**Between Yesterday and Tomorrow. Writings by Namibian Women**

**Compiled and edited by Elizabeth Khaxas, Women’s Leadership Centre, Windhoek 2005**

**Introduction**

**The birth of the “Women’s Voices” project**

This anthology of feminist writings is an outcome of “bath meditations”, the visioning and dreaming sessions that I have had over many years with my partner, Liz Frank. When our son was about eight years old, hearing us talking endlessly in the bath, he would say: “Don’t you two ever enjoy life? Even in the bath, you are always planning.” Our answer to him was: “Our enjoyment of life is exactly that – dreaming and plotting for women’s rights – that is what gives us pleasure!”

The idea to start a women’s writing project was conceived while both of us were still working for Sister Namibia, a media and training organi­sation that has played a major role in fostering feminism and women’s writing in Namibia over the past 15 years. The idea became a reality in 2004, when I invited a group of women interested in feminism and the arts to join me in starting a new organisation, the Women’s Leadership Centre (WLC). The organisation’s ﬁrst project was called the “Women’s Voices” project, the objectives of which were:

* to give women a platform from which to experience the power of writing creatively, politically and publicly;
* to mobilise the ideas, insights, knowledge, wisdom, skills and strengths of Namibian women who write as feminists, and to share these with other women in the country, and beyond;
* to analyse the reality of Namibian women’s lives at the time of celebrating 15 years of independence, with the intention of stimulating debate on how far we have come, and still have to go, towards the realisation of the protections, rights and entitlements accorded to all Namibian women by national and international laws;
* to give Namibian women writers an opportunity to take pleasure in “wordsmithing” (the skilful use of words), and thereby to delight and inspire others in their own society;
* to generate short stories, poems and personal testimonies for an anthology of Namibian feminist writings.

**Getting the word out**

In order to mobilise Namibian women around the concept of “Writing as Resistance” – which lies at the heart of the “Women’s Voices” project – it was important to ﬁnd a way of advertising the idea and the opportunities that such a project could offer women across the broad spectrum of social, linguistic, ethnic, age and geo-social locations within Namibian society. To this end a ﬂyer was developed, called Reclaiming Freedom: Namibian Women Writing for Pleasure and Transformation. The ﬂyer highlighted the signiﬁcance of women’s writing and linked it to the political situation of women since independence in 1990, while inviting Namibian women to write about their everyday lives in order to set the course of Namibia’s social transformation “between yesterday and tomorrow”. These were the words through which the ﬂyer urged women to do this:

*“Looking back over the last decade-and-a-half of national independence, and further back, we are surprised, delighted, disgusted and angered by what has or has not happened. We recall promises that remain unfulfilled, and commitments publicly proclaimed and ratified that are still ignored by those who hope that we will not remember their importance to our lives as the women (citizens, activists, workers, mothers, sisters, lovers, friends…) who struggled, sacrificed and compromised in so many ways to bring about social transformation, and who still dream of and work hard for a better life.*

*When retracing our steps through the many conventions and protocols presented to our nation with great media fanfare but not adhered to – among others, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the Kampala Declaration to Prevent Gender-Based Violence in Africa – we are reminded of the importance of making our voices heard. Our voices inspired these legal instruments, and our voices will entrench them for a better future for all of us.*

*Namibian women who know freedom treasure it and nurture its roots and branches. So, it is time to take up our pens to become the amazing “wordsmiths” we have always been in singing our songs, relating our dreams and myths, and writing our stories and poems.*

*The Women’s Leadership Centre (WLC) proudly invites women aged 18 years and older to take up your pen and “speak, sister, speak”, for your own and our society’s pleasure and transformation!”*

In addition, the ﬂyer provided all the necessary practical information on how to participate in the project, including the dates of the four Women Writers’ Training Workshops to be held in Windhoek, language issues, the required length of written pieces, how and when pieces should be sent, and the required participant contact information. The ﬂyer also described the selection process and the planned publication of the women’s submissions.

Altogether, 20 000 ﬂyers were printed and distributed to a targeted audience. The ﬂyers were sent to 1,500 school libraries in Namibia through the School Libraries Services, hosted by the National Library. Flyers were also distributed through members of the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network in 26 towns and villages, as well as to all non­governmental organisations and schools in Windhoek. The ﬂyers were further distributed through the 50 local workshops facilitated by the women who attended one of the four writing workshops in Windhoek. The indigenous language radio services also broadcasted information on the women’s writing project.

**Women Writers’ Training Workshops**

To encourage participation in the “Women’s Voices” project, members of women’s groups and individual women were invited to attend one of four Women Writers’ Training Workshops. The response was over­whelming. The four workshops were planned for about 120 women in total but more than 400 applications were received, and in the end 150 aspiring women writers attended. They came from towns and villages across Namibia. Some were old and some were very young. Some had tertiary education, while others struggled with basic reading and writing, especially in English. Some were members of women’s organisations that have provided support over the years, and others were living in isolated villages in rural areas, often feeling very lonely.

Despite these differences, the participants soon felt united by their wish to learn more and to empower themselves and other women through writing.

The broad aims of the workshops were to encourage Namibian women to write and to claim a feminist writing identity. The speciﬁc objectives were to introduce women to different forms of writing, to assess the difﬁculties and challenges of becoming a writer, and to brainstorm subjects to write about.

The challenges of becoming a woman writer

The writing workshops helped the participants to identify the difﬁculties and challenges of becoming a woman writer, which led to a discussion on the reasons why women should write.

***“Our libraries are the everyday lives of our people.”***

Talking about the difﬁculties that women face as writers, some workshop participants said that the act of writing is a luxury, and that women needed computers and printers to be writers. After much reﬂection, they acknowledged that to be able to write they needed only a pen and paper. Many women said that they also lacked access to libraries, but they ﬁ nally decided that “our libraries are the everyday lives of people in our communities, in our schools and in our churches…it is better to write about what you know, your own experiences, than about what you have researched in a library.”

***“You have to become selﬁsh if you want to write.”***

Participants also said that women do not have the time and space to write. They are forever cleaning, cooking and washing for their families, and at night when they go to bed exhausted they still have to provide sexual services to their partners. Many have full-time jobs, making it difﬁcult to start a hobby such as writing. Poor women have to work from dawn to late at night for their own and their children’s survival. “As black women we are expected to bear many children, whom we often raise without the support of husbands or partners,” they observed, concluding that Namibian women are living in a perpetual state of exhaustion, while in overcrowded family homes there is no room to write.

And yet they want to write. So the women agreed that they have to become selﬁsh. They know that they are going out of their way to make life comfortable for those around them; now they must learn to apply the same principle to their own needs. They must look after their own interests by getting their husbands or partners to share in the raising of the children and mobilising all their family members to help with domestic work. Women gained the understanding that “if you want to write you have to create the time and the space for yourself, and realise that no one else will do it for you”.

**“We must break the norm of silence”**

Participants also said that Namibian cultural norms do not see women as writers. In most of our cultures, women and girls are expected to be shy and silent, not to be outspoken:

“A good woman is a silent woman.” “A good woman is absent from public affairs.” “Women’s views are not respected.” “Women are forced to keep quiet and underestimate their own abilities.” “Women are controlled by men; they should be submissive, and must only receive what men give them.” “The needs of husbands and boyfriends are considered to be more important than women’s own needs.”

Women are afraid to expose oppressive cultural practices and the discriminating behaviour of men through writing. “As a writer you have to speak, yet how can a woman speak truthfully if her culture has decided that a conﬁdent and outspoken woman is not desirable?” This expectation of a silent and shy woman impacts on the self-esteem of many Namibian women, leading them to believe they are not good enough, and cannot engage in something like writing. As a result, women are also afraid to be exposed, criticised and condemned as bad writers.

The workshop participants agreed that they have to overcome all this negativity if they want to become writers. They have to ﬁnd the courage to write despite all the problems that they might face, especially as black women writers. “As Namibian women we have to learn to break the norm of silence that makes us invisible from public affairs.” They realised that the personal is political, and that they have to rebuild their self-image and self-conﬁdence with thoughts of “I can do anything I want to do” and “I can be anything I want to be”. Their struggle is to instil courage in themselves and in their daughters.

***“We need mobility in order to experience life”***

Women writers need personal autonomy and mobility to gain broader life experience. Yet many women are trapped in abusive relationships, which exacerbate their feelings of inferiority, apathy and lack of conﬁdence. Some women said: “If you are married or in a steady relationship you are conﬁned and chained to your home.” “We cannot move freely. We need the permission of our men in everything we want to do.” “Women cannot make independent choices.” While participants felt that an unequal balance of power in their personal relationships holds women back and prevents them from developing their full potential, some acknowledged that it is easy to blame men for one’s own laziness and lack of seriousness about being a writer or an artist. Women must move beyond this.

Participants also felt that women do not have enough knowledge about women’s rights and about feminism. Women can only exercise their rights if they know what they are. They asked the Women’s Leadership Centre to continue to educate women on feminist analysis. They saw that women’s writing in Namibia could become a valuable tool for educating themselves and others on the many ways in which women’s and children’s rights are violated, and need to be protected and restored.

***“You don’t have to be educated and able to speak English”***

Some participants came with the belief that one had to be white, educated, rich and able to speak English to be able to write, but this notion was soon debunked in the workshops. Women agreed that it is important to write in their indigenous languages, and requested the Women’s Leadership Centre to support such initiatives in the future. “This will ensure that the Women’s Leadership Centre’s activities do not only attract women who can speak English. Even illiterate women can be supported to write down their stories. They also have something to say. Such stories can be recorded, transcribed and published.” Due to high rates of illiteracy and a lack of reading materials in our communities and even in our schools, many people do not develop a love of reading and writing. The participants said they would work hard to expose their communities to books, reading and writing.

**Why Namibian women want to write**

The workshop participants discussed why Namibian women should be writing at this historical moment. Some explained why they were writing already, others why they had decided to participate in the writing project and learn to become writers:

*“Through writing we are standing up for our rights and making a case against the abuse of women.”*

*“Through writing we can envision changes in ourselves and in our society. To do this we must bring out the secrets in our lives.”*

*“We have to write about the good and the bad in our cultures, and especially about the oppression of women.”*

*“We are writing for our daughters, and to bring about changes in our cultures and traditions.”*

*“Writing is sustainable and goes to places where spoken words cannot go.”*

*“We have to write to claim our freedom, to heal ourselves, and to exercise our right to freedom of expression.”*

*“Writing is about being comfortable with who you are, sharing yourself, being truthful to yourself, acknowledging yourself, taking responsibility for yourself.”*

*“Our lives and experiences are the stepping stones for us to become writers. You write about what you know and what you have experienced as a woman in a particular community.”*

*“Telling our stories will change people’s lives and teach valuable lessons.”*

*“More respect is needed for women’s voices, and we must listen to each other.”*

*“We must pursue our dreams and use writing as a tool for change.”*

**Background to the recurrent theme in this book: Violations of women’s dignity and integrity**

This book is not a holistic and objective account of Namibian women’s lives. It is a feminist political product, expressing particular and partial meanings about the past and present realities of women’s lives. The “Women’s Voices” project was about examining the status of women’s human rights in light of the everyday lived realities of Namibian women. The stories and poems in this book unravel the silences that allow the daily violations of women’s human rights to continue with impunity.

Fifteen years ago, Namibia was born out of long and violent struggles for freedom from colonial and apartheid rule, systems based on the power of one race over another and the power of men over women and children. Our collective hope as the women of this country was that we would become equal partners with men in the development of our new society. Fifteen years later, this has still not happened. For us as Namibian women, the liberation struggle is far from over. In fact, we can speak of a daily war being waged by men against women and children. It is no exaggeration to state that violence against women and children has become an integral feature of the so-called peaceful, post-colonial Namibia.

Our country is one of the most dangerous places in the world for women and children to live in. More than half of those who have been raped in recent times have been children under the age of ten. While we were producing this book during the early months of 2005, two girls aged three and six were raped and brutally murdered. Women and children are being attacked, abused and violated, not by some foreign army expelling them from their homes, but by the very men they love and live with: their husbands, boyfriends, friends, fathers, step-fathers, uncles, brothers and neighbours.

The Namibian Government has adopted signiﬁcant policies and initiatives to improve the state response to violations of women’s rights. We have a Constitution that guarantees the equality of women. Our government has ratiﬁed CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, as well as the SADC Addendum on Violence against Women, thus committing itself to a wide range of obligations under international and regional law. Our National Gender Policy explicitly targets violence against women, and parliament has adopted relevant legislation including the Married Persons Equality Act, the Combating of Rape Act and the Combating of Domestic Violence Act. All of this has generated a climate in which women can break their silence and begin to speak the unspeakable and name that which is breaking their bodies and souls.

However, the Namibian state is still constituted of patriarchal institutions that continue to protect male privilege, dominance and control. We need far more serious efforts by our leaders in government, in traditional authorities, in educational, law enforcement and religious institutions to transform the oppressive gender regime in Namibia. Knowing, accessing and claiming their human rights is not yet a reality for the majority of women in this country; women trapped in the privatised spaces of patriarchal families, and living in rural and marginalised urban areas where, in the words of Patricia McFadden, “often the most basic infrastructure through which individuals could begin to acquire a consciousness of entitlement and a sense of being ‘righted’ do not exist.” This book speaks to this fact: It is about the ongoing and daily violations of women’s dignity and bodily integrity.

Independence not only provided us with an opportunity to embark on modernisation, but also with a chance to reﬂect on the good and the bad of our cultures and traditions. By restoring, reinforcing or reinventing the past without critical reﬂection, we run the risk of reinstating women as the guardians of cultural practices that oppress them and which are viewed as ﬁxed and unchanging, while men are free to embrace change.

As Namibian women we therefore have to reject archaic notions of what it means to be an “African woman”. It is time for women to enter into direct relations with the state as equal citizens, unmediated through patriarchal institutions and family relations that conﬁne them and hinder their development as full human beings. We agree with McFadden that:

*“...the state must always be made accountable and responsible to the people, regardless of who the people are. This is the fundamental premise of the existence of the state. And the protection of women’s physical, sexual, and bodily integrity as citizens of our societies is neither negotiable nor open to any kind of compromise. The integrity and wholeness of women’s bodies; their right to a life with dignity and protection is a responsibility that the state cannot and must not be allowed to compromise as accommodation of some backward notion of cultural authenticity or African-ness. The right of women and girls to integrity in all its aspects is fundamental to making rights real for women everywhere.”*

**Putting our words into practice**

The relevant laws to combat violence and protect women’s human rights are in place, but legal and punitive measures are never enough to prevent violence. Women and children must gain the conﬁdence to stand up for themselves. Men need to start listening to what women are saying, validating women’s experiences, and becoming partners in challenging male power and privilege in our effort to stem the tide of violence.

As peoples of this country we need to imagine the kind of world we want, and then implement far-reaching educational and awareness-raising activities that go to the very heart of the matter, activities that build and sustain human rights, women’s rights and democracy. We hope that this process of women writing, and this book, will hit home, straight into the hearts of the Namibian people.

We hope that a partnership can develop between women and men to bring about the necessary social transformation. We feel that this book can play an important part in this process, and hope that it will be read by all kinds of people in all kinds of families in Namibia, because change must start at home, in the heart. We envision this collection of women’s writings as a required textbook at universities, colleges and secondary schools in Namibia and elsewhere. We want to see this book in libraries across Namibia and Southern Africa.