Women and girls in Namibia are under attack. A recent report by CNN on the escalating femicide ravaging the country, quoted the nation’s Commander of Namibia’s Gender Based Violence Protection Unit, Hendrik Olivier, as saying that sexual and gender-based violence was a serious problem in Namibia. According to him police handled nearly 200 cases of domestic violence (GBV) each month during 2019. Those are the ones that were reported, with many often going unreported. Now take into consideration that Namibia only has a population of 2.4 million people and you understand why the country saw hundreds of young activists participating in the #ShutItDown youth-led movement.

“As a young woman I am devastated by what is happening to young girls and women in our country,” says 19-year old SRHR and menstruation freedom activist Ndelipewa Mungoba. “I guess that’s why I decided to study law,” says Ndelipewa. “Through my work as an activist I have realised that so many people in our country don’t know their rights and how the law impacts them. And for girls and women it’s even worse.” She believes that the legal system is pivotal for ensuring that the rights of women and girls are protected and held as sacrosanct. “Although we have laws that are meant to protect us in place, we are still experiencing such high numbers of ‘passion killings’, so something is clearly not working.” Ndelipewa believes that much of Namibia’s GBV issues are because of deep-seated societal and colonial behavioural constructs in the country, which have not been tackled by the government. She echoes the sentiment of the #ShutItDown youth movement, that many women and girls feel unsafe because they are subjected to bad behaviour by men, which is often excused or simply ignored. This leads to men believing that women have less value and in some cases even see them as ‘second class citizens’. This patriarchal behaviour is even more pervasive in the rural areas. Another big driver of gender inequality in the country is gender poverty, which maintains the imbalance in power between men and women. “Often you will see young girls coming from the rural communities and they are now confronted with other young women who appear to have more money and nicer clothes and phones, all of which costs money.” This she says leads to many young girls entering into relationships with working class men who are able to fund these nice things. But there is a price to pay and often it does not end well for the young woman. Ndelipewa believes that nothing will change, until there is a fundamental change in attitudes and behaviour towards women and young girls. “Unfortunately too many of the older generation are set in their ways and not interested in changing, so we need to work on educating our young boys to become gentlemen and how to treat others with respect and kindness. At the same time we also need to educate our young girls that they are worthy and have equal value to boys and what type of behaviour they should expect from boys.”

Ndelipewa started her activism journey at the tender age of 14 years while living in Walvis Bay. She was introduced to what would become her calling after a visit to her school by representatives from the Young Achievers Empower Project. “I was blown away by the work that they were doing to uplift and empower young people across the country and I knew that I wanted to be part of an organisation like that.” Today, 5 years later she is still a youth mentor for the organisation. She believes that the approach to have peer to peer mentorships works well because there is
a common understanding and appreciation of each other. “My approach has always been to help young people without judgement. Even times when the ‘shoe does not fit’ you can still relate to what the person is going through and you can offer them a solution.” Ndelipewa uses what she calls the ‘Point Breaking’ method in her mentorship, where she will sit with the young person in an empty room and encourage them to offload all the things they are feeling, their challenges, fears, desires, and wishes for the future. She then works with the young person, sometimes up to three-months, helping to see that they are creating a new reality and new world in which to move forward and fully participate and thrive in. “I will follow up with them to see how they are progressing and see if I need to provide any other help, like maybe offer studying tips.”

Coming from a small coastal town and through her work as a youth mentor, Ndelipewa has seen gender-poverty first-hand and how its negative impact on the opportunities for schooling and economic advancement for so many young girls in Namibia. This she says, is why she became the national youth advocate for the AfriYan Namibia Free Flow campaign, aimed at restoring equality and dignity for young girls in Namibia. “Our aim was to initiate empowering programmes that targeted adolescents and young girls from disadvantaged communities who lacked access to clean water and dignified sanitary wear during their menstruation.” The high cost of disposable pads means that many girls don’t have access to clean and hygienic sanitary pads. Instead they are kept out of school and locked away in rooms, where for the duration of their period, they are made to sleep on matrasses on the floor, with only a cloth to clean themselves. “This entrenches beliefs that girls and women are considered as dirty during this time and should be ashamed of their periods, which is just crazy because it is a natural and beautiful part of being a woman,” says Ndelipewa. Many would agree that girls and women should not be penalised for being a women, yet period shaming is alive and well.

Through her work with AfriYan Namibia, as an SRHR advocate, she has come to see the inter-linked relationship between the right to access sexual reproductive health services and menstruation poverty. This pushed Ndelipewa to start advocating for disposable pads to be as freely available for young girls as women as easily as condoms are. “Ideally we should be providing girls and women with pads for free or at least removing the tax that is levied on sanitary pads. That will go a long way to improve the lives of young girls so that they are not left behind because they are forced to stay at home during their mensuration.” She is also advocating for the Namibian government to legally allow the manufacturing and sale of re-usable sanitary pads. “Right now it’s not legal but through our work with the Children’s Movement, we have started producing some of the reusable pads so that young girls will be able to enjoy hygienic and economic access to the pads. “We actually put together a hygiene pack that includes a bar of soap, a facecloth, toothpaste, the re-usable pad with its pouch and then instructions on how to care and clean the pad. This has been life changing for so many young girls in the community. Sanitary pads are really a symbol of freedom for girls, so we are literally giving them their futures back!”

Considering all that she has achieved at just 19 years of age, it would therefore come as no surprise that Ndelipewa was awarded as the overall national SRHR
Africa Trusts Adolescent Activism Award in Namibia, for her passion and commitment to pushing for menstruation and SRHR rights and access for adolescents and young women. “I was so surprised when I heard that I had been nominated. And when they announced that I had won, I was humbled because among the finalists were some incredible young activists that I had heard of and who I admired. I was very happy to receive the award and recognition and it has inspired me to go back into my community and do even more.” On what she plans to do with her winnings for re-investment back into her community work, she does not even hesitate, “Oh, I am planning to go back to Kunene village after the Covid-19 restrictions are eased and I will be buying a whole lot of re-usable sanitary pad packs for the girls in the community. This lockdown has been very hard on them and they will be in desperate need of these hygiene packs.” Service to others comes first.

Still in her first year at the University of Namibia, Ndelipewa plans to continue her education to achieve a Masters Degree in Law. “I want to be a lawmaker, so that I can combine my education with my activism experience with communities and people I have mentored, to ensure that we fully protect the rights of girls and women and create empowered and equal environments for them to live and thrive in.” She has her sights set on becoming a legal advisor to the government or organisations who are interested in pushing for more equal inclusion and advancement of girls and women in Namibia. For Ndelipewa, it’s about touching lives before touching money. A motto taught to her by her mum and one that she lives by.

Follow Ndelipewa on:

- Instagram: @mbadja_girl

You can also follow the organisation she works with:

AfriYAN
- AfriYan Namibia:
  - Facebook: @AfriYanNam
  - Instagram: @afriyan_namibian
  - Twitter: @afriyan_namibia

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