

# VOICES INSPIRING CHANGE - THE FEMINIST

## IRENE GAROËS

Namibia





## “I was a rebellious child,” Irene Garoës says with a smile. “A troublemaker.”

It’s midday in the bustling Namibian capital of Windhoek, and we are sitting across from each other at an office complex in the southwest region of the city.

Looking at Irene, you might mistake her for a college student—clad in jeans and sneakers, and a checkered flannel shirt. But her appearance belies the gravity of the work that she does, which is helping to educate and empower some of Namibia’s most vulnerable populations.

Irene is a community organizer with the Women’s Leadership Center where she organizes and facilitates trainings on women’s reproductive health and rights.

“I am a feminist activist,” she says, “and I think I have always been—always saying: something is not right, it has to change somehow.”

Irene’s interest in women’s issues developed early in life when she was growing up in different towns Namibia.

“Throughout my life I saw things that were not right in my eyes—how a girl would be treated, and boys being treated better,” she says.



Photo Credit: Lindsay Morgan

After a stint at university in Windhoek, she applied to become a police officer, and was stationed in Kahenge, in northeast Namibia, where she regularly dealt with cases of domestic violence against women.

According to the UNFPA, 33 percent of girls and young women aged 15-24 years have experienced physical violence in Namibia.[1] Limited availability and access to high-quality integrated services are a serious challenge, with 15 percent of gender-based violence survivors never seeking support services.

Irene found that customary laws and social norms discouraged abused women from engaging with the criminal justice system, and violence often went unpunished. Sometimes, women who came forward were further harmed by their aggressors. Irene felt she had a limited ability, as a

[1] United Nations Population Fund. Country Programme Document for Namibia. “Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services, n.d. [https://namibia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/4\\_NAM\\_-\\_CPD\\_-\\_2018SRS\\_-\\_FINAL\\_-\\_5July18\\_o.pdf](https://namibia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/4_NAM_-_CPD_-_2018SRS_-_FINAL_-_5July18_o.pdf).

police officer, to change things: “I was thinking: am I really doing what I thought I was here to do? I wanted to help women, but I felt there was not much I could do.”

She returned to Windhoek where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in communications and began volunteering with the Women's Leadership Center (WLC).

The WLC is a feminist organization founded in 2004, that works with marginalized women in Namibia to help create “a society in which all women actively engage in shaping the politics, practices and values of both public and private spaces, based on the knowledge of their full human rights as persons and as citizens.” [2]

Working primarily through community facilitators who live in Namibian villages, the WLC builds movements to educate and empower women. They work on a variety of issues including indigenous people's rights; harmful cultural practices (including female genital mutilation); and with lesbian women throughout Namibia. They do their work through an eclectic set of activities: research, engagement, and communication through the arts—photography, writing, drawing and painting.

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*"Our goal is to makes visible the realities that women are facing."  
-Irene Garoës*

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One of the organization's first activities involved creating a space for women from across the country, documenting their stories and publishing them in two anthologies—*I Choose Life* and *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, which was then shared widely in schools, libraries and with local leaders.

“There was a lot of violence during the independence struggle. And some women were like: what about women and their rights? And the response was: let's first fight for the common good, let's first fight for the independence of the country, and then we can look at those things. But after independence, women were still being left behind. So that's why we said: let's tell women's stories.”

Since then, the WLC has published *Speaking for Ourselves: Voices of Young San Women*, and various

[2] "Our vision, mission and goals." Women's Leadership Centre, n.d. <https://www.wlc-namibia.org/about-us/69-our-vision-mission-and-goals>.

booklets: *Violence is Not Our Culture*, *San Women Speaking for Ourselves*, a booklet for parents with lesbian daughters, a health booklet for Namibian lesbian women, and two photo books called *Our Lives in Our Hands* and *Creating Ourselves in Our Own Image*. They plan to publish two additional books by the end of 2019, one about gender-based violence in the Zambezi region and one about the experiences of lesbian women.



Photo Credit: Katherine Matus

This vast collection of stories and data forms the basis for their engagement with local officials—traditional leaders, regional governors, and local government—whom they encourage to do more to protect and empower young women.

“We knock on different doors of the ministries and get them to come and sit in the same room with us, and we say, look we have done our research. This is happening. So can we change something about it?”

The goal, says Irene, is: “to make visible the realities that women are facing.”

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Although Namibia is an upper middle-income country and has made huge strides to reduce poverty and increase girls’ access to education, women, especially in rural areas, continue to be marginalized. According to the UNFPA: “44 percent of female-headed households and 32 percent of women live below the poverty line. Women, especially girls, are often forced to find alternative ways to earn a living, making them susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation, gender-based violence, child and early-marriage (7 percent nationally), HIV and unplanned pregnancies.” [3]

Irene thinks that social norms and practices drive a lot of the challenges women continue to face, including female genital mutilation and the stigma associated with being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex. She wants those norms to change: “We need to look at the culture and the role that it plays,” she says. “We aren’t saying that all culture is bad. But there are harmful cultural practices that need to stop.”

[3] United Nations Population Fund. Country Programme Document for Namibia.” Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services, n.d. [https://namibia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/4\\_NAM\\_-\\_CPD\\_-\\_2018SRS\\_-\\_FINAL\\_-\\_5uly18\\_o.pdf](https://namibia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/4_NAM_-_CPD_-_2018SRS_-_FINAL_-_5uly18_o.pdf).



Photo Credit: Katherine Matus

Harmful social norms can affect the degree to which marginalized women feel comfortable seeking out health services, or whether they receive quality care once they arrive at a facility.

“A lesbian woman needs to be able to go to the clinic without any judgment. Indigenous women need to receive care from healthcare professionals who speak their language.”

Irene’s deep experience in communities has shown her that, even when people ostensibly have access to health services, fear persists—whether fear about the cost of services (something Irene mentions as an obstacle for many) or fear of stigma.

And a reluctance to seek care, or inability to receive quality care, impacts every facet of the lives of the women the WLC works with.

Says Irene: “Universal health coverage—and the lack of it—has an impact on everything we do. The quality of services is very low. It’s something we live with, but we shouldn’t have to because this country is rich, and we are very few. Things need to change.”

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*“There's a lot of hope about. Women are now speaking up. They are taking their power back.” -Irene Garoës*

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On LGBTI issues, which is the area where Irene thinks things are changing for the better: “A lot of women are coming out, we’re building solidarity and resilience. In 2017, we had our first Namibian Lesbian Festival. It was something that had never been done before in Namibia—lesbian women taking over a public space, saying: here we are, we are dancing, we are singing. It was big for us in terms of visibility and creating leaders.”

Irene also volunteers with Young Feminist Movement Namibia (Y-Fem) in rural communities, and her work with churches, which wield significant influence in a country where the vast



majority identify as religious, has been particularly positive. But it took time: “At first it was not easy. We realized that in order to engage with the church, we had to go to church and talk to people at church.” Now, she says, the church regularly comes to her to ask for assistance facilitating community educational events. “The community members are always in our house.”

It takes a tremendous amount of courage and sacrifice to do the kind of work Irene does. “There’s a lot to be hopeful about,” she says. “Women are now speaking up. They are taking their power back.” She gives an example from their Zambezi gender-based violence program, and the story of one young girl who, supported by her mother, refused the initiation process that comes with female genital mutilation.

“That was a huge thing for us, for that one girl to say: no, I’m not going to do this. I think impact is very difficult to measure, but you can see it in the leadership of the women. We are about movement building. We think it’s the way we can create change on a bigger scale, when there’s a movement of women being powerful in their villages, making decisions for themselves, bringing in money, having access to health, having access to education.”

The work remains challenging, though.

“It’s frustrating at times,” she says. “It takes a lot from you—to say you’re an activist, you’re a feminist—a lot of people push you away. Even in the government, people think you are against them. But it’s just that there’s a gap and something needs to be done to fill it. We are not fighting the government, actually, we are together in this.”

But though her profession—or better put, vocation—takes a lot from her: “It also gives a lot when you see change happening,” she says. “Because I don’t think I can stop being who I am. And I don’t think I can stop seeing something wrong and not want to change it.”



Photo Credit: Katherine Matus



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