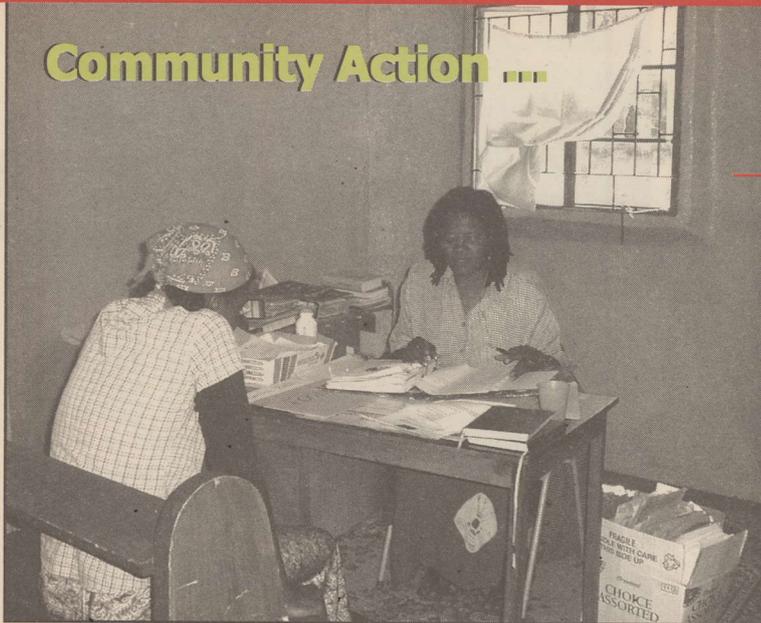


Community Action ...



Member of Parliament Rosa Namises counsels community members on a range of issues from domestic violence to HIV and Aids at the Women Support Women's small office in Katutura.

Women Support Women

A number of networks and groups have protested the killing, abuse and raping of women and children and demanded the passing of legislation that will recognise and address the vulnerabilities of women and children. *Women Support Women*, a community-based organisation started focusing on these issues in 1994.

It started out as a group of women who saw increasing levels of domestic and sexual violence as well as alcohol abuse in the sprawling township of Katutura. One of the contributing factors, they realised, was the mushrooming of shebeens.

Magriet Appolus, one of the founding members, told *Sister Namibia* that shebeens were selling liquor to minors, which contributed to an increase in youth abusing alcohol. Husbands and boyfriends would spend their free time and lots of money at shebeens after which they returned home and abused their families. Sexual violence, she noted, increased in the area, while girls and women in need of money targeted shebeen patrons.

The group took action by raising awareness among shebeen owners on how their business negatively affected the community. They demanded different operating hours. The women also went on nightly patrols with the police, urging loitering youth and women to return home explaining the dangers of such behaviour.

"But it was difficult; people didn't listen. Today almost every fifth house in Katutura sells either alcohol or drugs or both. The situation is really bad," Magriet lamented. An increase in socio-economic challenges led to the women making a more concerted effort to lessen or reverse their impact, and they currently run a number of programmes that address specific problems.

The Lutheran Bet-el Church provided the group with a space from where they run an office, which is open for counselling twice a week. There is also a container, which the women use for meetings and from where they distribute food. Rosa Namises, women's rights activist and a Member of Parliament for Congress of Democrats, coun-

sels community members on a variety of socio-economic challenges.

Those who come for counselling are mainly survivors of domestic violence, people infected or affected by HIV and Aids, and elderly people frustrated with delayed pension applications. These days more women approach *Women Support Women* for advice on how to care for Aids orphans. A high number of people also receive counselling on drug and alcohol related problems.

"But mostly people come here because of hunger, not poverty – hunger. Our people are dying of hunger," Namises said. Many women have approached her requesting advice on how they can become financially independent.

The *Uibasen Project* is the group's main income generating project. The women use their needlework skills to make colourful and creative bags, dresses, bedding and curtains for sale. Once a month the women sell barbeque, salads and other foods on street corners to raise funds for their work.

The project closest to their heart is the feeding scheme. Alwina Kooper, Project Coordinator, said they distribute basic foodstuffs such as maize meal, beans and cooking oil to desperate families once a month.

Katutura has a high rate of teenage pregnancies and according to Namises many girls are not aware of reproductive health issues. A sexual and reproductive health and rights gathering for girls is held once a year in August. Girls are educated on sexuality, assertiveness, dating and reproductive issues such as menstruation.

Members of the group also travel the country to raise awareness on new laws that can help women, such as the Combating of Rape and Domestic Violence Act; and on the different treatments available for HIV and Aids. Erica van der Westhuizen said most of the group members are married and they have to deal with husbands who are unwilling to let them go for a few days. "They complain about the workshops and our talk about democracy and 50/50. But we tell them that we have to do it. People are suffering, so we cannot just sit and watch how our people are dying of hunger and disease," she exclaimed.

It is difficult to believe that the organisation manages to achieve all they do considering the few resources they have. According to Namises, the food they distribute monthly is bought on account from a local supermarket and this account is paid by interested individuals. The countrywide workshops are funded, but the group is in need of skills training, computers for the office, a copy machine, a telephone and fax, old clothing and materials they can use for the *Uibasen Project*, as well as stationery and support with food. ♀