

Give her the car wash! - What women bring to local politics

"Women have tried to enter politics looking like men. This will not work. We bring our differences, our emotions, our way of doing things, even our tears to the process."

- Ann Tibaijuku, Executive Director, UN HABITAT, Tanzania

Kaija Shililifa is an even tempered woman. But when the male colleagues in the seven-member council of Tsumeb on which she is the only woman councillor wanted to turn down an application by a woman to set up a car wash, she blew a fuse. Using her clout as chair of the powerful management committee she asked: "The three other cars washes, who owns them? It is men. Now why can't we give an opportunity to this woman who also wants to progress? They tried to say 'no' but I said, let's give this woman a car wash and see what she will do. It's up to her."

The woman is now putting up her car wash. "Sometimes you have to tell men," grumbled Shililifa, "that they have had their chance. Now we must also benefit. Men can be very difficult."



Women can also have car washes

Not that Shililifa lacks experience in dealing with men. Other than being the only woman in the council, Shililifa is the only woman station master in the whole of Namibia. She also prides herself on being a student, mother and wife. Politics, she says, "needs a go-getter." In just two years as a councillor, she has not only learned the ropes but is determined to make a difference in her community: especially for women.

Like other councillors in Namibia who came in fresh after the 2004 elections, her only orientation consisted of a week's training and a note to say the rest she could learn from the CEO. But on the day the councillors were sworn in the CEO resigned. With a degree in public management and background as a unionist in the transport sector, Shililifa got stuck into her reading pack that included the Local Authorities Act and Code of Conduct so that "I knew what was wrong and what was right, where to go and where not to go."

Elected soon after to chair the management committee where most of the decisions get taken in local authorities in Namibia (see Chapter four) Shililifa has had frustrating moments, like when she goes out into the community "and they just look at you, but if you go there with a man they listen."

Her strategy when she is feeling undermined is to remain calm. "Sometimes you can influence (the men); it depends on how you deal with them. But sometimes they start with their stories, you lose your temper, you lose your game. You have to be cool to get it right."

By earning the respect of the men in the council, Shillilifa has bought herself space to manoeuvre. While she wants "the whole community to be empowered" and feel ownership, she also believes that it is important for women councillors to take up gender issues.

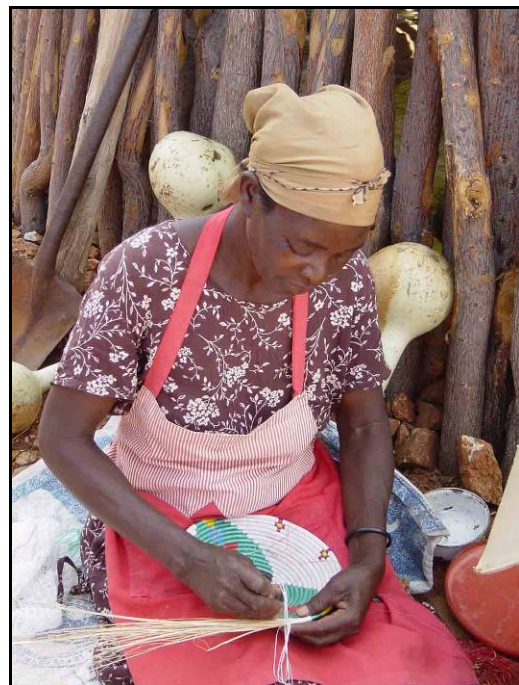
"We tend to misunderstand the term gender and some think that when we talk of gender we are talking about women, but gender is about balance, we want balance in the community where we live, so if we have a project for unemployed people it shouldn't just be unemployed women but you should also consider unemployed men, there should be a team of men and women in the community. Men and women should be treated equally."

However, she believes that as a woman councillor she has a special responsibility to empower women for whom the playing field is not level. For a start, she says, "I want all women to be part of the decisions taken regarding the running of the municipal office."

She makes it a point to ensure that women get to participate effectively: "When we have groups I always ensure that women are the leaders, men can be part of the group but they cannot be the leader of that group. We didn't benefit (in the past) so why can't we lead now? And then we start learning, leading from a small group then to a big group, you become the leader of this small group and then at the end of the day you become a minister. It's about starting small and growing."

To empower women, she adds, "We have to start small projects that can generate income." In Tsumeb there is only one such project. It's an agricultural project. They sell their vegetables to make a profit and then they sell from their houses, and the council put up sheds in the town where women can sell their fruit and vegetables." The Tsumeb Cultural Village is one such initiative that was started by the previous Mayor. Women who work at the village say that their lives are different with more women being in local government. They believe that women councillors fight for the rights of women during council meetings and they call meetings to discuss various projects.

As chair of the management committee Shillilifa is strict about money, but she also



Woman at the Tsumeb cultural centre
Photo: Susan Tolmay

sees the human side: "The problem of revenue collection is always brings difference among the councillors. Some think that when community members don't pay rates and taxes you disconnect their electricity. Some councillors don't think that there is a need. You always have differences and they are what make me grow. We were all new in the field."

Shililifa believes that the long term solution is to weed out wastage and corruption so that resources can benefit those who need them, of whom the majority are women. She believes that every woman should be acquainted with the municipal budget and become active watchdogs. The more women get involved in local government, she says, the more corruption will be eradicated. In her relatively short stint as a councillor, Shililifa says she can see already "that I make a difference." That gives her the energy to go on.