Fifty members of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network (NWMN) from 21 towns and villages across Namibia came together in Windhoek in early September to analyse the impact of their campaign for gender balance in elected positions of government, and to plan a new campaign on access to treatment for people living with HIV and Aids. Elizabeth Khaxas, Spokesperson of the NWMN, reports.

Achievements at local level

Members of the NWMN were proud to hear a summary of their achievements at the local level. Between July 2001 and March 2002, they conducted altogether 105 workshops - in two or three rounds - in 55 towns and villages. In their workshops they involved 3500 people, mainly women but also a number of men, in discussions on the importance of women’s participation in politics and decision making. They educated participants about the current electoral acts and possible law reform to bring about women’s equal representation in elected positions of government, and generated enthusiastic support for the 50/50 Bill.

Following the local workshops, Network members and supporters visited altogether 70 schools, 88 churches, 9 traditional leaders, 17 regional councillors and 32 local councillors, and received public support from many of these leaders. They further had meetings with NGOs and leaders of all major political parties. They distributed thousands of pamphlets, collected hundreds of signatures and held marches to local authorities at Spitzkoppe, Outjo, Stampriet and many other locations to hand over the signatures and the 50/50 Bill.

Impact at national level

Participants were pleased to hear that strong support was received from former Minister of Regional and Local Government and Housing, Dr Nicky Iyambo, who called for ‘zebra party lists’ headed by women on many public occasions during the past six months. They further recognised the impact of their lobbying and advocacy on the Namibia Elected Women’s Forum, which consists of women members of local, regional and national government. In July 2002 the Forum adopted gender balance in elected positions of government as its vision, and agreed to lobby for zebra party lists for the next elections.

Government is currently proposing to amend the Local Authorities Act to retain the party list system, agreeing with the Network that this is more favourable to women. The members of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network vowed to lobby government to include a requirement for gender balanced “zebra party lists” in this amendment.

Are women MPs “pulling up the ladder”?

Network members however expressed concern at the response from members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Petitions, who had met with a delegation of the NWMN in May 2002 to discuss our petition calling for the adoption of the 50/50 Bill. While the Committee members had agreed on the need to bring about equal representation of women in the interests of gender justice, some had questioned whether enough women were ready for political office to bring about gender balance in the next elections. Network members were surprised to hear that women members of parliament were now pulling up the ladder behind them, instead of helping to open the doors for their sisters. “What about all our past and present women mayors and members of regional and local authorities?” asked Isabella Gurira of Tubuses. “They could bring valuable knowledge of the needs of their communities to national government. And what about all the teachers and nurses, the vast majority of whom are women? But to us leadership is not about levels of formal education or the ability to speak English- it is to know and to remain accountable to our grassroots women.”

Is our National Gender Policy “unrealistic”?

Considering that the demand for gender balance in government is based directly on our National Gender Policy, members of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network were also surprised to hear that the Minister of Women Affairs and Child Welfare recently stated in an interview that she viewed our Campaign as “unrealistic.” In particular the National Gender Plan of Action calls for gender balance at all levels of government including cabinet by 2003! “Maybe the Minister should inform us which other sections of the National Gender Policy she spearheaded are now considered to be unrealistic.” was a common response at the meeting. With regard to the Minister’s claim that the Network was simply seeking “publicity”, members said: “This is what we call lobbying and advocacy for gender equality.”

Quotas must be adopted and filled democratically

The meeting further analysed the failure of women to be elected to the Swapo Party Central Committee in large numbers at the recent party congress. We realised that women cannot and must not rely on the patronage of a party leader who promises to appoint them to positions of power in contravention of the party constitution. Women who have been ap-
... and planning a new campaign

pointed by one powerful individual will serve the interests of that person and not the interests of women. Instead women need to lobby for the democratic introduction of quotas for elections to all levels of their party structures. Even when quotas are introduced women should openly compete for positions so that everyone knows what they stand for. Are they going to strongly promote the implementation of the National Gender Policy or keep a low profile in order not to challenge male power?

Strengthening our local women's groups

Following the above analysis, we discussed how members of the Namibian Women's Manifesto Network can strengthen their local women's groups through developing constitutions, plans of action and proposals. We invited donor agencies to inform Network members of their programmes in Namibia and their requirements for funding. And we were honoured to learn that many donor agencies value the work we have done so far through our Network and are willing to support us in our further endeavours to engender democracy and development in Namibia.

This meeting with donors was welcomed with great enthusiasm by the Network members, who are keen not only to establish income generating projects but also to utilise the lobbying and advocacy skills they have learnt through the 50/50 Campaign to further promote women's participation in development at the local level. Sister Namibia was requested to continue to provide support to members in building their groups in their communities.

Aids is a gender issue

The third part of the NWWMN workshop looked at the impact of HIV and Aids on individuals, families and communities, and analysed why girls and women are particularly vulnerable to contracting HIV. In small groups participants questioned the relevance of the Abstain – Be Faithful – Condomise messages of Aids prevention campaigns to their lives. They agreed that abstinence is difficult for women in a culture that does not challenge men's coercive behaviour towards their girlfriends. They discussed what would happen if a married woman asked her husband for non-penetrative sex. They suggested that men might agree to other ways of having sex with their girlfriends, but with their wives they would ask: “Who taught you that?”

They further questioned how being faithful to one partner could benefit women in a culture that condones men having many partners, either officially in polygynous marriages or unofficially. They also said that it was not easy to get their partner to use a condom – while most women do not have access to the femidom yet.

Participants agreed that women need to know and assert their sexual rights – their right to decide freely and without coercion when, with whom and how to have sex. They said that mutual respect in sexual decision making would go a long way towards the prevention of HIV and Aids. However, they stressed that women’s lack of voice in decision making at all levels of society contributes to their lack of voice in the bedroom. We came to the conclusion that gender inequality is the main cause of the high rate of HIV infection among girls and women.

Joining the Treatment Literacy Campaign

Finally, the NWWMN workshop provided information on treatments that have been developed for HIV and Aids, as well as on our human right to treatment. The Network members launched a signature campaign calling for access to Nevirapine and alternatives to breastfeeding for pregnant HIV-positive women, PEP medication for rape survivors and medical staff, and anti-retroviral drugs for all people living with Aids who need them. They will now conduct workshops in their communities and mobilise their workshop participants to become part of the nationwide Treatment Literacy Campaign.