

RESPECTING OUR ELDERS THE FIRST NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE OF OLDER PEOPLE

The first National Consultative Conference for the Older People was organised by the Directorate of Developmental Social Welfare Services of the Ministry of Health and Social Services in collaboration with the National Council for the Older People. It was held on 28-29 September 2003, followed by a commemoration of the International Day for Older People on 1 October.

It was a very fruitful and informative conference and an eye opener for many of us on some issues which affects the status of older people in Namibia.

In her official opening address, the Minister of Health and Social Services, Hon. Dr L Amathila, said that the extent to which we protect and promote the dignity and rights of older people today, reflects on how our own rights will be protected and promoted in our old age. The Namibian government does not promote institutionalised care of older people because it is neither sustainable nor appropriate. She raised the question of what happened to the houses or shelters of the older people. And what happened to the children they have nursed and cared for from birth? The government should not be expected to shoulder family responsibilities unnecessarily.

On the second day of the conference the National Co-ordinator of the Catholic AIDS Action, Dr Lucy Steinitz, gave a presentation on the elderly and HIV/AIDS. She mentioned that, although the numbers are not large, elderly become infected themselves through their partners and as a result of rape and violence. Since they are in most cases the foster parents of HIV/ Aids orphans, they need to be equipped with training in home-based care as well as information about HIV/AIDS. Without relevant information about HIV transmission, the grandmother may contract the virus from the people she cares for.

The burden of care and grief for the grandmother can be overwhelming. Imagine the situation when a mother with AIDS and her children come back home. The grandmother takes care of her own daughter until she dies and then continues to take care of her grandchildren who are orphans. There is no time for grief on the loss of a child, because she must be strong for her grandchildren.

Dr Steinitz stressed that one way to care for the elderly is to care for the children. The current procedure for the application of maintenance grants for foster children is in need of a complete overhaul. At present, it sometimes takes months or even years before such a grant application is approved while in the meantime the condition of the children changes radically.

The Ministry of Health and Social Services has embarked upon a national survey which will be conducted by the International Development Consultancy. Once this study is completed, the Ministry will be in a position to

know what interventions are needed to improve the living conditions and status of older people.

The existing system of social assistance in the form of pensions and welfare grants was explained to the conference. A suggestion has been made that a basic income grant for all children throughout Namibia be considered or alternatively that provision be made for additional income to HIV/AIDS orphans who stay with their grandparents.

Another key issue discussed at the conference was the draft bill for the rights, protection and care of older people that will replace the Aged Persons Act 81 of 1967. This bill would, among other things, guard against discrimination against older persons. For example, according to the draft bill, when deciding whether or not to admit a person to a home for older people, no person may unfairly be discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status. The HIV/AIDS status of an older person may not be part of the criteria and assessment procedures for admission of a person to such a home.

In the near future discussions will be held between the Directorate of Developmental Social Welfare Services with the National Council of the Older Persons in Namibia and other stakeholders about joining forces towards the upliftment of the current living conditions of the elderly in Namibia.

Naomi Kisting
Project Assistant
Gender Research & Advocacy Project

**REPORT OF THE FIRST NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE OF
OLDER PEOPLE THAT WAS HELD ON THE DATES OF 28-29 OCTOBER
2003 AT PARLIAMENT CONFERENCE HALL.**

I was attending the first National Consultative Conference for the Older People that was organised by the Ministry of Health and Social Services: Social Welfare in collaboration with the National Council for the Older People.

It was a very fruitful conference and an eye opener for many of us on some issues which affects the status of our old people in Namibia.

Lucy Steinitz was given a presentation on AIDS and Ageing. It became known how deeply old women are affected by this illness. They need to be equipped with home based care training as well as information about HIV/ AIDS since they are in most cases the foster parents of HIV/ Aids orphans. Because of lack of relevant information in terms of this disease, the grandmother can easily contract the virus.

The affected mother with her affected children comes back home. The mother is taking care of her daughter until she dies and then continues to take care of her grandchildren who are orphanage. There is no time for grief on the loss of a daughter, because she must be strong for her grandchildren. It is expected from her to provide a balanced diet and medicine to her sick family members with her pension grant of N\$250.00.

The Ministry of Health has launched a National survey on the status and living conditions that will be conducted throughout the country by International Development Consultancy (IDC). From the 108 000 older people, 2 500 will be interviewed by trained interviewers. After this, we would be enabled to determine the overall status of our grandfathers and grandmothers respectively.

The current structural procedure that has to be followed for the application of maintenance grants for foster children is time wasting and too complicated. It was being requested to look into it under the current Bill of the Rights, Protection and Care of the Older People.