They said: “Hopelessly, we stare into the harsh dry land that refuses to nourish any spirituality nor any economic development. Our spirit has deserted us, leaving no energy, no enthusiasm to put our heads together to make plans even for today... Frustrated, we curse our government for doing so little, for paying lip service to our needs. There is no equality of opportunities for those of us living in rural areas. We need so much and get so little... We need development skills, farming skills, craft skills, small businesses so we can generate our own income – to become independent. We know so little about women’s rights; culture dominates here. Women’s rights do not mean much in a rural setting. But still – there is hope for the future!”

These were their sentiments – shared with me when I visited rural Namibia, as part of the outreach work of the Young Feminist Movement. I visited several villages to have discussions with women (young and old) on their rights and the problems they are experiencing in their communities. I captured their stories, as they told them.
The plight of rural women in Namibia: Lessons for the region

SPITZKOPPE

Spitzkoppe is a small village in Erongo, whose name comes from the famous mountain that is one of the ‘must see’ sites in Namibia. As a tourist destination, it looks so promising, yet women in this community face a bleak future.

There is a small clinic in Spitzkoppe that isn’t properly equipped – sometimes there is no medicine. People live in poverty. There are odd jobs, but these are mostly for the young men in the village. They work as small-scale miners of semi-precious stones, which they sell to tourists. Some young men are also employed as tour guides. Money comes in fast for the men and this is very attractive for some young women in this community. As such, young men often have many girlfriends – there is no need to outline the health hazards that come from such a set-up.

As work for women is scarce, cohabitating is a huge problem in this village. Young women, who dropped out of school, start relationships at very young ages with men of all ages. Young women have little autonomy over their bodies and over their lives, and are not informed about their rights. Alcohol abuse is also a huge problem here. I had an inter-generational discussion with a group of 17 women from this village to learn about their lives. I also spoke to a local nurse, a struggling gemstone and crafts vendor, and a 19 year-old girl who had a seven month-old baby.

I spoke with Karekwe, the local nurse:

Florence: As a nurse, what are the challenges you face working here?
Karekwe: It’s not at all easy... Most of the time I work alone. It gets unsafe when people wake me up at late hours with knife wounds, and I don’t have the necessary equipment to help them.
Florence: Knife wounds? So you mean people get into fights?
Karekwe: These young boys get themselves drunk. They sleep around with schoolgirls. When their girlfriends question them, they get into fights, beating up the women so badly that I have difficulty doing my job as a nurse.
Florence: So, violence against women is a big issue in this village?
Karekwe: I have been woken up with many emergencies in the early morning hours. I treat women with broken jaws, badly bruised on their heads, arms broken, and stabbed. Once I tried to call the ambulance from the town that is about 50 km away. But there was no telephone network. So I decided that we had to hitch hike.
Florence: Were you able to get a lift?
Karekwe: No. It was a weekday, so there were no cars. We waited for 16 hours before we could get a lift to the hospital.

My conversation with Fransisca, (a craft maker and a gemstone seller) was also not encouraging:

Florence: Where do you get the semi-precious stones that you are selling?
Fransisca: My boyfriend mines them at the small Spitzkoppe mountain, as well as at the Brandberg mountain.
Florence: So what is it like working as a vendor in this village?
Fransisca: Tourists are not always interested in our stones, especially when the competition is so high. Everybody here is selling stones. And the tourists are not always around, you know. Some months are better than others. The money that I make is very little. I face a lot of problems with my boyfriend.
Florence: What sort of problems?
Fransisca: Sometimes I do not even get to see the money. He takes it all and finishes it on alcohol and other women. Then we argue about it and he hits me. It hurts that he wastes hard-earned money on booze while we have children to feed. I don’t care so much about the beating, but his alcoholism is the main problem.
Florence: But is that behaviour of his acceptable here?
Fransisca: My dear, men beat women, they do that when we (women) anger them. It’s just because of alcohol. A lot of women get beaten up around here. We don’t even have a police station. To report our boyfriend is of no use. The town is far, and if we call them, they don’t find domestic problems big enough for them to drive all the way here to our village to help us.
For me it was not easy to listen to what my sisters go through every day. The sense of hopelessness touched me so much. How I wish change could come quicker for them. The amazing thing is that I saw so many smiles and we all had more laughter than tears. Laughter not only heals our pain but also gives us hope and strength to face another day. Laughter transforms our challenges into steps we can take to overcome all obstacles. Laughter helps us to face our fears and hardships with courage!

Similarly, Meide, a 19 year-old single mother of two, experiences no joy living here:

**Florence:** Did you go to school here?
**Meide:** I went to school till grade 10 in the town. But I failed. So I didn’t continue. My mother didn’t have money; she has five children. My father is a pensioner as well. Our livestock is just over 50 goats, so there is not much happening for my family.

**Florence:** When did you become a mother?
**Meide:** I got my first child when I was still in school. But I went back to school.

**Florence:** And the father?
**Meide:** They have two different fathers, but both are unemployed so they don’t pay maintenance. My firstborn is with his father’s mother at a farm nearby.

**Florence:** You mentioned you are also unemployed. How do you cope being a single mother?
**Meide:** I am not coping at all. Life is hard here. If I had a choice I would not keep them. But even contraceptives are difficult to get around here. Condoms are not a guarantee. Negotiating with men is just like asking to be hit.

**Florence:** Are no contraceptives offered here at the clinic?
**Meide:** I’m not sure. A friend of mine went to ask a nurse to give her the pill. The nurse was so cruel to her, calling her promiscuous and a loose woman, saying that she is too young for sex. It’s not nice to be humiliated like that, you know.

UIS

UIS is a small town in the Erongo region. It used to flourish back in the 70s when it was a tin-mining town. But as the years went by, the demand for tin gradually faded away. Women in general, and young women in particular, in this community face so many challenges — unemployment being the biggest. I spoke to local women to get their perspective on the situation.

Selvina, 45 years old, and a former tin miner opened her heart to me:

**Florence:** How has your life changed since the time when you were a tin miner?
**Selvina:** Those were the good old days with less hardship. Life was good back then. I could take care of myself, and I was not depending on men for financial security. I could take care of my children and even see that my extended family was well taken care of.

**Florence:** How do you take care of yourself now?
**Selvina:** My dear, in today’s life you have to do whatever it takes. I married an older man. He is a pensioner, 78 year old. We have a couple of goats back at the farm — that is a bit of security for the ‘drought’ days. But, I have a lot of responsibilities. He is old so I have to take care of him, manage our livestock, and the children as well. The N$500 that he gets as a pension is very little. I try to dig some tin here and there, but the value has dropped. Besides, digging has such a bad effect on my health now.

**Florence:** How is your health these days?
**Selvina:** I have breathing problems. It is very dusty in the mines. You can ask anyone. A lot of people who worked as tin miners here have some sort of breathing problems. I have asthma. And I have back problems from all the years of digging under the sun. But what can we do … we need money. There are no jobs here. Tin was our life and bread.
After my talk with Selvina, I met Maero. She was sitting near a local shop. She asked me for N$2.50 to buy a cigarette. I bought her a cigarette and ended up sitting besides her for a casual chat. Maero is 24 and unemployed.

Florence: You look sad – with your hands upon your head as if you are carrying the whole world on your head.
Maero: Ag, it’s nothing, ousiro (little sister). Just a terrible hangover – that’s all. All we do around here is drink beer, nothing much is happening.
Florence: Are you employed?
Maero: No, I don’t have a job. There are no jobs here. For me going to the town is of no use. I didn’t finish school. Yesterday was the payday for the old people. I take care of my grandparents, so I manage their monthly pension money.
Florence: How do you manage it?
Maero: I buy them the basic food they need, buy some electricity and pay the bills they have at the local store. The rest is mine for keeps.
Florence: But you just asked me to buy you a cigarette?
Maero: I have three children and an unemployed boyfriend as well. He gets very violent with me so I give him most of the money I have left from my grandparents’ monthly pension. I pay a portion of it for the kids’ school. And I drink as well.

It’s not just the young women who struggle, even older women’s lives in this community leave a lot to be desired. I spoke with Ouma (grandmother) Hentrica, 77 years old. Hentrica is a pensioner raising three of her grandchildren.

Florence: Ouma, how come you are looking after these children? Where are their parents?
Ouma: My child, that’s what we old people do in rural areas. We care for our grandchildren. Their parents can’t take care of them; they are both HIV positive and struggling as it is. I want to spare these children the burden. At least with me, I see to it there is flour to bake fat cookies (round bread made from dough that is deep fried).

Florence: What is it like raising these kids as a single old woman?
Ouma: I’m widowed. My husband died a couple of years back. Two of these children are HIV positive and that is the hardest part for me. It gets very expensive as they have special needs. They need vitamins and proper food to keep them going. So I bake fat cookies for school children and I sell some sweets as well. It helps, although I don’t make a lot of money.

Florence: And their medical needs? Do you get the necessary medical help at the clinic?
Ouma: No, I don’t. I mostly have to travel to bigger towns to get pills.
Florence: You are a strong woman. You still look so young for your age. What’s your secret?
Ouma: (laughs) A lot of people say that, my child. I am always busy, running after the kids. I used to live at the farm, but all my livestock were stolen and I saw no reason to continue living there. That’s how I found myself living at the old people’s home here. It was tough at the farm, especially with the sick children. With no cars or donkey carts around, travelling to Uis in cases of emergency was a serious problem.
Young and old, all women face a lot of challenges. Women in rural communities are caregivers. They take care of their old parents. They take care of their husbands. They take care of their children and grandchildren. Most of them don’t even have enough to take care of their own needs. Women risk their health in order to put bread on the table. They work under the burning sun without sunscreen or a hat. With no employment opportunities, poverty is taking a dramatic toll. Other women I spoke to told me that they need skills. They need courses to come to rural communities to give them the necessary skills in farming, craft work, for them to become self-sustaining and able to care for themselves and their family. They said they need more feminist fora. They want to learn more about their rights and their bodies. “We want to be empowered! We don’t want to be constantly reminded of our challenges. Yes, we are rural women, but we are strong and still smiling. We need encouragement and motivation as young women for us to have a vision, to have dreams.” Those were some of the words from the rural women.

**Conclusion**

Women generally, and young women in particular, face a lot of challenges in all spheres of life, regardless of where they live. Women in rural and farming communities experience additional challenges because of the specific locations in which they live. Therefore, it is essential that the needs and wants of women and young women in rural communities be recognised. I would like to believe that this is not unique to the few villages I visited in Namibia, but typical of rural and mining communities across Namibia and also across the whole of southern Africa. As women’s rights defenders, we have a lot of work to do before we bridge the gap of unequal access to women’s rights in our region. As young feminists, we are taking long overdue baby steps to make the plight of young women in rural communities visible and working to develop strategies to transform these sad stories into tales of hope.