Engendering Local Government
a new focus of the 50/50 Campaign

By Liz Frank

Elections for Local Authority Councils are expected to be held in early 2004. On the same day that voter registration started in July this year, women leaders from towns and villages across Namibia gathered in Windhoek to develop strategies for ‘engendering’ the local government elections, marking the beginning of Phase 4 of the 50/50 Campaign.

Aims and activities of the Campaign

Phase 4 of the 50/50 Campaign aims to mobilise women across Namibia to register as voters for the Local Government elections and to come forward as candidates. The campaign further aims to lobby political parties to put forward 50/50 gender balanced party lists and to include specific time bound gender policies in their party platforms for engendering local government. As with the first three phases of the 50/50 campaign, this campaign is being conducted by the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network (NWMN), a project of Sister Namibia.

Two national training of trainers workshops for 60 facilitators of the NWMN from more than 30 towns and villages have already been conducted, in July and September, as well as a first round of local workshops conducted by the facilitators in their communities. The second round of local workshops will be completed by the end of November. A half-day consultative workshop was held in August for members of NGOs supporting the work of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network, and Sister Namibia invited Faeza Kahn of the Gender Advocacy Project (GAP), Cape Town, to share the South African experiences with engendering local government at this workshop. GAP is the leading organisation of the Global 50/50 Campaign in South Africa. Two panel discussions with political parties have also been conducted as part of the campaign.

Understanding local government from a gender perspective

In the national and local workshops we looked at the work of local councillors and the skills they need to do this work. Participants understood that through their everyday work in their households and communities, women have developed many of the capacities needed for local government. The facilitators of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network realised that through their leadership training in the Network they have developed further valuable skills including the planning, conducting and evaluation of meetings and workshops; public speaking and accessing the media; budgeting, financial management and report writing; and community mobilisation through lobbying and advocacy activities such as meetings with different stakeholders including government officials, leaders of political parties and civil society organisations. Following this discussion many of the facilitators stated that they were ready to stand for election, and that their platform would be the National Gender Policy!

The common refrain that “women are not ready and not educated enough” to be elected into government was thus strongly challenged through this discussion. “There is no special university where men are trained for politics, so women should go for it and learn through experience just like men do” was the unanimous view of the house. One could on the contrary say that the 50/50 Campaign itself has been “a special university for women” through the training on women’s political participation provided by sanitation. Many facilitators said that even where these services are provided, poor women cannot pay for them.

By sharing their dreams of how their own communities should be developed over the next five to ten years, participants understood that local government has an important role to play in the implementation of policies and programmes promoting gender equality, including the National Gender Policy. Suggestions were made that Local Councils should provide more facilities for childcare so that women can work outside the home, educate men to be more responsible fathers and share in the household duties, provide information on legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act - and shelters for women and children seeking protection from violence, inform communities about the roll-out of treatment for HIV and Aids and encourage people to go for voluntary testing and treatment, and provide support to orphans. Following these discussions participants agreed that local government, as the level of government closest to the people, is an important site of struggle for gender equality, and that women should therefore register and vote in the forthcoming elections.

Motivating women to stand as candidates

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Sister Namibia over the past four years to the facilitators of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network and through them to thousands of women at the local level!

However, participants agreed that even where many women are present in governing structures, these are still dominated by a patriarchal culture, which sets priorities that are not necessarily in the interests of women. It was therefore suggested that Local Councils need to establish gender desks or committees and work together with women’s groups in their local communities in order to bring about meaningful change.

**Lobbying political parties to “engender” their party manifestos**

Discussing the role of political parties in promoting substantive gender equality, participants agreed that the time has come for parties to go beyond the affirmative action requirements of the Local Authorities Act, which brought 43% women into the Local Councils in 1998, to 50/50 gender balance as a matter of principle in the name of gender justice. New facilitators were surprised to learn that the Namibian government had already included the goal of gender balance in all elected positions of government in the National Gender Policy, adopted in 1998, and asked why this has still not been achieved. In fact, it would already have been achieved at the local level if political parties had alternated women and men candidates ‘zebra-style’ on their party lists in 1998 instead of putting more men at the top of their lists and more women at the bottom.

Participants at the national and local workshops also discussed why political parties should include specific time-bound gender policies in the party manifestos. They agreed that it was the duty of political parties to implement the National Gender Policy and all the international instruments promoting gender equality that our government has signed, and that this needs to be done at all three levels of government. They suggested that the commonly lamented voter apathy was due to the fact that elections have not been contested around real issues facing communities, and realised that as citizens women had the right and the duty to hold political parties accountable to the implementation of the constitution and all government policies for development, which needed to be solidly based on gender analysis and gender budgeting.

**Responses from political parties**

The two panel discussions organised as part of the campaign activities provided political parties with an opportunity to present and discuss their views on the need for engendering local government. Only two parties sent representatives. Ignatius Shixwameni, Secretary General of the Congress of Democrats (CoD), emphasised the need to put people at the centre of development and said that since women formed the majority of citizens in our country it was time to overcome “minority rule” by men. He stated that he is proud that the CoD is signatory to the Namibian Women’s Manifesto, which was done as a question of principle and commitment – not public relations. He further said that the CoD is the only party that, in its constitution, provides for a quota system in leading structures. For the upcoming Local Authority Elections the party has issued directives that candidate lists will not be accepted if either of the sexes constitute less than 40 percent of the list.

Administrative Secretary of the DTA, Richard Kamburona, also stated that his party was a proud signatory to the Namibian Women’s Manifesto in 1999. He emphasised that the DTA leadership were ‘firm believers’ in non-discrimination against women. He stated that women already make up 46% of the DTA local councillors. However, he was less optimistic about the possibility of bringing about gender balance in the party structures, saying that patriarchal culture predominates and leads to the situation that even women generally do not vote for their fellow women because politics is seen as “men’s business.”

**First success of the campaign**

According to reports from the Electoral Commission of Namibia, 97% of all eligible voters registered during July and August! The new 50/50 Campaign of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto can surely claim co-responsibility for this success following the national and local workshops and other activities we conducted in many parts of the country during the two-month registration period. We will report in more detail on the local activities in the next issue of *Sister Namibia*. During the next four months the facilitators of the Network and members of the 40 supporting NGOs will use the campaign pamphlets and posters to mobilise women, men and young people country wide to vote for political parties which put forward 50/50 gender balanced party lists and seriously promote gender equality in their manifestos with specific time-bound indicators for implementation at the local level. Together, we will make a difference!
The Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network

50 – 50
Women and men in local government - get the balance right!

Campaign for gender balanced “zebra” party lists and gender policies for the local government elections 2004

What is the current representation of women and men in local government in Namibia?

Women are more than half of the Namibian population and more than 52 percent of voters, yet women hold fewer elected positions than men in Local Councils across the country.

But we are close to achieving gender balance at this level of government! In the 1998 Local Authority elections, 43 percent of the Local Councillors elected were women. This success is due largely to an affirmative action provision in the Local Authorities Act, which requires political parties and associations to place a certain minimum number of women on their candidate lists. If the political parties had alternated women and men “zebra style” on their candidate lists we would already have achieved gender balance at the local level.

The women elected to serve on their local councils have risen to the challenge and provided good leadership in their communities. A number of them are currently Mayors or Deputy Mayors, others have moved on to higher office, for example to become head of a national institution or an ambassador.

The Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network together with its allies now challenges political parties to go beyond affirmative action to gender equality and gender justice by putting forward gender balanced zebra style party lists (alternating women and men candidates on their lists) in the 2004 local government elections and all future elections at this level.

Why should political parties implement 50/50?

1 ... because political parties must implement our Constitution.

The Namibian Constitution states that all people are equal before the law and that no one may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex or race. (Article 10)

The Constitution points out that women have suffered special discrimination in the past. It says that Parliament may need to take special steps to help women play an equal role in all areas of life in Namibia. (Article 23)

Yet participation in public life, and in particular in politics and decision making, is still seen by many as something that “men do”. Women are not encouraged to enter public political life, and those who do face the burden of work both outside and inside the home, as well as a lack of support for their public role.

Political parties must therefore take the lead in leveling the playing field for women, by making space for women to participate equally in politics and educating men to share equally in housework and the raising of children.

2 ... because political parties must implement our National Gender Policy and Plan of Action.

The National Gender Policy states that government shall strive to establish mechanisms for attaining the goal of gender balance in government bodies and committees, public administration, judiciary and any other decision making organs. Further, the National Gender Plan of Action calls for gender balance at all levels of government, including cabinet, by 2003!

3 ... because women bring different perspectives on development challenges and solutions to the table.

In Namibia women and children are the poorest of the poor in our communities. Women work as subsistence farmers, domestic workers and in the informal economy, many of them as single parents with little support from the fathers of their children. They hold families and communities together in the face of poverty, escalating domestic violence and the impact of illness and death as we move from being a society affected by HIV to a society affected by Aids which does not yet provide treatment to all those who need it.

The Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network therefore calls on political parties and associations to seriously study the National Gender Policy and the international instruments for gender equality signed by our government, including CEDAW
(Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, and the Beijing Platform for Action. Political parties must develop policies to implement these agreements at the local level. We urge political parties to set specific time-bound targets that promote gender equality in our families and communities.

We call on women, men and young people to vote for political parties and associations that will work towards gender equality and the empowerment of women in our towns and villages in the following ways:

**The Development of Gender Policies**

All Local Councils must use the tool of gender analysis to develop gender policies. This should be done in consultation with the local community to ensure that all development and service delivery strategies adopted by the councils are gender sensitive and result in gender equality in the community.

**The Establishment of Gender Desks**

All Local Councils must establish structures such as gender desks or committees to oversee the implementation of the gender policy, and mechanisms for community participation in the monitoring and evaluation of progress towards gender equality.

**Gender Budgeting**

All Local Councils must use the tool of gender budgeting to ensure equitable distribution of resources to all citizens as well as to correct past imbalances.

**Checklist for Gender Equality in the Local Government Elections:**

- My political party has put forward a 50/50 “zebra-style” party list, alternating women and men on the list.
- My political party has included specific and time-bound gender policies in its party platform.

The power of political parties lies in the vote of women. Women are more than 52% of the voters. Our vote is for 50/50 and for gender policies for Local Government!

**Members of the following organisations are participating in this Campaign:**


**If you need more information or would like to support this Campaign, please contact Sister Namibia at**

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**Our vote is for 50/50!**