

# MAKING ACCESS REAL

**Promoting access by rural  
women and girls**

The Women's Leadership Centre



**Title:** Promoting access by rural women and girls

**Organisation:** Women's Leadership Centre

**Country:** Namibia

**Date:** December 2017

We are funded, and have two full-time staff, as well as a part-time bookkeeper/accountant.

### What was the issue?

Rural women and girls in Zambezi Region, Namibia, lack access to state protection from harmful cultural practices that subject them to all forms of violence and high risk of exposure to HIV:

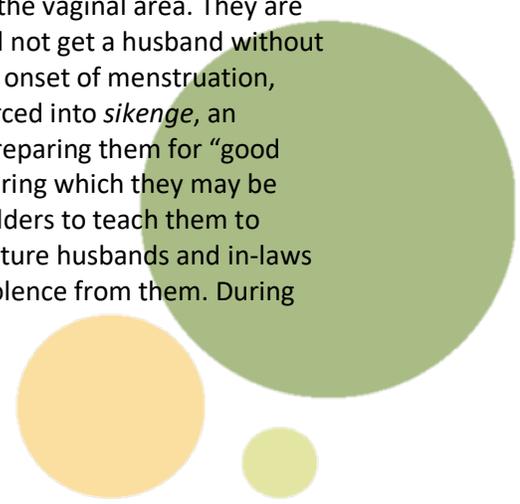
### Who are we?

The Women's Leadership Centre is a feminist women's rights organisation based in Windhoek, Namibia. We work towards building a society in which all women actively engage in shaping the politics, practices and values of both public and private spheres of life.

Our organisation supports the development of leadership among Namibian women at the grassroots by building the voice, visibility, creativity, pride and transformative agency of women from some of the most marginalised sectors of society. We empower them to form women's groups and to articulate their experiences, needs and desires through texts and photography, informed by a critical feminist consciousness of their human rights as women and as citizens.

Our *Zambezi for Women's Rights Programme* focuses on the prevention of harmful cultural practices that subject girls and women to all forms of violence and high risk of exposure to HIV. We run this programme in villages across Zambezi Region in north-eastern Namibia, as well as in the regional capital Katima Mulilo. We do not have members, but operate through volunteers and village community facilitators across Namibia, with whom we communicate via mobile phone.

- Over the past ten years, bi-annual figures from the Ministry of Health and Social Services show that almost 50% of women aged between 25 and 49 tested in Katima Mulilo, Zambezi Region, are living with HIV, and almost 25% of women aged 15 to 24 years. This is double the national average for the older age group, and close to three times the national average for the younger women. In fact, the national averages would be much lower without the high prevalence rates in Zambezi Region!
- Yet the Namibian state is in denial about the link between harmful cultural practices among the Lozi-speaking people of Zambezi Region and the high rate of HIV in the region.
- Rural girls and women in Zambezi Region are subjected to practices that involve making their bodies sexually pleasurable and available to men. For example, girls may be forced by their grandmothers to elongate their labia minora long before puberty, a practice that is painful and leads to sores and infections in the vaginal area. They are told that they will not get a husband without long labia! At the onset of menstruation, many girls are forced into *sikenge*, an initiation ritual preparing them for "good womanhood", during which they may be beaten by their elders to teach them to "respect" their future husbands and in-laws and to endure violence from them. During



*sikenge* the girls may be taught how to “dance in bed” for men, which may end in “sexual readiness testing” by a male relative – a culturally accepted form of rape. Girls are also taught to practise dry sex, through inserting herbs or chemicals into their vaginas to prevent lubrication, as men like it “hot, tight and dry”. This practice, during which condoms cannot be used, is extremely painful to women and exposes them to high risk of HIV transmission through damaged vaginal tissue. Girls are also subjected to cuttings on their backs and arms to create scars that men like to feel during sex, another painful practice with a high risk of exposure to HIV.

- These violent initiation practices, that include physical and emotional abuse, are used to perpetuate male power and privilege in a patriarchal culture by preparing girls for subservience as wives, daughters in law and sexual partners. Girls are socialised from early to accept forced marriage, polygamy, lobola, divorce that leaves them with nothing, and widow cleansing (often through sexual intercourse) after the death of their husbands.
- These practices remain hidden as it is a cultural taboo to speak about them. Girls are taught to “respect their culture” and are not aware of their right to be free from violence, torture and degrading treatment, as protected in the Namibian Constitution, and laws such as the Combating of Rape Act.
- Government officials – including the Minister of Health and Social Services – avoid taking up this issue as it is “embarrassing” and “disrespectful of the culture”. The Minister of Justice went to the extent of implying to the UN that Silozi is not a language spoken in Namibia, meaning that the harmful cultural practices named in Silozi in the WLC

research and reports, do not take place in Namibia.

- There have, therefore, been no efforts by the state to research the links between HIV prevalence and harmful cultural practices, nor to ensure that the many laws protecting the dignity and rights of girls and women are actually implemented in the region.

### **What was the change we wanted to see?**

The WLC has worked with young women in various villages in Zambezi Region over the past ten years on the assumption that the girls and young women of today can protect their own daughters, nieces and granddaughters from this cycle of violence. But we understand that cultural change is a slow dance. First we wanted to develop these young women’s knowledge and understanding of human rights, including the right of girls and women to be protected from all forms of violence. We wanted them to gain power and agency – through feminist critical consciousness, and by organising themselves to support one another and speak out as a group. Thus they would build voice, visibility, leadership and courage to break the culturally prescribed silence and taboos; and to challenge the many harmful cultural practices that entrench women’s subordinate position, and expose them to all forms of violence, HIV and AIDS.

### **What did we do?**

We created local and regional platforms at which the young women were able to speak out on their need to be protected from these practices. They have addressed, and given testimonies to, traditional leaders, regional governors, local councillors, and staff of state agencies based in the regional capital, Katima Mulilo. They have won support from teachers, social workers, nurses, staff of the Women and

Child Protection Unit, and regional, local and traditional leaders.

In 2015, through the Namibian NGO Forum (NANGOF Trust), we developed a Shadow Report on Harmful Cultural Practices in Namibia, which was submitted to the UN Committee monitoring Namibia's implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This was the occasion of the Justice Minister's denialism, referred to earlier. The Shadow Report led to a number of recommendations to the Namibian government on the prevention of harmful cultural practices, not only from the CEDAW Committee, but also from the Committee monitoring the Convention on Civil and Political Rights.

Having gained visibility, credibility and support at the local, regional (Zambezi Region) and international levels, we decided to scale up efforts to put this issue onto the national agenda. In 2017 the WLC organised the **First National Dialogue on the Prevention of Harmful Cultural Practices**; this took place in Katima Mulilo, Zambezi Region. The young women and traditional leaders we have trained over the years spoke out strongly in front of government officials.

We also conducted a **media campaign**, including a press conference, which provided platforms for the young women and traditional leaders to speak directly to the regional and national media.

### **What did we achieve?**

Young women and traditional leaders have broken the culturally prescribed silence and taboos at the national level. They had the courage to use the platforms created by the

WLC to speak out loudly and clearly on their issues. They challenged cultural denialism and demanded support for their efforts to change their culture to protect – rather than violate – the rights of girls and women.

Many government officials expressed their support, but we will need to intensify the campaign to hold them accountable.

All the national media houses in Windhoek attended and covered the press conference addressed by the young women and traditional leaders from Zambezi Region, and some did follow-up research and stories on the work of the WLC.

### **What were the key lessons learnt?**

The media coverage by the two television broadcasters led to a major backlash on their Facebook pages, with many viewers attacking the young women as liars, disrespecting their culture and undermining the reputation of Zambezi Region. News clippings were circulated via cell phone in the region, leading to verbal attacks and harassment of the young women – even staff of the Gender Ministry participated in this.

**Media training:** From this we learnt that we need to train the media to also foreground the voices of the male traditional leaders, as this will prevent much of the backlash that is largely gender-based.

**Preparation:** Further, we need to prepare the project participants for the backlash as human rights defenders, and be ready for it ourselves. We must have volunteers at hand to engage with the Facebook (and other social media) conversations as they unfold, exposing how the denialism serves to uphold patriarchy and the oppression of girls and women.



**Amplifying voice:** We need to find ways for senior government officials to add their voices in the public realm; and we must also find voices speaking out against harmful cultural practices in other ethnic groups in Namibia so it does not remain a Zambezi issue only, but becomes a national one.

**Re-defining “key populations”:** In fact, it is a SADC issue – our extensive desk research shows that many of the harmful cultural practices in Zambezi Region also occur in Namibia’s neighbouring countries including Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. If we are serious about reducing HIV prevalence in Southern Africa, it is high time for SADC and all other role-players to declare women living under customary laws and exposed to harmful cultural practices a KEY POPULATION for the

purposes of HIV prevention and treatment programmes.

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