

Legal Assistance Centre, Namibia

BACKGROUND

The Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) assists Namibians on a broad range of legal and human rights issues. The Centre started in 1988 when Namibia was still under apartheid rule and known as South West Africa. The LAC is a public interest law centre dedicated to protecting human rights. According to Dave Smuts, a former Director of the project, the aim of establishing the centre was closely related to the ideal of establishing a human rights culture.

The Gender Research and Advocacy Project (GR&AP) of the LAC was established in 1993 to focus specifically on laws involving gender issues, and to advocate for how they might be improved. The GR&AP assists the Namibian government in drafting legislation and actively lobbies for the implementation of gender-positive laws.

Namibian Men Against Violence Against Women: A National Conference. Their Gender Research and Advocacy Project organised the first Conference in Southern Africa dedicated to working with men on violence against women. The Conference brought together more than 250 men from Namibia and throughout Southern Africa to discuss possible models of organisation in working to end violence against women. To ensure broad participation in developing a comprehensive strategy, LAC held 25 consultative meetings throughout the country in the months leading up to the conference. Media events, including two live television panel discussions and a candlelight vigil, ensured recognition of the process, and public debate.

The Conference began looking at and attempted to contextualise violence against women in Namibia. Conference participants attended group sessions on the experiences of men and women, linking manhood and violence, reasons for violence in Namibia, strategies to address men's violence and ways to implement them.

Speakers talked about African manhood, dealing with feelings of anger and frustration, and the economic, social and political impact of VAW and the legal position of women in Namibia. The discussions at the Conference attempted to raise and deal in a non-confrontational way with some of the fears and issues men encounter in their struggle to be part of the movement against violence against women.

By the end of the Conference, men from every region in Namibia had committed to a plan of action, which they felt was measurable and implementable. Participants also decided to establish a national steering committee that would monitor and provide support to regional initiatives. Namibian Men for Change (NAMEC) emanated from this Conference, and has been supported by and situated within the Legal Assistance Centre.

PROGRAMME OF ACTION

NAMEC operates as an awareness-raising group among young adult men on issues such as masculinity, relationships, parenthood, sexual abuse and the promotion of a non-violent culture in Namibia.

APPROACH

NAMEC has an outreach approach and according to Abdullah Hussein Mwakembeu, Chairperson of NAMEC, it does not aim to isolate men and boys who commit violence and other forms of abuse against women and children. It works with men in a way that challenges their patriarchal assumptions and privileges, whilst reaching out with respect and compassion.

The National Namibian Men Against Violence Against Women Conference tackled issues such as the experiences of men and women, linking manhood and violence. Speakers talked about African manhood, and dealt with feelings of anger and frustration, and the economic, social and political impact of VAW and the legal position of women in Namibia.



CHALLENGE

A key challenge for the organisation has been its lack of financial resources. Yet, NAMEC has been able to achieve a significant degree of awareness-raising during its brief period of existence.

SUMMARY

This case study highlights the usefulness of a national Conference that enables men to share histories, stories, frustrations, fears, ideas, models and commitment within a structured process. The Conference consolidated a men's movement in Namibia and established further structures around which to organise men. Preconceptions were broken down, and men were empowered to act within a new dynamic.

The Conference report highlighted the usefulness of working within small groups. While speakers told stories and gave ideas and models, the most useful work was done within facilitated group sessions. These structured formats enabled men to open up to one another in a contained environment, and connect with each other's experiences.