

No woman is an Island

Building support circles for women
in our communities and starting
revolutions of change

By Laura Hallikas and Mimi Mwiya



Violence against women affects the lives of a majority of Namibians. Women and children are especially victims of rape, sexual abuse and all kinds of domestic violence. In too many families and partnerships men dominate women and control their lives with the threat of violence. Too many women are suffering alone, not speaking about their experience even to other women. This may perhaps be the biggest battle women have to fight, the battle of isolation and of having to suffer in silence for fear of losing their lives.

On Saturday, 9th of June, as feminist students from the University of Namibia, we initiated a women's meeting at the Jacob Marengo Secondary school. We were ten women, Namibians, foreigners, students, housewives and working women alike. The purpose of the meeting was to provide a platform for women from all walks of life to freely talk about the issues that bother us most in our society. To form some sort of support system for women who feel there is a lack of one and want to do something about it.

What we learned from the meeting was that violence against women is a universal problem, and most women have the same battle to fight. Why then, if the battle is the same, should we fight in isolation?

We should help each other to be strong enough to speak out or fight back when we face violence.

We should be there to encourage one another. It is important in this kind of difficult situation to have someone who understands what you've been through. The culture of silence cannot be broken by one person alone. Lives continue to be lost and rights continue to be violated, thus there's an outcry for women to unite and fight together.

And it's not only women who are willing to fight this battle. When we told three young men about the meeting, they were very supportive of the idea. "The violence and rape and all must stop. Because not all men are violent. Next time you have a meeting, we also want to come." This discussion gave us courage. The majority of people, both women and men, are willing to stop the culture of violence.

We need more women's support groups where we can share our experiences and help each other to solve the problems. That is something we can all contribute towards. But our government also needs to act. More social workers are needed, because we don't all live near people we can really trust. There is also a strong need for safe havens or shelters to be created for women in our society. They should be places women can run to without fear or shame, without feeling that the perpetrator is being protected instead. All these things we must demand from our political parties and our local politicians. There are many ways of contacting them, but again the most important thing is to say it out loud.

We think this small meeting was a good start for the atmosphere of sharing and talking about our experiences. We want to encourage all women in Namibia to do the same: Invite women and other people who are concerned about rape and abuse together and just talk. It does not take more than little bit of airtime, but it can give a lot! Like one of us said in the meeting, "Alone we can't do anything. But together we can make a change."

Of course one meeting alone will not address all of the social evils we face, and change will not happen overnight. But after all, all it takes to start the change is just that one step. If at least ten women are willing to stand up and raise their voices, ten more may get the strength to do the same, someone may get the strength to leave an abusive relationship, someone may get the strength to report a rape. And that is how revolutions are started, that is how true change is achieved!

Loving myself true

When I was five I learned to read. Books were a miracle to me. White pages, black ink, new worlds and different friends in each one. To this day I relish the feeling of opening a new binding for the first time, the anticipation of where I will go and whom I will meet inside.

When I was eight I learned to ride a bicycle. And this too, opened my eyes to a new world that I could explore on my own. Over the street from where I lived, aunties sold iceblocks, colorful sweets and many delights. I wonder today where they went. My best friend's house had a rosy smelling sort of tree in the yard. Sometime in autumn the leaves used to fall to the ground. We would pick them and plant them in our hair, very much sure that we looked like little daisies.

When I was 12 I learned that I was a lot more different than all the other girls. Dolls and makeup were alien to me. I played with cars. I Ran around all day with boys with my shirt tucked in my shorts. 'Look at me run daddy!' I would say. Stop being feisty he would say. Leave the boys to do the loud stuff. You will not find a man to marry you he would say.

I learned that there would be women that will love me, and there would be people that would respect me. I learned that society would teach me how to diet and of course how to cheat on diets. I learned how to feel miserable and ashamed, how to cringe away from peoples glances, how to tense myself for the fights that I thought were coming. The society I live in has a way of making one a soldier. But I am no different from the person on the street, only I'm a woman and a lesbian and that has been a battle for me.

Along the way I learned a dozen tricks on making myself invisible. How to keep a towel wrapped around my midsection at the beach but never swim. What will people say?

A lot has changed since then. These days I go out into the world in a suit of invisible armor, fully expecting to be shot at, but determined that I would not get shot down. I am going to be whoever I want to be. Live wherever I see fit, love whoever loves me back because there is comfort in love. Comfort in reaching out to people, asking for help and realizing that am valued, treasured. The truth is I'm alright the way I am. I was alright all along. I might not do everything I dream of doing, but I'm happy. I will love my body for what it can do—because it is good enough to lift, to walk, to ride a bicycle up a hill, to embrace the people I love and hold them fully, and to perhaps one day nurture a new life.

I will savor the taste of being young. I will savor my life. Most importantly I will love without stopping to ask whether that person deserves it. I am beautiful, I am happy, secure and I have and will find friends and success and even if my life does not have a Hollywood perfect happy ending I will stand steady in my pursuit to loving myself true!

By Limba Mupetami