

15 *The Gendered Politics of the SWAPO Camps during the Namibian Liberation Struggle*

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the sexual politics of the SWAPO camps (civilian and military) in Angola and Zambia.¹ Its purpose is to explore issues around allegations of sexual abuse and unwelcome sexual advances, and issues of sexuality, against the backdrop of SWAPO's policy on gender equality. Did these allegations undermine the goals and objectives of the leadership, particularly the women's leadership that had gender equality and women's emancipation as one of its main goals? The chapter will also seek to question whether a rhetorical commitment to equality was translated into practical equality in terms of the political structures and socio-economic power relationships in the camps.

SWAPO made a clear and a firm ideological commitment in publications and speeches that, in the liberation struggle, women were equal to men and that equality between men and women was a central principle of the party. Iina Soiri has argued that the rhetoric of sexual emancipation became more pronounced from the mid-1970s because of a combination of factors. The United Nations announced that the International Decade for Women would take place between 1975 and 1985 and, in 1976, SWAPO adopted a more radical 'Political Programme' based on the principles of 'scientific socialism' (Soiri, 1996, pp. 67, 85). However, the depiction and representation of women in the liberation movement as being fully liberated from gender oppression does not seem to reflect the actual experience of women in the camps. Allegations of sexual abuse and excessive party control over female sexuality were levelled against those in power and this suggests that, despite the firm pronouncements on gender equality, men and women in exile were not equal after all. In the war, people found themselves in situations that they were unaccustomed to and this might have had an impact on the socially constructed notions of gender, gender power relations, and gender identities. As men and women got drawn into the war, gender meanings and relations between them were altered and shifted.

¹ This chapter is a revised version of one in my doctoral thesis. See Martha Akawa (2010) 'The sexual politics of the Namibian liberation struggle' (Institute of History, University of Basel), published in 2014 as *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*.