We must choose life
Writings by Namibian women on culture, violence, HIV and AIDS

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We all know the statistics: 20% HIV/AIDS infection rate in most of Southern Africa, including Namibia, with little change in numbers despite billions of dollars for education and treatment from organisations like PEPFAR, Project Hope, and the Millennium Challenge. Less known is the gender distribution for HIV/AIDS: 62% for women and 38% for men in Namibia, but even these are still just numbers. The unique and invaluable contribution of We must choose life is to put faces into the bleak AIDS landscape, providing a human dimension to the bureaucratic facts and figures.

The book is a collection of writings by women all over Namibia, some of which are translated or transcribed from local languages. Of the more than 500 submissions, 159 were published. Its goal is to raise consciousness and empower women to take control of their health and welfare in a male-dominated society.

A similar book published two years ago, Between Yesterday and Tomorrow, deals with the progress toward gender equality on paper and the lack of progress in reality during the time since Independence. A third volume, forthcoming, will deal with moments of courage in a male-dominated society.
AIDS overwhelmingly victimises women, as statistics attest. The pain, of course, is physical, as sufferers succumb to myriad opportunistic infections, not to mention fevers, sweats, skin lesions, flus, headaches, diarrheas. The emotional pain, though, may be even worse. Many narratives tell of betrayal by an unfaithful HIV-positive husband, of fears and resistance to being tested for HIV, of fears about disclosing one’s status, of abandonment after revealing a positive test result, of isolation after deciding to conceal the result, of fear and grieving that one will not live long enough to raise one’s children, of broken homes and orphans reunited only in the graveyard, of poverty worsened by inability to work. The searing psychic pain of AIDS sufferers may be best expressed in the poem, Discrimination: “Why do you accuse me?/ i am not the virus/ why are you fighting me?/ i am not the disease/ can’t you see me?/ i am your mother, your daughter...don’t you recognise me?”

Reading these stories of women’s suffering provides an epiphany of the root cause of the AIDS pandemic: it’s not lack of education, it’s the presence of male-dominated culture! Traditional cultural practices in Namibia impact people’s behavior far more than educational leaflets or even Constitutional guarantees of human rights and gender equality. Indeed, as the editor claims, “Namibia remains one of the most violent and most unequal societies in the world.”

Although “it’s taboo in our culture to talk about sex and sexuality,” men supposedly have uncontrollable sexual desires. Therefore, they can’t take the time to use condoms, they require multiple partners (so they can “taste macaroni and rice, not just porridge all the time”), and sometimes “five wives.” They pay lobolas of “twenty-three cows,” which make their wives into property, subject to rape, beating, even murder. “Angel” is a particularly poignant story of a little girl raped and murdered by her uncle. Other little girls endure years of incest with family members. When a girl starts to menstruate, she is commonly “initiated” (raped) by a cousin. A widow needs to be “cleansed” (raped) by another family member and then remarried within the family to keep the property intact. “My daughter, Sofia, I know that you are still mourning your husband’s death, but remember that this is our culture and you will become Martin’s wife.” Infertility requires the woman to mate with another man in hopes of sparing her husband the shame of childlessness. Genital mutilation and the use of herbs to create “dry sex” increase chances for HIV infection.

Why do Namibian women tolerate this brutality and succumb to HIV/AIDS like sheep to slaughter? Because they, too, have been acculturated to accept male dominance. They believe that “a respected woman is quiet, obedient, hard-working, and married.” Because any resistance is met with even more brutality and rejection from both husbands and extended family. And most of all because they have no other options, lacking any encouragement or means to support themselves and their children on their own. As one poet put it, “Infidelity is rooted in culture/ know that dead people have no culture/ therefore a culture has no meaning/ if it drives people to death...”

Obviously, something has to change. No society can prosper without equality. As Deputy Minister of Education, Dr. Becky Ndjoze-Ojo, states in her introduction, “if one part of society is sick, the whole society is sick, and if one half of the society is treated without respect and freedom, the whole society remains oppressed and disempowered.”

We must choose life may just be the catalyst for this desperately needed change. A prerequisite for healing, the book diagnoses the illness, not just of HIV and AIDS but of the culture that allows this grim reaper to flourish. And rising phoenix-like from the grinding suffering are stories of triumph of the human spirit, of brave women reclaiming their rights and their dignity and encouraging their sisters to do likewise. In so doing, these writers have created art. 

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