

9. The suspension by the national leadership came about in May last year — for disloyalty, and disruptive behaviour — because of Mrs Mandela's sponsorship of a takeover of offices at ANC headquarters by a group of women from the squatter camps.
10. *Sowetan*, 19 July 1993.
11. It was Mrs Gertrude Shope, not Chris Hani, who relieved the suffering of prisoners at Pango camp in Angola, after the mutiny.
12. 1 July 1993.
13. *City Press*, 27 June 1993.
14. *Star*, 3 June 1993.
15. Mercer, p 214.
16. Quoted in Mercer, p 232.

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- Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, New Left Books, 1977.
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WOMEN AND SWAPO

INSTITUTIONALISED RAPE IN SWAPO'S PRISONS

Paul Trehwela

If unacceptable treatment of women was the norm in the ANC in exile, even more atrocious behaviour took place in the Namibian nationalist organisation Swapo, and was ignored by its international supporters. Literally hundreds of exiled Swapo members were imprisoned by its security department in pits in the ground at Lubango in southern Angola, sometimes for up to nine years. Scores of women shared this experience.

The story is told by two twin sisters, Panduleni and Ndamona Kali, in an interview in *Searchlight South Africa* No 4 (February 1990). What the editors did not fully realise at the time was that women members of Swapo imprisoned in the pits at Lubango were sexually at the mercy of their male guards. There was often no way to secure minimal needs without the guards having sex with their prisoners, and the women were subject to constant threats. The Swapo prison system, about which the churches and the United Nations kept silent, was an institutionalised form of rape. When they arrived back in Namibia, women prisoners were often too ashamed to speak of the degradation to which they had been subjected.

When some of these women became pregnant it was worse. They gave birth to the children of their guards at the bottom of the pits. And then the

babies were normally taken off them, and sent by Swapo to be reared in state orphanages in the former German Democratic Republic. This was the origin of a substantial proportion of the hundreds of children who were returned to Namibia from the GDR, beginning in August 1990.

Information about this has been in the public domain for several years now, without becoming an issue for women's organisations or trade unions internationally. As early as 1985, the Committee of Parents based in Windhoek wrote to the United Nations Secretary General (then Javier Perez de Quellar) that eyewitnesses had told them of 'sexual abuse of young girls' in Swapo in exile. They referred to girls of 14 and 15 being sexually abused, families being separated and children being kept hostage 'should any dissidents become too resistant.'¹ Copies were sent to the Namibian Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, all Namibia support groups and the presidents of Cuba, Angola and Zambia. There was no reply.

A woman from Windhoek who spent nearly three years in the pits, Sary Eises, has stated in a sworn affidavit that about 150 women were held prisoner at Minya Base near Lubango during 1989.² Sam Nujoma, the Swapo president, and now president of Namibia, addressed a group of 98 women prisoners at one camp in southern Angola, on 17 April 1989, immediately before their release.³

A further large group of women prisoners was shown to the international press at the end of May 1989, not long before repatriation to Namibia. John Liebenberg, a journalist from Namibia, reported that one of the 'saddest and most moving moments' was when a young woman in her twenties pointed to the baby in her arms and told a German TV crew that the child was 'the product of rape by one of the camp guards.'⁴ A woman who 'only gave her name as Magdalena' gave the same information when ex-detainees arrived in Namibia in July 1989.⁵ This appears to be Magdalena Goagoses, who said she was beaten in prison in the months before her son, Hans, was born.⁶

Immediately on their return to Namibia, former Swapo prisoners recorded the issue in *A Report to the Namibian People* drawn up by the Political Consultative Committee of Ex-Swapo Detainees (PCC). This stated:

A number of female victims were arrested pregnant and went as such through the torture process resulting in miscarriages and congenital disabilities of the babies. There were also cases of pregnancy in prison resulting from sexual abuses of the inmates by the prison authorities and guards who either intimidated or blackmailed the female inmates with threats of solitary confinement, punishment and trumped-up charges leading to physical assault in the name of the prison office.

Some females gave birth in prisons unattended to by any knowledgeable person, midwife or medical officer, thus enduring untold labour pains and related difficulties resulting in infant deaths. (pp 13-14)

In an annex, one of the prisoners, Karina Mvula, describes how she was arrested and beaten - naked and suspended in the air - at the Karl Marx

Reception Centre at Lubango in June 1987, while three months pregnant. She states that she 'awaited delivery time in a dugout overcrowded by female prisoners. I was taken to a small dark room dirty and with no proper ventilation - where I gave birth to a baby girl'. The baby was born with an injured back and was unable to suck. When Ms Mvula begged the guards to take the baby to hospital, they threatened to beat her. The baby was taken away after Ms Mvula was given an injection that made her unconscious. 'I was called later and told that my baby died and that I should not tell anybody'.

The report of the PCC was widely distributed to the press in Windhoek in the hectic period leading up to the election to the Constituent Assembly in November 1989. Similar allegations were sent to Pope John Paul II and the then US president, George Bush, on 13 October 1989, in letters by the PCC signed by 54 ex-Swapo detainees. Among forms of 'neo-barbarism' systematically practised by Swapo is listed:

Rape of women, either adults or adolescents, married or single, according to the arbitrary wishes of the camp commanders; sexual blackmail by which young women were forced to prostitute themselves as a means to obtain food, clothes or other essential needs . . .⁷

At the very least, these claims need to be investigated by an independent commission of women drawn from different countries.

The most widely available account appeared around the same time in the British journal, *The Spectator*. It was written by a British woman, Elizabeth Endycott, who spent May and July 1989 in Namibia after having befriended Namibian refugees in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s. Her late husband had assisted the UN petitioner Clemens Kapuuo, and they had entertained Namibian exiles such as the Shipanga brothers, Fanuel Kozonguizi and Mishake Muyongo at their home. With good contacts and a long familiarity with Namibian conditions, she met many returnees, listened carefully to them and noted what they said. Some people, she wrote, had spent as long as nine years in Swapo's prisons. She continued:

Women and girls were frequently taken out and raped; children were born in the pits (no medical attention was given). Miraculously, some even survived.

Even girls who did not live in the pits were often raped by guards of Swapo officials. I met a woman, now only 26 years old, who left Namibia when she was 16 looking for education and a better life, who has had six children in ten years. She has no idea where any of them is. Swapo policy has been to separate families of ordinary refugees, and I met many men who had not seen their wives and children for many years. Older children were sent to other African countries, or to East Germany or Cuba, 'for education,' while younger ones were sent to Tobias Hainyeko camp in Angola. Children born as a result of rape were taken from their mothers at a very young age and taken to the same camp, where their names were changed and they lived until they, too, were old enough to be sent away for 'education.'⁸

The conservative editorial policy of *The Spectator* does not at all mar the truthfulness of Mrs Endycott's article. She went on to note that despite all this, support for Swapo from the churches and from the British Labour Party was unwavering. Glenys Kinnock (wife of the then leader of the Labour Party) and Lady Tessa Blackstone had visited Namibia and been told about these matters. They had said they would take the matter up with Swapo, 'but they did not meet any of the victims'. Mrs Endycott's article was reprinted by the *Times of Namibia* on 26 September 1989. Accompanied by an illustration of inmates in one of Swapo's dungeons drawn by a former prisoner, it appeared under the headline: 'Swapo's hellholes. Why is the left silent?' The question is still unanswered. The drawing is reproduced below.

An Inheritance of Trauma

Swapo's prisoners have since received only minimal help. A grant from the charity Medico International of Germany enabled the PCC to set up a 'Child Trust' that planned, among other objects, to invest funds 'aimed at securing a future to those children born in prisons...'⁹ Nineteen of the 53 ex-detainees present at the meeting in Windhoek to ratify the project were women. They are all named in the document, and are available to be interviewed.

Other documents from Windhoek refer to the 'physical and psychological scars' sustained by prisoners as a result of their ordeal.¹⁰ (To this could be added: scars induced by lack of compassion from socialist, feminist and liberal bodies across the world).

EDSC states in another report that sympathetic doctors had found the ex-detainees would need extensive psychiatric treatment and rehabilitation

The few who have found jobs have been found to suffer from retarded reactions and serious depression. Some experience illusionary physical ailments such as influenza and malaria with all the symptoms, but doctors found that these were psychological.¹¹

All the survivors of Swapo's paranoid and largely tribalist spy-mania experienced trauma, but the suffering of its women prisoners - and their children - was particularly horrible. The spy-drama reached such crazed lengths that those arrested included even Nujoma's wife, Kowambo, her sister Hilma Mushimba (married to a Swapo Central Committee member, Aaron Mushimba, also detained) and a niece, Ilona Amakutua. According to Elizabeth Christoph, a prisoner who was with them at Minya Base, Mrs Nujoma was 'stripped naked and beaten like the others' [ie like all women prisoners undergoing interrogation].¹² On this, the available evidence is conflicting. But there can be no doubt that the patriarchal culture of the Kwanyama-based security department induced a special sadism towards women. This is the only explanation for the frequent charge that women detainees had poisoned razor blades concealed in their vaginas.¹³ What this charge reveals about the unconscious relation to women among the Swapo

security men and the male leaders of Swapo's Politburo can only be imagined.

As with the ANC, Swapo's 'progressive' jargon was meaningless - an ideological form of words to numb the brain. It was characteristic of southern African politics that the second item in Swapo's constitution, adopted in 1976, was a commitment to 'combat all reactionary tendencies, such as racism, sexism, etc'. This was stressed by a prominent Swapo speaker in exile, Bience Gawanas, in a talk on 'The women's struggle within the national liberation struggle' in a colloquium on crisis and transformation in Africa, held in Ghana in August 1986. The colloquium, representing 'Marxist-Leninists' from several African countries, and organised by the *Journal of African Marxists*, concluded that the liberation of women was a 'fundamental problem' in Africa and recognised the need to 'improve the practices within existing movements and organisations with regard to the women question'. Two years after the conference, in August 1988, Ms Gawanas was abducted in Zambia by Swapo security, and imprisoned and tortured at Minya Base in Angola. Highly placed contacts in political, legal and academic life in Britain secured her release, after a public campaign - but not her less well known companions in misfortune. This was Swapo's contribution to the 'women question,' and to Ms Gawanas.

Women in the Unions

The sexual abuse of Swapo's women prisoners and the schoolgirl exiles in the ANC presents a particular challenge to the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) in South Africa. At its congresses in 1987 and 1988, the TGWU resolved to fight sexual harassment 'wherever it happens'. At the annual conference of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in July 1989 - just as the Swapo detainees were arriving back in Windhoek - delegates from the TGWU called for 'tighter sexual discipline' within Cosatu and its affiliates, in opposition to 'unequal relationships' between the sexes at work. In the end, only the chemical workers union pledged full support. The TGWU now has a responsibility to make these brave words a reality, by coming to the assistance of the women victims of Swapo and the ANC in exile.

Comments by the TGWU general secretary, Jane Barrett, set the context in which these abuses can be judged. It is clear from her remarks that exile and the unbridled power of the ANC and Swapo security departments provided conditions in which general features of southern African society received intensified expression. What happened in the camps was the symptom of a general ill. Dangerous consequences for the society as a whole would follow from ignoring it.

Over the years, said Ms Barrett, there had been many complaints in the TGWU about

sexual harassment and exploitation of women members by management and particularly middle management such as foremen. An example is women giving sexual favours for jobs. There have been extensive discussions [in the TGWU], many struggles and much publicity around this issue.

What became clear to us was that it is all very well discussing the issue as it manifests itself with management, but sexual exploitation was taking place within our own union structures. This was particularly apparent in relation to young male organisers and newly recruited young female members...¹⁴

This appeared to be one of the reasons for young women members dropping out of the union. There was clearly, she said, a 'question of power relations'.

The interrelation of sex and power, well established in feminist discourse and in the writings of Michel Foucault, could not have been more vividly shown than in the ANC and Swapo camps. The civil war in former Yugoslavia has shown mass rape of women from the 'enemy' community as an instrument of war, by men. In Swapo and the ANC it was an instrument of power by brutalised men against 'their own' side. That, if anything, makes it the more repulsive.

It is a matter of women joining the nationalist organisations in exile being turned into sexual prisoners. On this issue, the women's organisations of southern Africa have still not even begun to take a stand.

References

1. Letter signed by 12 signatories, including Erica Beukes, 20 September 1985. Reprinted in Basson and Motinga, p 45.
2. Affidavit reprinted in Basson and Motinga, p 181.
3. Helga and Ludwig Helbig, p 11.
4. *Namibian*, Windhoek, 9 June 1989.
5. *Star*, Johannesburg, 5 July 1989.
6. *New York City Tribune*, 5 July 1989.
7. Reprinted in Basson and Motinga, pp 135-36.
8. 'Swapo Shopped,' 16 September 1989.
9. Resolution of PCC signed by Hans Peters, spokesman, 1 November 1990)
10. Statement by Erica Beukes, chairperson, Ex-Detainee Support Committee [EDSC], February 1990.
11. Report by Erica Beukes and Hans Peters, 4 January 1990.
12. *Windhoek Advertiser*, 14 August 1989.
13. See Panduleni Kali, *SSA* No4, pp 85-86
14. *Work in Progress* 61, September/October 1989.

Sources

Nico Basson and Ben Motinga (eds), *Call Them Spies*, African Communications Projects, Windhoek/Johannesburg, 1989. Documents available in photocopy from Windhoek are reprinted accurately and in full in this invaluable collection.

Helga and Ludwig Helbig, *Swapo's Violations of Human Rights: An Argument*, Germany, May 1990. The Helbigs were active in Namibia solidarity work for some thirty years, and were involved in numerous campaigns and publications hostile to its German and South African rulers.

Bience Gawanas, 'The women's struggle within the national liberation struggle,' *Journal of African Marxists* No 10, June 1987. After her release, Ms Gawanas failed to associate herself with other former detainees in drawing attention to Swapo's abuses. Her independence of spirit, and the tone of official relations within Swapo, may be measured by this statement from Ms Gawanas at the Ghana colloquium: 'A person like Sam Nujoma, who has become a leader through his experiences of working with the people, can never go back on his word, because it is through his experiences as a contract labourer that he is today leading the national liberation struggle.' (p 52)

Panduleni and Ndamona Kali, 'Swapo's Prisons in Angola,' *Searchlight South Africa* No4 (February 1990). The Kali sisters were arrested in Cuba, and flown to Angola where they were tortured, in November 1984 - nearly two years before Ms Gawanas asked a rhetorical question at the Ghana colloquium: 'The same effort that we put into fighting against racism, why can't we put the same effort into fighting sexism?'



6The Swapo hellholes, drawn by Frederick 'Cheetah' Gowaseb, an ex-detainee of Swapo, and published in *The Times of Namibia* 26 September 1989.