NAMIBIA'S Fourth National Development Plan (NDP4) contains praise-worthy strategies aimed at children, but scant treatment of women.

The foreword by President Hifikepunye Pohamba states that "Government is keenly aware that most of the unemployed are young people and women", but there is not a single gender-disaggregated statistic in the entire document.

NDP4 is structured around three priorities: high and sustained economic growth, employment creation and increased income equality - all topics with important gender dimensions.

There are some sweeping generalisations about women here and there, and there is also a short paragraph in the opening section on gender equality and the empowerment of women: "We acknowledge that gender equality is a pre-requisite for sustainable development and that it permeates all spheres of life. We will, therefore, endeavour to create and promote an enabling environment in which gender equality and the empowerment of women are realised. Emphasis will be placed on mainstreaming a gender perspective in the principle strategies identified for the achievement of key NDP4 outcomes."

Alas, as is so often happens under the guise of gender mainstreaming, gender disappears from the document almost completely at this point, with the only real hint that Namibians comprise people of different sexes being references to the maternal mortality rate and a general vision of future family harmony complete with responsible mothers and fathers. So women are recognised explicitly as contributors to the economy in reproductive terms, but their productive role is virtually invisible in the plan.

The absence of gender-disaggregated information on key points is glaring. For example, the report cites the broad unemployment rate of 51.2 per cent (based on the 2008 Namibia Labour Force Survey) but nowhere refers to the fact that (according to the same source) this breaks down into a 58.4 per cent unemployment rate for women compared to 43.5 per cent for men. In its discussion of agriculture, NDP4 notes the continuing importance of subsistence agriculture to many households but fails to bring in the gendered dimension of this activity in Namibia.

Likewise, the discussion of income inequality makes only passing allusions to the fact that poverty is particularly high for female-headed households, and completely ignores the potential inequalities within individual households. The gendered face of poverty means that specific interventions are needed to address this disparity, but NDP4 offers no gender-sensitive strategies.

There is one passing reference in the section on peace and political stability to the goal of eradicating "gender-based violence", but no analysis of how this enormous problem is impacting national development.

The only specific recommendation on gender in the entire document is to "strengthen research capacity, including gender analysis research, since women are affected by poverty to a greater extent than men" - not a bad idea, but it seems half-hearted and inadequate in comparison to the report's other specific recommendations with clear statistical targets.

What should NDP4 have included on women? We understand that it is a high-level plan designed to prioritise key issues and strategies, but it could have at the very least suggested equal access for women to land tenure, credit and employment opportunities, gender balance in training initiatives designed to develop marketable skills relevant to key economic growth areas, and law reform in the neglected field of family law where structural problems continue to disempower women and leave them economically vulnerable. And, as already noted, the need to bring an end to gender-based violence - and violence in society more generally -
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Dianne Hubbard is the coordinator of the Gender Research and Advocacy Project at the Legal Assistance Centre. She is concerned that while women are a major focus, the NDP4 does not give them sufficient attention.

The thorough, sensitive treatment of children's issues provides a stark contrast to the almost complete absence of meaningful discussion of women's issues - despite the acknowledgement that both of these groups are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

There is a need to focus specifically on women to ensure that the gender gap is addressed as part of Namibia's national development efforts. One can only hope that the Annual Sector Execution Plans which are intended to give more detail to NDP4 will do more justice to women.

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Namibia: NDP4 - Great for Children, Disappointing for Women