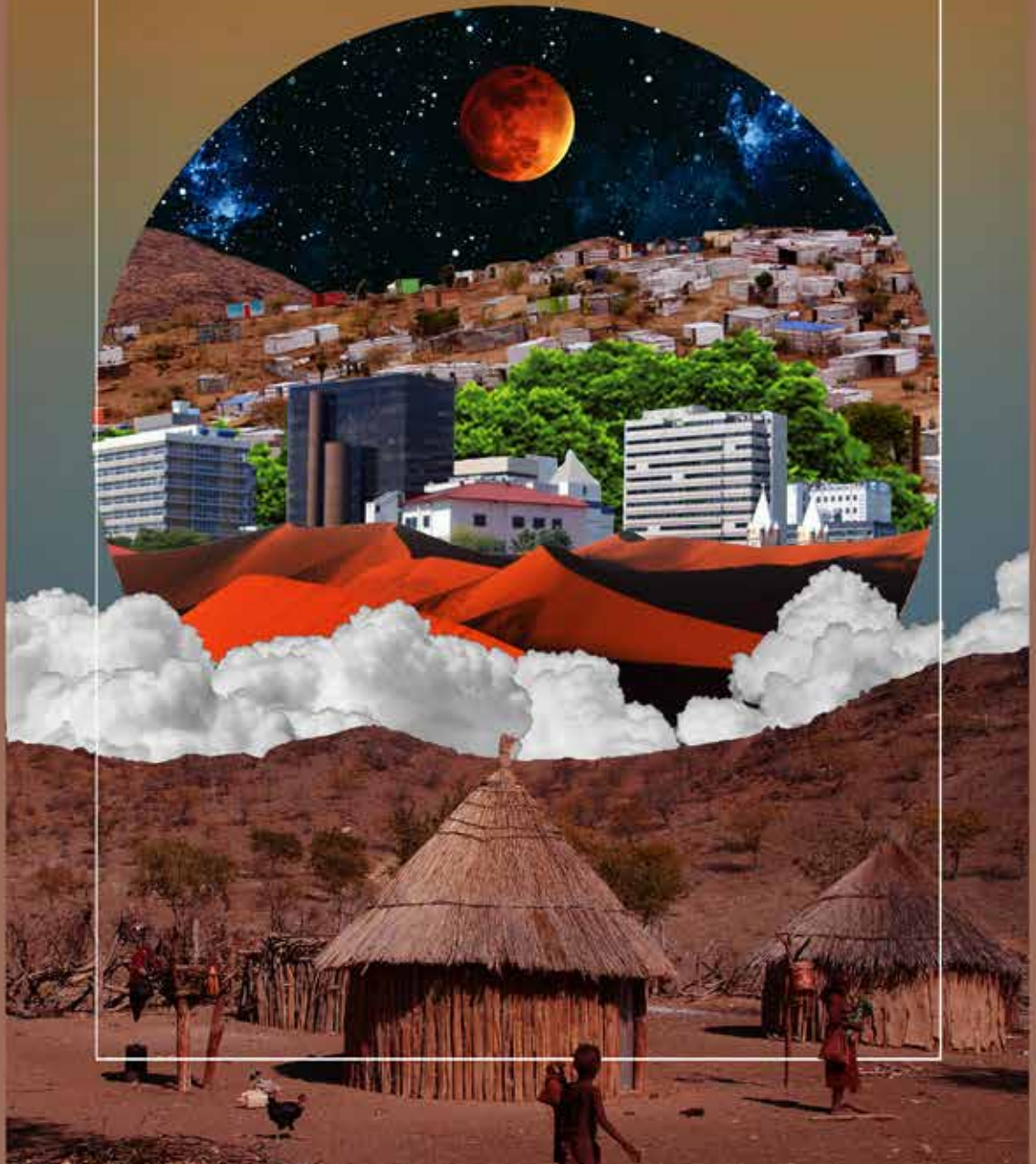




Namibian  
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Justice

## Namibia's Housing Crisis in Perspective



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# **Namibia's Housing Crisis in Perspective**

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## #ShutItAllDownNamibia: Young Namibians are Hitting the Streets against Gender-Based Violence and Colonial Legacies

*Heike Becker*

Six months after Namibia celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of her independence from South Africa in March 2020, the country is on fire. Hundreds of Namibian activists, students, working youth, and artists have taken to the streets of Windhoek and other towns. The protests started on 7 October 2020 after the body of a young woman was found murdered in the port city of Walvis Bay. Twenty-

two-year old Shannon Wasserfall had been missing since April of 2020.

### A New Generation of Youth Activists

This young generation, triggered by the scourges of femicide and gender-based violence, is tired of living in a violent society. One of their major rallying cries has been #OnsIsMoeg (Afrikaans for “We



*Photo: Hildegard Titus*

are tired”), along with, significantly, #ShutItAllDownNamibia. The hashtag expresses their aim of disrupting business-as-usual in a situation of crisis. Protesters have been marching on various ministries and demanding the resignation of Namibia's Minister of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, Doreen Sioka.

Activists against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) forwarded a petition to parliament, demanding political action to address femicide, rape, and sexual abuse. In response, Prime Minister Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila issued a statement saying that the protesters' petition would receive “priority” and that the government was “in full agreement” that the high incidence of sexual and gender-based violence “cannot be allowed to continue”. Young activists and established gender equality advocacy groups such as Sister Namibia have pointed out, however, that the government promulgated two national plans of action against SGBV before, in 2016 and 2018, little of which has been implemented.

“The system has failed us” read one of the hard-hitting placards a young woman held up at one of the ongoing protests in Windhoek. Drawing on Cardi B's recent hit single, “WAP”, young protesters taunted the police force with radical hip-hop moves inspired by the song. During one of the early marches on Saturday, 10 October

2020 protesters were forced to scatter in central Windhoek after security forces threw tear gas and shot rubber bullets at them. Twenty-six activists were detained, although charges against them were later dropped. One of the arrested protesters said that the dropped charges were a bittersweet moment for the movement, as the activists did not have the opportunity to expose the police's abuse of power. This incident caused much concern. Minister of Home Affairs, Frans Kapofi, eventually apologised for the police brutality during a meeting on 23 October with youth activists to discuss issues of gender-based violence (<https://www.namibian.com.na/95911/read/Kapofi-apologises-for-police-brutality-at-protests>).

The recent protests are the latest in a series of actions, as young Namibians have taken to the streets in growing numbers over the past few months. In early June 2020, following the murder of George Floyd in the United States, protests under the Black Lives Matter banner were also organised in Windhoek. At the time, Namibia's BLM activists focused on a statue near the Windhoek municipality building of German colonial officer Curt von François, deemed the “founder” of Windhoek in colonial historiography. They demanded the removal of the statue with a widely circulated petition under the hashtag #CurtMustGo.

Alongside this local activism against colonial iconography, the Namibian BLM protesters addressed other pressing demands concerning structural racism and social inequality. They called for an end to police brutality during the Covid-19 lockdown, in full force in June 2020, which had hit impoverished urban areas hard. Speakers also insisted that the long-standing issues of gender-based violence had to be addressed, not least because they had been exacerbated during the hard lockdown.

A few weeks later, in mid-July, protesters took to the streets again. This time they demanded the legalisation of abortion and expansion of women's reproductive health rights. The pro-choice action was organised by a newly-formed alliance known as Voices for Choices and Rights Coalition (VCRC), which had by then already collected 60,000 signatures (a significant number given that Namibia's population is only 2.5 million) calling for the right to safe abortion and abolishing the country's Abortion and Sterilisation Act of 1975, a legal legacy of South African colonisation.

The series of connected protests against coloniality and structural violence have galvanised growing numbers of young Namibians to reclaim the streets, marching and dancing and unleashing incredible creative energy with their performances. Social media users from across the African continent

have posted on Twitter and Instagram in solidarity, linking the Namibian protests to political actions happening elsewhere on the continent, from Nigeria in the West to Zimbabwe in Southern Africa.

This is no longer just a protest about sexual and gender-based violence. Thirty years after the end of apartheid colonialism, a new generation of young Namibians are again speaking up. Challenging the vestiges of coloniality in the country, they follow in the footsteps of an earlier generation of activists who made enormous contributions to the political (although socially incomplete) liberation of Namibia in the 1980s. In the light of the new generation of Namibian activists forcefully asking penetrating questions and engaging in collective action over the past few years, culminating in the 2020 protests, the history of the popular urban revolt of the 1980s has become particularly significant once again.

## **The Vibrant Past: Anti-Discrimination Protests in the 1980s**

In the 1980s, social and political developments in Windhoek and other towns of central and southern Namibia critically challenged the colonial politics. From 1983 onwards, residents protested against the price of electricity and formed street committees in several towns. A popular revolt against poor living conditions and the oppression



under apartheid colonialism was staged by residents' associations, and movements of workers, students, and women, and was also reflected in an emerging alternative press. In 1987, 29 community-based organisations were listed, ranging from residents' associations to women's, church, education, and health groups.

These social movements took up people's day-to-day concerns under conditions of worsening poverty after the (partial) abolition of influx control laws led to accelerated urbanisation, and an economic recession had set in towards the end of the 1970s. The crisis hit urban Namibia at about the same time that the South African regime began to use its colony as a "testing ground" for limited reform. In the late 1970s, South Africa lifted certain apartheid restrictions – which it had not yet dared to do in the South African heartland. In a particularly significant move, in 1979 the legal requirement for separate residential areas ended with the promulgation of the Abolishment of Racial Discrimination (Urban Residential Areas and Public Amenities) Act 3 of 1979.

The political and legal reforms introduced in the late 1970s also played a role in the rise of new movements and forms of protest. Social occasions, which had been greatly restricted following the forced removal of Black Windhoekers to the apartheid townships 20 years earlier,

were gradually revitalised. Nightclubs and football tournaments provided increasing opportunities, especially for young urbanites, to meet across the fissions of race and ethnicity. The urban population, which crossed ethnic and racial boundaries, remained small but became increasingly significant for an emerging new layer of activists who, in the mid-1980s, founded social movements and community-based organisations (CBOs). This cosmopolitan nationalism became a key driving force of the anti-apartheid decolonisation struggle in urban Namibia, providing many of the leading activists with key ideas and practical experience?

A particularly suggestive dynamic behind the rise of the new movements was the emergence and life experience of a growing Namibian intelligentsia with increasing educational opportunities in the country and at South African universities. This happened at precisely the moment when South Africa erupted in vibrant protests of youth and particularly students. During the well-known uprisings of 1976 and again during the widespread popular revolt of the mid- and late 1980s, students from the apartheid state's colony also took part in South African campus protests and some young Namibians became intensely involved in township protests. In student reading groups, these young Namibian revolutionaries were influenced by the writings of



*Photo: Hildegard Titus*

Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko, Lenin and Gramsci, Samir Amin and Paolo Freire.

The transnational entanglements of southern African social movement politics were remarkable. The nascent Namibian intelligentsia studying in South Africa returned to Namibia and brought back ideas and practices of student politics and new forms of anti-apartheid activism that arose after the 1976 Soweto revolt, along with “alternative” styles of South African oppositional politics. The boundary-crossing desires of the young anti-apartheid activists broke down the barriers which prevented people from creating networks among Namibians of different social and cultural backgrounds.

The revolutionary activism of youth and students became ever more pronounced in the 1980s. Thousands of Namibian high school students throughout the country, joined later in the year by those attending the Academy of Tertiary Education (the predecessor of the University of Namibia, UNAM) in Windhoek, mobilised for a massive school boycott in May 1988 to demand the withdrawal of army bases near schools. The Namibia National Students’ Organisation (NANSO), founded in June 1984, became a leading force, spearheading many rallies and marches in the final few years of South African rule over Namibia. Several youth leaders were arrested and imprisoned for their activism.

The late photographer John Liebenberg's amazing images of the vibrant anti-occupation protests illustrate the tremendous significance of the student struggles. Sometimes they were related directly to student issues: for instance, students publicly challenged the rector of the so-called "Academy" over his academic credentials, asking: "Are you *Koevoet* or *Academicus*?", highlighting the institution's collaboration with the apartheid regime. Other student activism was more overtly tied to broader politics, such as the massive public rallies in Katutura on Cassinga Day and May Day 1988, which were led by NANSO activists.

Young women also played leading roles in community activism along with student and worker struggles, forming a vibrant autonomous women's organisation known as Namibian Women's Voice (NWV). The NWV set out to address not only women's practical interests (such as earning an income or securing childcare), but also their strategic gender interests and the project of national liberation. They insisted that their main target group, "grassroots women" in urban locations and rural areas, were oppressed because they were black, poor women caught in a web of racist-colonial domination, exploitation, and sexist subordination.

## **Silence after Independence**

Although Namibian civil society proved not to be very robust in the years following independence in 1990, the community activism of the late 1980s helped significantly in undermining South African rule over the country. Its absence in the historiography of Namibia's decolonisation struggles is thus a major blindspot – but it is not the only one. Postcolonial Namibian narratives of nationalism are peppered with silences. In the twenty-first century, the narrative of the Namibian anti-colonial struggle has begun to open up, albeit tentatively, to more inclusive perspectives. Thus far, these have largely been restricted to growing consideration of the early anti-colonial resistance in southern and central Namibia. This has recently gained momentum in the context of ongoing, contested negotiations around Germany's colonial genocide in Namibia (1904–08), and has been driven forward by the Namibian apology and reparations movements and their supporters in German decolonisation movements.

Regarding the period of nationalist struggle between the 1960s and 1980s, however, little has changed regarding the postcolonial narrative. Public remembrances, the country's ritualised political calendar and monumentalisation continue to celebrate the armed struggle from exile as the foundation of national liberation.

This adheres, generally, to a narrative of the exile-based political and military nationalism of SWAPO winning independence through the barrel of a gun. The role played by the civilian population during the liberation war has been, at best, contingent in the hegemonic discourse.

The silences surrounding the urban, community-based activism during the final decade before Namibian independence reach even deeper. To some extent, this relates to what has become known as persistent tension between the “external” and “internal” wings of the organised nationalist movement, known then as the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO), those who had mobilised from exile, and others who kept up the struggle at home. The erasure of Namibia’s urban struggles of the 1980s is largely due to the history of strained relations between SWAPO and the community organisations, which the politically organised liberation movement considered as being too independent.

The community activism of the late 1980s had helped to undermine South African rule over Namibia. However, Namibian civil society largely faltered in the years after independence. To a certain extent this was caused by the history of tensions between SWAPO and the community organisations. Co-option further weakened civil

society organisations when a number of leading activists were recruited into senior positions in the civil service after independence. That said, there were certainly positive aspects in the recruitment of former activists into the new state. In a number of instances, activists-turned-civil servants paved the way for progressive developments. For example, by the 1990s postcolonial Namibia could certainly be counted as a relative success story in terms of gender equality.

Nevertheless, the limits to liberation were evident. Particularly during the Nujoma presidency (1990–2005) the postcolonial state regularly denounced suspected “hidden agendas” of certain civil society initiatives, revealing a trend? move? towards authoritarianism and a deep-seated social and cultural conservatism. The Namibian Women’s Manifesto, for instance, an attempt in 1999 to bring together a coalition to push for increased representation of women in the political sphere, was denounced as deflecting from gender equality because some of the manifesto’s proponents were known for their advocacy against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

## **Bridging Namibia’s Past and Future**

The current protests are certainly different from those held by the youthful social movements of the late apartheid colonial period. The local and global

worlds of the twenty-first century have seen profound change, which issue an invitation as well as a challenge to Namibia's young social movements. There can be no doubt, however, that civil society's post-independence lull has made way for a new vibrancy among young people, a desire for liberation and full decolonisation in recent years, of which the current protests are the best expression.

Since the mid-2010s, the popular politics of young movements such as the Landless People's Movement (LPM) and Affirmative Repositioning (AR) have been engaging Namibia at the crossroads, where the country has found itself after the end of the immediate postcolonial era under the country's first president, Sam Nujoma. One fascinating development is Namibia's exciting scene of young artists in the performing as well as the visual arts, who take up pressing concerns in their works and come together in events such as the 2019 Owela Festival (<https://www.owelafestival.com>).

Young activists and activist-researchers have also become engaged in long-standing grassroots political groups such as the Namibia Housing Action Group (NHAG) and the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia (SDFN).

The impressive array of ongoing political and artistic activist initiatives and protests are part of essential conversations about the entanglements of Namibian past, present, and future. These challenges cut both ways: the history of the earlier anti-colonial struggles of young people must be told again, including those of the community uprisings of the 1980s. Revisionist narratives of liberation contribute to a better understanding of the channels through which young Namibians make their voices heard 30 years after independence. At the same time, the youth of today deserve to be listened to, in order to grasp how they imagine postcolonial Namibia as their "project".