we need to engage in the lives of our black brothers and sisters—at home and abroad. We need to affirm the blackness within each of us. As long as we despise and suppress the darkness, we will despise not only parts of ourselves, but an entire race. Our liberation is inextricably bound to our sisters and brothers of color.

Along with friends, I frequented a popular dance club in the township. We used to laugh at the coincidence that one of the first hit songs after our arrival was “You Don’t Have to be White to be Right.” But what happens when the dance is over? When society continues to affirm the rightness of whiteness—

through its advertisements and its opportunities. Do we recognize the symbols of superiority which pervade every aspect of our lives?

I often stayed in the border village of Engela with the family who had adopted me. I was always put in the bedroom of one of their teenage girls, while she would be displaced to another room. During my first visit, I was surprised by the pictures tacked on the wall—pictures of white voluptuous women in swim suits. I despised the pictures, wondering whether my presence and representation in media contributed to young black women's self-hatred. Is it possible to confront and challenge those images as a white woman?

The connections between sexism, racism and imperialism cannot be

denied. I thought about the feminism espoused in the U.S.—how my own liberation is connected to other women's freedom to love themselves fiercely. How can I love myself when my image is used to induce self-hatred in my black sisters? How can I love a white Christ whose image insists that his followers be cleansed white as snow? I long for a life-long dance—to the tune "you don't have to be white to be right."

Home sweet home

Returning to the United States, I continue to reflect on the meaning of my privileges—white, middle-class, educated, American. They can be as oppressive here as I perceived them initially in Namibia. Or, they can be seized as power to change. From the vantage

point of Namibia, I got a glimpse of America and racism from a new angle. But, the concept of solidarity continues to baffle me. Does it involve denouncing one's privileges? I think not. After showing me the world through different lenses, would my Namibian friends expect me to deny myself every means to change it?

The concept of solidarity is not the glorification of poverty and oppression. Rather, it is the acknowledgment of oppression and one's connection to it. Burning those connections destroys opportunities to change them. The challenge, then, is to use power to transform oppressive structures.

The questions I will keep before me are: Is there space in the house we are building for the poorest of the world's women and children to live healthy and peaceful lives? Will they contribute to the floor plans or carry the rock to the building site? My accountability must always be to the world's women and children living in poverty. In that way, I am called back to my Christian heritage, which concerns itself with "widows and orphans." Whom better than they to serve—as a measure of our humanity? They who are responsible for life and its nourishment, they who do two-thirds of the world's labor and own 1 percent of the land?

Finally, work must be done in my own community to provide us all a way to address fears and questions about racism. My energy must be infused into the institutions I love—those who raised me as a child of God; those who loved me enough to let go—so that I could discover the holiness of others.

Judith Ann Diers begins doctoral studies at Princeton Seminary in fall, 1995.

Women of the ELCA grants

The following groups in Namibia received grants in 1995 through the Women of the ELCA Designated Gift Program #528:

Andreas Kukuri Centre Garden Project

The garden project, sponsored by the Women's Department of the Andreas Kukuri Centre, involves women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) in the cultivating and marketing of vegetables and fruits. The goals are to empower women, develop their leadership skills, and provide income.

Ekamba Parish Pre-Primary School

This small school, a program of the Ekamba Parish in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), is struggling to meet the educational needs of young children. This grant assists the school in upgrading classrooms and providing teaching materials.

Council of Churches Women's Desk

Oshiko Women's Group
Located in the Northern region of Namibia, the Oshiko Women's Group focuses on self-determination and empowerment. The Women of the ELCA grant provides funds to establish an English language course, develop a community cultural museum, and purchase equipment for a kindergarten.

Women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia

Leadership Development
ELCIN Women is an organization which supports leadership development and empowerment among its members. This grant supports dress-making, knitting, and food-gardening projects.

All Lutheran Women's Conference



SOLVEIG KJESETH

by Solveig Kjeseth

Women of Namibia seek to fulfill our Lord's desire that we "may all be one" (John 17:21). In May of this year, they came by bus, train, and car to Swakopmund for the All Lutheran Women's Conference to express their unity. Some even hitchhiked!

Nearly 300 women from three Lutheran church bodies—Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, and the German Lutheran Church—met for three days to worship, think, and pray together.

The Swakopmund conference continues an effort begun in 1982, when women of the proposed "United Lutheran Church of South West Africa" came together in a historic gathering at the Ongwediva Training Center in the North. The chartered bus transporting participants from Windhoek must have shocked South African soldiers as it passed through the control point into Ovamboland—full of black and white women together!

In 1983, these courageous pioneers

met in Berseba, far to the South. The next year they met in Swakopmund. Finally, in 1986, the group gathered in Keetmanshoop and met with Lutheran World Federation delegates from Geneva. But increased tensions among the boards of the Lutheran churches in Namibia, pressures of apartheid, and church politics led to a temporary end of the dream for a united church. The women were told they should not meet until "matters were resolved."

Locally, the women continued to meet. In 1994, after an eight-year "pause," women from all three churches met again in Okahandja. Their dream was revived!

And now, on this May weekend, hundreds of women, black and white and brown—all Lutherans—celebrated together. Many faces were the same as in 1982, older, but still determined to be "perfected in unity so that the world might know the love of God which makes all of us one" (John 17:23).

At the closing worship, Landesprobst Reinhardt Keding advised the women to return to their congregations and challenge the men to follow their example!

Namibian women and the law

A main speaker at the All Lutheran Women's Conference in May was lawyer Ms. Bience Gawanas, Chairperson of the Law Reform and Development Commission. She received her law degree while in exile in England. Equally at home in her Damara tradition and her European experiences, Ms. Gawanas is a powerful role model for Namibian women.

Following are excerpts from her presentation.

What are women's experiences of the law?

We have two things in common: we are women and we are Lutheran. But we come from different ethnic groups, classes, and educational backgrounds. There is no single female standard we can use to measure our experiences. And so our day-to-day encounters with the law are different.

Cultural assumptions about women's roles also affect assumptions about men's roles. If women are responsible for child care—men are not responsible for child care. These assumptions go hand in hand.

The media casts women in stereotyped roles: servant, mother, sex-object. We are often not seen in our diversity, as we really are, but as what they want us to be.

When women are considered in stereotypical terms, we are all diminished.

Three questions:

What are human rights? Human rights concern the inherent dignity and worth of a person. Every child has the right to respect and a decent life. Human rights are about daily living, not something enshrined in the constitution. Domestic violence is a crime, but it is also a violation of basic human rights.

What is equality? Equality does not mean "being the same as." People—

men and women—are not identical. Equality for women means to fully enjoy the same level of human rights as men. It does not mean being compared with men.

What is discrimination? It is the denial of basic human rights to anyone for any reason. When two groups have

Bience Gawanas



SOLVEIG KJESETH

historically been treated differently, this does not mean that automatically, on March 21, 1990, (Namibian Independence Day) everyone became “equal.” To apply exactly the same law, the same standards, to everyone would be discriminatory.

Affirmative action is needed. Those who have been disadvantaged, because of ethnic group or gender or position, must be helped—socially, culturally, economically, educationally. Only then can they run the race with fairness.

Laws which don’t take into account the different experiences of men and of women—laws that treat people equally—will be discriminatory.

Namibian law lags far behind the promises of the Namibian Constitution. A woman married under the General Law of Namibia is considered a minor, with her husband as legal guardian. She may not sign contracts, obtain loans, or initiate legal proceedings without the

husband’s permission. A bill to make spouses equal before the law will be introduced in the National Assembly this year.

For women married under Traditional Laws, discrimination is often even worse. When a husband dies, his family may come to take all of the property.

Another area of law which needs to be changed is that of divorce. Currently, a divorce must be adversarial. One person must be guilty, at fault. So the process involves publicly “airing the dirty linen.” What does this do to the husband, the wife, and especially the children? That law must be changed and both parents encouraged to plan for the welfare of their children.

Traditional Laws are even harder to change than General Law, because they are based on long-accepted attitudes. But unless women press for legal changes, we will continue to live under

“Human rights are about daily living, not something enshrined in the constitution.”

Bience Gawanas

practices contrary to the enjoyment of full human rights, guaranteed to us by our constitution.

Solveig Kjeseth, former Director of National Namibia Concerns, is currently in Namibia at Paulinum Seminary with her husband, Peter, representing Wartburg Seminary.

Update on dental student

by Naomi Linnell

Featured as a “pioneer among us” in the fall 1994 issue of *Women in Namibia*, Mariana Amwaala just successfully completed her second year of dental school at Creighton University Dental College [Omaha, Neb.]. She’s well on the way to turning theory into practice! Following are excerpts from a telephone question and answer interview with Mariana.

What have the main challenges been going from college to dental school?

The academic challenges were more intense. There were more classes, studies were unfamiliar, more time and energy was required. Dental terminology was a new language.

What has been your favorite course?

I particularly enjoyed biochemistry and occlusions [which deals with how the jaw

functions, biting patterns and their effects on the teeth].

What are you doing this summer?

I am seeing patients in a clinic. I am the dentist. On my first day I was in oral surgery, helping with extractions and removing sutures. I will be assigned a wide variety of procedures throughout the summer.

Do you have other comments?

I am grateful that I have the privilege of studying to become a dentist and I am thankful for the assistance I have received.

Women of the ELCA provided funds to assist Mariana with her second year of dental school and has pledged money toward her third year.

Naomi Linnell is Assistant Director for Colleges and Universities, ELCA Division for Higher Education and Schools.

Annual Ecumenical Women's Conference

May 12–14, 1995

by Nangula Kathindi

The voices of women rise toward the sky. They sing melodiously while walking around the mission.

It is May 12, 1995. We are gathered at Okatana Catholic Church Mission for The Council of Churches in Namibia Women's Desk's Annual Conference; the ecumenical event is attended by women from different churches, including the Anglican Diocese of Namibia, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia.

Most of the women were dressed in traditional dresses—woven cotton skirts in red colors, matching blouses, scarves around their heads, and ornaments of shells or metal.

This mission is one of the major missions of the Catholic Church in Namibia; it has a hospital, a church and a high school.

Women came to discuss issues relating to their lives under the umbrella of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. The Decade's main emphases are: 1) Women's full participation in church and community life; 2) Women's perspectives and commitments to justice, peace and the integrity of creation; 3) Women's theology and spirituality.

The program opened Friday evening with an address by a Catholic priest who has been in exile with Namibians in Angola.

The next morning, women got up early to do physical exercises and sing. The atmosphere was solemn, but festive. About 25 meters from the meeting place, a group of six women were busy cooking lunch for 300 women.



NANGULA KATHINDI

Topics discussed in the conference included:

Education of children

The importance of basic education and the role of women as parents was pointed out. The women were assured that the Ministry of Education is encouraging education for girls, as opposed to the previous government which discriminated against women in education.

The Ministry of Education encourages parents to assist in educating children on several topics, including sex education, formerly a taboo subject.

The CCN Children's Desk presentation

Women heard directly from children about what they would like from their parents. Parents were reminded about the importance of good relationships between themselves and their children, and with their children's teachers.

Women's Rights

Brainstorming sessions produced agreement among participants that they have rights: to be married and make marriage work, to care for their families, to make their own decisions, to be educated, to be healthy, and to have a job.

They decided to form small support groups in their villages, districts, and

towns. Such groups will encourage women to come forward to report cases of rape, domestic violence and other abuses. Women will learn more about their rights and support other women who are victims of abuse. They also vowed to influence legislation, making punishment of offenders very severe.

Women performed three plays: 1) A play showing the need for the churches to be self-reliant and not solely dependent on outside funding of projects; 2) A play depicting the relationship of in-laws to families and the importance of respect among all people; 3) A play about injustices in the court system when women are abused. Often cases are dismissed and the women are blamed for their misfortunes.

The conference concluded with an ecumenical service in the Okatana Catholic Church. Women marched around the church building for an hour—singing and dancing—before the service started. It was spectacular to see the church full of women from many different traditions fully participating.

The Rev. Nangula Kathindi is an Episcopal priest and director of CCN Women's Desk in the North.

Teacher interns at the United Nations

Julia Ilonga, a teacher from Namibia, began an internship with Lutheran Office for World Community at the Church Center for the United Nations in the fall of 1994. She tells of her experience below.

Introduction

I am from Northern Namibia, born in a village called Oshihole. Before my Lutheran Office for World Community internship began in September, 1994, I taught accounting for six years in a small town called Oshakati.

During Namibia's first free election, I served as an interpreter for a United Nations team. Impressed with the way the UN Transitional Assistance Group staff performed their duties, I eagerly applied for the internship at the Lutheran Office for World Community—the Lutheran office at the UN. The internship's objective is for me to learn how the UN works, focusing on human rights and women's issues.

Experience at the UN

Upon my arrival, I learned about the UN and its main objective: maintaining international peace and justice. I began attending General Assembly meetings. The GA is divided into six committees; I follow the Third Committee, which deals with humanitarian problems, including human rights and women's issues. I've learned a great deal about human rights violations worldwide.

Last year, the UN appointed the first High Commissioner for Human Rights, who works to promote and protect all rights. Special UN representatives investigate situations in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Cuba and Haiti. The organization also established International Tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda to bring to justice those who've committed genocide.



Julia Ilonga

Another area of my focus is women. I learned that women are excluded from economic and political decision-making processes. One reason is that the majority lack adequate skills because of exclusion from schooling. Many nations now understand they must shift from their traditional ways and start considering women as partners in decision-making. I believe that "When one educates a woman, then one has educated the whole nation," because women pass on knowledge to new generations.

The UN has held Conferences on Women for the past 20 years. The fourth is planned for Beijing, China, in September this year. Women worldwide have high expectations that the Beijing meeting will suggest solutions to the problems they face.

I attended a meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit for Social Development, held in preparation for the Summit held in Copenhagen, Denmark, this March. Leaders acknowledged that the previous focus on economic development and

the "trickle-down" approach is not working—the focus is shifting from economic development to human development.

At the summit, heads of states and governments pledged themselves to ten commitments, including strengthening their cooperation in social development efforts through the UN.

Reactions and Future Expectations

The UN seemed overwhelming at first, along with the culture shock of New York City. Accustomed to open spaces, I was surprised to see all the tall buildings. Understanding the American English accent also was difficult. But the staff at Lutheran Office for World Community was supportive, and I thank God that I stayed.

The program has been very enlightening. I've gathered good ideas, but I then wonder whether nations like mine—with limited resources and technology—will be able to implement such good ideas.

I've also learned about terribly destructive affects of armed conflicts on people—mainly women and children. I consider this a challenge to us as Christians not directly affected by such difficulties. We need to provide assistance. Most importantly, I call upon Christians to include the people affected in their prayers, and to pray that such tragedies come to an end.

I plan to return to teaching, and to bring information to my students and colleagues. I now have background knowledge on human rights and women's issues to share with women's programs in the church and in society at large.

I thank the Almighty, my sponsors, the Lutheran World Federation, and everyone who helped make this program succeed. I thank Lutherans worldwide for their contribution to our independence struggle.

We've got hope!

by Joan Gerig

This spring two pastors from Southern Africa traveled in the United States on a trip organized by the Southern Africa Network of the ELCA.

Both Pastor Caroline Mhlongo from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and Pastor Aino Kapewongolo from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia were among the first women ordained in their churches. In addition to sharing their personal struggles as women pastors, they were eager to talk of the struggle for freedom in their countries.

I traveled with both women to Iowa and Wisconsin; Pastor Caroline then flew to the Caribbean synod, companion synod to her Eastern diocese, while Pastor Aino and I went to Washington and California.

Many people were encouraged to

learn that the ministry of women pastors is accepted in Namibia and South Africa. Both pastors shared some of the pain of waiting for acceptance, as well as the joys of now serving a congregation.

When asked about what is better in their countries now, both women mentioned the hope they feel. Pastor Aino also related how immunizations are now available throughout the country and that education is more accessible. Both women were pleased that their children are not required to learn Afrikaans, as they were. Pastor Aino smiled and stated, "We have hope in the future!"

Joan Gerig is coordinator of the Southern Africa Network, (SAN/ELCA). ELCA organizations, including Commission for Women, Division for Global Mission, Congregational Social Ministry and Women of the ELCA, supported the women's tour.



Pastor Caroline (left) and Pastor Aino



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Progress in childhood education

by Solveig Kjeseth

Children are everywhere in Namibia. In a country where nearly 50% of the population is under 15 years, one cannot help but think about children. Informed that more than half of these children live in poverty, one cannot help but worry about them. What will ensure that these little ones have a chance for a healthy, meaningful life?

The Katutura Early Education Course is an important initiative of the Children's Desk of the Council of Churches in Namibia. Established in 1994 and directed by Selma Shejvali, KEEC recognizes that a child's earliest experiences are critical to healthy development.

The main objective of KEEC is to

improve the quality of care and education for young children by providing "in-service" training for day care providers and pre-school teachers. Classes meet weekly for two years, supplemented by several three-day "intensive courses" focusing on child development and psychology.

A long-range KEEC goal is to develop and test a curriculum for early childhood care and education adaptable to both rural and urban settings. The Children's Desk has received assistance for this effort from educators in Norway and Finland.

Hopefully, KEEC's achievements will inspire other groups to provide similar training to nurture the eager minds of Namibia's smallest citizens.