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INFORMATION ABOUT NAMIBIA'S LAW

Women and elections

In a parliamentary democracy like Namibia, all power shall be vested in the people through freely elected representatives exercising this power. 51 % of Namibia's population are women who still face many injustices based on their gender. Namibia has a long history of many types of social inequality including gender inequality. Many challenges women face in Namibia today have been influenced by the historical imbalance of power between women and men, social structural factors such as poverty, unemployment and related social problems. This includes, among others, economic inequalities like no acknowledgement of unpaid domestic work women disproportionately often do in their households, being exposed to gender-based violence, or being single mothers without any or insufficient support from the children's fathers.

Some of these inequalities are based on political, cultural, traditional or religious beliefs that promote gender inequality. For example, the cultural concept of the alleged supremacy of men over women. This makes it even more important that women are represented in parliament and have a say in who makes decisions in Namibia by participating more in the election process and casting their votes. The voices of women must be present and respected in decision-making at all levels.

Article 17 (2) of the Namibian Constitution provides all citizens of Namibia the right to vote from the age of 18, to run for president from the age of 35 and to be elected into public office from the age of 21. The 2020 *Perspectives on Parliament Issue No. 13* of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) stated that with 41 seats women make up 43 % of the 96 elected voting members of the current 7th National Assembly. Besides that, four out of eight seats (50 %) of the additional eight non-voting members that were appointed by the president are occupied by women. It also states that specific to the lower house of parliament, the National Assembly, Namibia ranks 7th in the world and 2nd in Africa with its representation of women in parliament.

Those numbers are impressive globally, but Namibia can do better, especially if the female representation in parliament only exists to round the numbers and doesn't necessarily contribute meaningfully.

On a regional and local level women's representation is much lower. According to the above IPPR bulletin only 26 % (11 out of 42) of the members of the National Council, 16 % (19 out of 121) of regional councillors and 32 % (18 out of 57) of mayors in Namibia are women. Despite 59 % of women in Deputy Minister positions only 20 % (5 out of 26) of Namibia's Ministers are female. Thus, although the National

Assembly almost reached gender parity regarding the percentage of men and women having seats in parliament, the representation in other law-making branches is quite unbalanced.

Why keen representation of women in parliament is so important is shown by the above-mentioned injustices and obstacles women still face in office and society. It is less likely that men, who do not experience these issues themselves, will consider women's struggles sufficiently. Adequate female representation can support law-making that speaks to gender-specific problems and offers adequate solutions.

Men in decision-making positions might represent a regressive idea of gender roles which views women primarily as caregivers of children and their husbands without economic independence that enables women to make individual life decisions. Therefore, it is not only important that women are represented in parliament and office but that voters also consider the candidate's political beliefs. It is difficult to say how many women in Namibia vote and who they vote into office due to unavailable statistics. It is important, though, that voting decisions are informed and well-considered to make sure the candidates and parties understand women's concerns and are cognisant of their emancipation.

For the parliament election in 2024 and elections in general this should mean that Namibia's women take time to read through, understand and focus on the different parties' election programmes and plans. What are the parties' stances on gender politics? Are they aware of the struggles women face? Who do they want to send to parliament? Are the parties' lists male-dominated or balanced? Women should also participate more effectively in information events and rallies to inform themselves as well as ask their local candidates which particular policies they want to pass to improve women's social and economic situations in society. The government and media should make sure they provide information that explains how the voting process works in an easy language that everyone (in rural and urban areas) can understand and which is translated into all the local languages. **Indeed, we call upon the government to do so as a matter of urgency.**

Political parties should be transparent about their political goals so that all, whether women or not, can make an informed decision about who they vote into office. Besides, politicians need to consider that women have different concerns depending on their income, (dis)ability, where they live, their age, their marital status, sexuality and many other individual factors. Women are not a homogenous group. Young women might have other needs than women who retire. Trans and lesbian women face discrimination that cis-heterosexual women do not experience. Wealthy women might not see the struggles of women with insufficient income. All these concerns are part of various life realities and need to be equally considered in the run for parliament and in legislation.

A growth in women's political involvement can yield real benefits for democracy, such as improved public responsiveness, stronger cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and a more sustainable future for Namibia.

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