

**LAC'S GENDER RESEARCH & ADVOCACY PROJECT:
TEN YEARS OF WORK TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY
by Dianne Hubbard, Co-ordinator, 2003**

“Even with a game of cards, the king counts more than the queen. “

That statement was made in Parliament back in 1995, during the debate around the Married Persons Equality Act.

For the last 10 years the Gender Research & Advocacy Project has been working on issues of gender equality, trying to show that this kind of thinking should not be applied to real people in real-life Namibia.

We have looked at conditions in sectors of work dominated by women, from domestic work to sex work, with the goal of recommending steps that would assist women in the most vulnerable and marginalized positions in society. On the other side of the equation, we have also examined steps designed to help women move into positions of power, by studying affirmative action provisions for women to see how well they have worked in practice.

What would you identify as the most serious human rights abuse in Namibia today? In terms of the numbers of people affected and the impact on society, we would say that it is violence against women and children. For this reason, the Gender Research & Advocacy Project has devoted much of its attention over the last ten years to research and law reform in this area. For example, we conducted research on sentences imposed for rape in Namibia and on approaches to sexual violence in other countries. Our lobbying work with the larger NGO community was a key factor in influencing the final shape of the Combating of Rape Act. Similarly, we have carried out research on domestic violence in Namibia and on legal mechanisms which have been used to combat domestic violence in other countries, for the purpose of making inputs along with our NGO partners into the Combating of Domestic Violence Act which has just been passed by Parliament.

Of course, we recognise that law reform alone is never enough to change society. We have also tried to engage in activities which can help to create a culture of non-violence. For example, we brought men together from all parts of the country to help them mobilise against violence against women. We have produced videos and radio dramas highlighting the evils of violence, in several Namibian languages. We have visited schools in various parts of the country to involve schoolchildren in discussions of positive ways to prevent violence in the home, and helped them translate their ideas into murals on permanent display at their schools. We have sponsored artwork and poetry against violence. We have regularly engaged in police training on how to deal with cases of rape and domestic violence. We have published educational material on the new laws and how they work, as well as a directory of places where people who have suffered violence can go to get help, and a document containing information on rape and HIV. We have written a play which we use in workshops to help demonstrate how the new law on domestic violence will work. We continue to network with the many other organisations which are active around this topic, in ongoing efforts to make Namibia a safer place for all of its citizens.

Another area of focus has been family law. We have published educational material on the Married Persons Equality Act as part of our efforts to explain and popularise its provisions. We have also produced research reports on maintenance, divorce and the recognition of customary marriage, while papers on marital property and cohabitation are in the pipeline.

Our work on maintenance is a good illustration of our efforts to make sure that all of our research is activist research. Some research models are premised on the idea of the researcher as a detached, objective observer who simply collects information and draws conclusions. We have taken a different approach. We consider the research process itself to be a tool for involvement and change. Because we conceptualise research as part of a package of services which we offer to our clients, we try to let the research process as well as the research results serve their interests. For example, we conducted detailed research on the operation of Namibia's maintenance courts which led to proposals for law reform on maintenance. During the course of the research, we found that there were many women who had complaints which could be resolved without the need for legal changes, so we organised a meeting between some of these women and representatives of the Ministry of Justice and the Namibian Police. The women who attended this meeting gained valuable practice in asserting their rights, and the government officials learned more about how women perceive the maintenance process. Some immediate improvements in the system grew out of this initiative.

In addition, we produced educational materials about the existing law on maintenance so that we could combine workshops designed to collect data with explanations to interested groups on the law and how it is supposed to work. When our research revealed that there were some misunderstandings about the correct interpretation of the law on the part of maintenance officers and magistrates, we worked together with the Ministry of Justice to produce a Maintenance Manual for court personnel. In order to reach the general public, we produced a series of short "advertisements" for broadcast on NBC, urging fathers to take financial and emotional responsibility for their children. Posters in a range of languages emphasised the same message. These projects were part of a nation-wide maintenance campaign aimed at raising awareness of maintenance as a children's issue rather than a tug of war between mothers and fathers. The long-awaited Maintenance which Act will probably have been passed by Parliament by the time you read this article. Hopefully the research and advocacy activities which went along with the legal research leading up to the law will have helped to prepare its meaningful implementation.

Our project refers to "gender" advocacy because discrimination has more than one side. In the drive towards gender equality, we have also taken up areas where men and boys have not received equal treatment – such as the positions of single fathers and children born outside of marriage. Another example is the new laws on violence, which give equal protection to men and boys, who can also be victims of rape and domestic violence. Discrimination is often double-edged: a law which makes it harder for a husband to adopt his wife's surname discriminates against her as well as him, by de-valuing her name in comparison to his. Gender equality sometimes involves looking beyond the categories of 'men' and 'women' to the rights of people as individuals.

We have seen over the years that it is possible to change gender stereotypes. One of the most memorable moments I can recall over the last ten years was a demonstration by men against violence against women outside the High Court in 2000. The men had been discussing the roles of men and women, and they suddenly began to ululate, thereby challenging one stereotyped gender role in a very dramatic way. It sent chills up my spine – a small alteration in the usual way of things that make me think about what great changes are possible.

The following is another statement which was made in Parliament in 1995 during the debate on the rights of husband and wife:

Nations are made up of women and men. It is only logical that for right decisions to be taken, both women and men should play an equal role... One can hardly do much if half your body is paralysed.

We believe that this sentiment represents the only way forward if Namibia is to develop to its full potential. As the Gender Research & Advocacy Project enters its second decade, we will continue to advocate gender equality in law and in life.