

## From shack dweller to home owner: The power of the MBOP, Africana womanism, and self-help housing among the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia

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### *Abstract*

*Africana womanism holds that African women hand down generational wisdom, think and act communally, and routinely confront issues of race, class, and gender exclusion. This ethnography uses data gathered during a seven-month field study in 2010 from a little-researched group of nearly 300 female members of the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia (SDFN) to explore how Federation membership develops leaders and converts shack dwellers into homeowners. Organizational challenges, accomplishments, values, and beliefs were used to measure Federation women's knowledge, politics, and practices. Overall, findings suggest that a combination of factors, including the membership-based organization of the poor, Africana womanist ideologies, self-help housing, and communal leadership practices, help poor women catalyze women's rights, develop leadership skills, and reduce poverty by converting Federation shack dwellers into Federation homeowners. Those dwellings, in turn, stabilize and make more secure the economic, social, and political lives of Federation families. Results have academic and applied importance to illumine how Africana womanist and self-help practices are occurring in severely impoverished spaces, as well as how ideology translates into praxis.*

### Introduction

The tradition of self-help and mutual aid that stresses communalism and social solidarity lies deep in African heritages.<sup>1</sup> For over 30 years, the Shack Dwellers Federation of

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<sup>1</sup> Self-help groups provide emotional, practical, and (sometimes) financial support and an exchange of information. These groups use participatory processes so that people can share knowledge, common experiences, and problems. Membership in Federation self-help groups is voluntary, and led mostly by

Namibia (also known as the Federation or the Federasi) has represented a political and social ethos of Africana womanist survival and self-help for impoverished black and colored Namibians.<sup>2</sup> Just as Africans take care of and depend on one another during illnesses, injury, and death, the Federation – which is a membership-based organization of the poor (MBOP) – works to accomplish the same objectives of communal care and collective power in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.<sup>3</sup> For example, the history of different women’s movements in shack settlements shows that organized groups often emerge as problems become more acute, as practical, concrete solutions are considered increasingly urgent, and as the basic needs of the entire group are addressed.<sup>4</sup> Organization also tends to arise when emergency situations lead to sustained collective action.<sup>5</sup> Historically, such groups were structured hierarchically and excluded women from the planning process.<sup>6</sup> In Namibia, these economic, political, and social problems fostered the emergence and creation of the Federation as a post-apartheid collective response.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the singular contributions of the Federation to knowledge about African and MBOP-based women’s movements in the context of poverty reduction, since its inception more than 30 years ago, to our knowledge, a multi-disciplinary, mixed-methodological analysis exploring the knowledges, practices, and politics of this MBOP

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members. Generally, groups meet on a regular basis, are open to members, and do not cost money to join. Cf. Patrick McGowan, “Self-Help Groups”, in: Lester Breslow, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Public Health*, vol., 4, New York: MacMillan, 2002: 1087. See also Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, London, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Womanism is a form of feminism that focuses on the perspectives, experiences, and multiple identities of women of color. Womanism emphasizes the importance of wisdom handed down through the generations and stresses communal thought and action. Womanists value localized knowledge as women work to ensure that colored communities survive and thrive. Cf. N.N. “Womanism”, in: Ronald L. Jackson, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Identity*, vol. 2, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2010: 888-893. See also Gwendolyn Mikell, *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lesley Abdela, “From palm tree to parliament: Training women for political leadership and public life”, in: Caroline Sweetman, (ed.) *Gender, Development, and Citizenship*, London, Oxfam, 2004: 16-23; Hannah Britton, Jennifer Fish and Sheila Meintjes, *Women’s Activism in South Africa: Working Across Divides*, Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009; Adelheid Iken, *Women-Headed Households in Southern Namibia: Causes, Patterns, and Consequences*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1999; Mikell, *African Feminism*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Drik Berg-Schlosser and Norbert Kersting, *Poverty and Democracy: Self-Help and Political Participation in Third World Cities*, London, Zed Books, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kathleen Fallon, *Democracy and the Rise of Women’s Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Baltimore, Hopkins, 2008; Salma Ismail, “A poor woman’s pedagogy: When ideas move in people’s hands and hearts, they change, adapt, and create new solution”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 31, 2003: 94-109; Kristina Smock, *Democracy in Action: Community Organizing and Urban Change*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eunice M. Ipinge and Debie LeBeau, *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Namibia*, Windhoek, University of Namibia, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fallon, *Democracy*; Iken, *Women-Headed Households*.

has not occurred.<sup>8</sup> This ethnography examines the role that the Federation plays in the lives of 281 female, African shack dwellers, as well as whether and how Africana womanism and self-help practices influence belief and behavior to combat poverty.<sup>9</sup> We consider two research questions. What role does the Federation play in female members' lives? What are the knowledges, politics, and practices of Federation settlements?

To answer these questions, we begin by reviewing the work of scholars in the fields of MBOPs, African women's movements, and the politics of shack settlements and self-help housing movements in the global South. Next, we review relevant Namibian history, then investigate the politics, practices, and knowledges of female Federasi shack dwellers, suggesting that Africana womanist and self-help ideologies along with self-help housing practices, help women form and build a powerful collective. Membership can also catalyze poor women's rights, help members move from shack dweller to home owner, and develop their leadership skills. Findings will have academic and applied import to illumine how collective self-help is occurring in severely impoverished spaces, as well as how Africana womanist ideologies translate into praxis.

## Literature review and theoretical framework

The context from which the Federation emerged in Namibia (also Southwest Africa) is complex and nuanced. The follow summary of major historical events does not do its

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<sup>8</sup> In the context of Federation work, 'the poor' and the 'severely poor' include women, children, subsistence farmers, and pensioners living disproportionately in rural areas.. A poverty line is a predetermined level of consumption below which a person is considered to be poor. The highest incidence of poverty is currently found in the Kavango region (55%), followed by Zambezi (50%), and Oshikoto (44%). The lowest incidence of poverty is found in Erongo region (7%), cf. United Nations Development Program, *Poverty Dynamics in Namibia: A Comparative Study Using the 1993/94, 2003/04, and the 2009/10 NHIES Surveys*, <<http://www.na.undp.org>> [accessed February 17, 2016]. Female poverty is linked to unequal access to and distribution of resources, a lack of control over productive resources, and limited participation in political and economic institutions. Women are more vulnerable to chronic poverty because of gender inequalities, which come in the form of income distribution and access to credit. Women often have inadequate rights to land, labor, housing, or any other property, which are essential for life, survival, and economic security and often have limited access to markets, services, credit, information, and training. Cf. Raissa Muhutdinova, "Feminization of Poverty", in: Mehmet Odekon, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*, vol. 1, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2006: 354-359. HIV-AIDS kills millions of adults and leaves countless children orphaned and impoverished. Childhood poverty in developing countries is due in part to the outmigration of low income families from rural dwellings to urban areas, demographic shifts, cultural norms, as well as an institutional framework that fails to meet the changing needs of indigenous peoples. Poverty among children is also causally linked to illiteracy, short life spans, lack of access to appropriate healthcare, as well as social and economic disenfranchisement. Cf. Jim Quane, "Children and Poverty", in: Mehmet Odekon, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*, vol. 1, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2006: 150-154.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sandra Barnes, *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment*, New York, Lang, 2010; Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2006; Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Atlanta, GA, Scholars Press, 1988; Linda Thomas, (ed.), *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2004; Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

past justice, but rather provides a broad backdrop through which to understand some of the economic, political, social, religious, and cultural dynamics that have shaped the development of the Federation and of women-centered organizing.<sup>10</sup> The history of Namibia is informed by migration patterns often followed by periods of contestation and community building. For example, three hundred years before the Germans and Dutch invaded Namibia (1540 CE), the San, Nama, and Damara peoples settled and lived together throughout the territory. By the 1600s, Ovambo and Herero had migrated into Namibia. From 1770, Namas continued their migration northwards across the Orange River into Southwest Africa to avoid colonization in the Cape Colony (South Africa). Near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and eager to exploit natural resources such as vast tracts of arable land, Atlantic sea waters with abundant fish stocks, and diamond, copper, uranium, zinc, and salt deposits, Griqua, Orlam, and Boer trekkers invaded Southwest Africa and introduced informal colonialism.

In 1793, the Dutch government laid claim to Southwest African coastal regions. From 1830–1892, there were continuing conflicts and small-scale skirmishes between the Namas and the Hereros over land. The Germans invaded Southwest Africa in 1880, and remained as a colonizing force until 1915.<sup>11</sup> After the Germans exited Southwest Africa in 1916, the territory was under South African rule from 1915–1990. As a result, over 100 apartheid laws to control black life ‘from cradle to grave’ were created. During the anti-apartheid period, women’s self-help organizations were central to the work of helping dismantle the apartheid regimes and apparatuses. On a local level, women worked within religious organizations (for example, the Council of Churches in Namibia), funeral societies, savings groups, social organizations, and economic enterprises, and often used such involvement to further anti-apartheid networking. In such groups, women gained valuable organizing skills and personal growth opportunities. Work inside these groups created a framework from which they could create positive change in their lives and communities.<sup>12</sup>

At the present time poverty among female shack dwellers and other low-income people consists of a set of deprivations that include: inadequate and unstable income and asset bases; poor-quality, insecure, hazardous and overcrowded housing; and, inadequate public infrastructure (e.g. piped water, sanitation, drainage, roads, and footpaths). Moreover, the poor contend with: limited basic services (e.g. daycare, school, vocational training, healthcare, public transport, law enforcement) as well as constrained or absent safety nets to meet basic needs if their incomes decline or disappear. They often lack protection of their rights under the law and are generally powerless within political systems and bureaucratic structures to receive needed goods and services. Additionally,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gerhard L. Buys and Shekutaamba V. V. Nambala, *History of the Church in Namibia: 1805–1990*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2003; Angela Cowser, *Power and Democracy in Post-Conflict Namibia: A Case Study of the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia*, Saarbrücken, Scholars’ Press, 2013; Fallon, *Democracy*; Iken, *Women-Headed Households*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Amukugo, *Education and Politics in Namibia*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Britton et al., *Women’s Activism*; Fallon, *Democracy*; Mikell, *African Feminism*.

there is no means of ensuring accountability from aid agencies, non-governmental organizations, public agencies, and private utilities or of being able to participate in defining and implementing anti-poverty programs.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, low-income people are also adversely affected by high and/or rising prices for basics such as food, water, rent, transportation, access to toilets, and school fees.<sup>14</sup> It is the combination of political and economic oppression, very low income and material asset levels, marginalization in social relations, and negative cultural perceptions that trap women in abject poverty.<sup>15</sup> It is under these conditions that the Federation emerged as a proactive, adaptive, and resilient response to extreme poverty and its related inequities. The habits of the Federasi – informal, flexible, and pragmatic – feature a constant struggle for survival and self-development.<sup>16</sup>

Today, impoverished Namibian women come together because of a shared sense of powerlessness, discrimination, and dissatisfaction because of their economic and gender statuses. To accomplish its primary objective which is to improve the living conditions of low-income people living in shacks, rented rooms, and those without accommodation while promoting women's participation.<sup>17</sup> Federation members use the membership-based organization of the poor (MBOP) as an organizing form, as well as adaptive forms of self-help, understood as distinctive belief systems which when adopted by members serve as specialized knowledge or a cognitive antidote to the problem or life situation. In adopting these beliefs, some of the most psychologically disabling aspects of their situations can be ameliorated. Conversely, self-help burdens already overburdened people with the extraordinary responsibility of building their own homes while allowing the state to abdicate from its responsibility of providing low-income housing for poor people.<sup>18</sup>

As an MBOP, the Federation operates as a self-help housing cooperative, savings and credit union, funeral association, and community-based organization representing traditional and non-traditional social groupings. Members are committed to collective action

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wade Pendleton, *Katutura: A Place Where We Stay: Life in a Post-apartheid Township in Namibia*, Athens, Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1996; Hilma Shindondola-Mote, *The Plights of Namibia's Domestic Workers*, Windhoek, Labor Resource and Research Institute, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite, (eds.), *Empowering Squatter Citizens: Local Government, Civil Society, and Urban Poverty Reduction*, London, Earthscan, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Inge Tvedten, "As Long as They Don't Bury Me Here": *Social Relations of Poverty in a Namibian Shantytown*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2011; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, *Squatter Citizens*.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Véronique Dupont, David Jordhus-Lier, Catherine Sutherland and Einar Braathen, (eds.), *The Politics of Slums in the Global South. Urban Informality in Brazil, India, South Africa and Peru*, New York, Routledge, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia, "Improving the lives of poor people in Namibia", <<http://Namibia-shackdwellers.blogspot.com>> [accessed 1 April, 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Cf. David Jordhus-Lier, Einar Braathen, Véronique Dupont and Catherine Sutherland, "Knowledge and power in upgrading and resettlement initiatives", in: Véronique Dupont, David Jordhus-Lier, Catherine Sutherland and Einar Braathen, (eds.), *The Politics of Slums in the Global South. Urban Informality in Brazil, India, South Africa and Peru*, New York, Routledge, 2016: 115-133.

to change their living conditions via a network of informal settlements and savings groups. As of June 2013, there were 20,400 Federasi households organized into 605 groups which, collectively, had saved about N\$13 million. About 90% of Federasi are indigenous African females. This sub-section provides a descriptive summary of the Federation; our analysis delves deeper into the knowledges, politics, and practices that facilitate its success. Although the Federation has made significant inroads in enabling its members to save money and build their own homes, a paucity of research exists on this movement and on the lives of its members. The current project reflects one attempt to address this limitation.

## The role that the Federation plays in female members' lives

### A catalyst for women's rights

Theorists in the field of poor people's social movements agree that women's movements are key determinants of new, gender-based politics in the post-conflict era. Aili Mari Tripp argues that

autonomous women's movements are one of the most important determinants of the new gender-based policies adopted after 1990 in much of Africa. These movements tend to focus on advocacy, but also provide training in lobbying, research, civic education, and leadership skills.<sup>19</sup>

Other determinants include changing international norms and influences of global and regional women's movements, the allocation of new government and donor resources to implement reforms related to women's rights, and the diffusion of female-friendly policies as a result of the influences of multilateral bodies such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth organizations, regional bodies such as the African Union, and sub-regional institutions such as the Southern African Development Community. The end of a significant number of conflicts after the mid-1980s also created important political opportunities for women's movements.<sup>20</sup> The improvement of women's economic standing, political representation, cultural status, and legal rights are the central goals of these movements. Members deal with issues of associational autonomy, face a multiplicity of issues and people, build ties across ethnic, clan and religious lines, define 'the political' as a nonviolent discussion around the distribution of power and resources, and mobilize with gender parity alongside their male members.<sup>21</sup> The Federation advocates and mobilizes poor women, and it does that work through training in research, civic education, and leadership skills.

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<sup>19</sup> Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesig and Alice Mungwa, *African Women's Movements: Changing Political Landscapes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009: 2.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African Centre for Women, United Nations Development Programme, *African Women and Leadership*, Addis Ababa, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 1995: xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Tripp et al., *African Women's Movements* : 88.

### **A mechanism to reduce poverty through home ownership**

Martha Chen et al. argue that membership-based organizations of the poor (MBOP) measure their success by improvements made in concrete dimensions of members' well-being as well as in the MBOP's ability to retain and expand membership. Women are the primary constituency, and political and organizational strategies focus squarely on the concerns of women. MBOP-Federation members join voluntarily, live together in continuous housing and neighborhoods, and have agreed to work together to achieve collectively defined objectives. They develop and engage in their own decision-making structures and members provide in-kind contributions of time and labor (e.g. self-help housing) to build new homes (in-situ development) as a primary condition of membership.<sup>22</sup>

In Namibia, shack dwellers who live in inferior metal shacks, rural reed-huts, tents, or rented rooms face increased vulnerability and insecurity due to evictions and relocations. Mark Hunter and Dorrit Posel argue that the power to negotiate with the state for in-situ redevelopment and security of housing tenure is important for groups like the Federation because their informal settlement locations (neighborhoods) are often close to (formal and informal) employment opportunities, which in turn are critical for livelihood and survival.<sup>23</sup> MBOPs like the Federation offer members the power of the collective to negotiate for these types of concessions.

Federasi realize the significance of home ownership in reducing hardship, thereby increasing their economic productivity through their ability to transform assets into income, food, and other necessities. Home ownership is important for a woman because she can create home-based businesses and other income-generating activities to increase financial security. A woman can also pass down her home to her children thereby reducing their vulnerability. A home is also regarded as one's final resting place.<sup>24</sup>

### **Self-help housing and in-situ upgrading**

In their research of five informal settlements in six cities in the global South, Jordhus-Lier et al. found five policy approaches to informal settlements: self-help; demolition and eviction; in-situ upgrading; relocation and resettlement; and integrated human settle-

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<sup>22</sup> Martha Chen, Renana Jhabvala, Ravi Kanbur and Carol Richards, *Membership Based Organizations of the Poor: Concepts, Experience, and Policy*, Ithaca, Cornell University, Department of Applied Economics and Managements, London, Routledge, 2007; Fallon, *Democracy*.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Hunter and Dorrit Posel, "Here to work: The socioeconomic characteristics of informal dwellers in post-apartheid South Africa", *Environment and Urbanization*, 24, 2012: 285-304.

<sup>24</sup> Mirinda Miles, "Housing for Domestic Workers in Swaziland", in: Ann Schlyter, (ed.), *A Place to Live: Gender Research on Housing in Africa*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitute, 1996: 94-111; Bruce Frayne, Wade Pendleton and Akiser Pomuti, "Urban development and community participation in Oshakati, Northern Namibia", in: Arne Tostensen, Inge Tvedten, and Mariken Vaa, (eds.), *Associational Life in African Cities: Popular Responses to the Urban Crisis*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2001: 282-303.

ments.<sup>25</sup> The demolition and eviction of slum dwellers exist as state responses to rapid urbanization. These policies force shack dwellers to become homeless; people must then seek refuge in overcrowded houses, abandoned vehicles, chicken shacks, and other structures unfit for human habitation. If slum rehabilitation and relocation are inevitable because of the increasing number of shack dwellers, projects should be organized in ways that benefit slum dwellers. Redevelopment can either be carried out in-situ (in the same place) or relocated, depending on the circumstances and land use. Proximity to employment opportunities – domestic work and casual employment, including collecting/selling scrap metal – is important to shack dwellers which means that in-situ (re)development and security of (housing) tenure are important stabilizing forces.<sup>26</sup> Relocation of the poor away from their established locations, usually to areas on the city/town periphery, increases their vulnerability and often deepens poverty.<sup>27</sup> In-situ redevelopment represents the best option of addressing the growing numbers and needs of shack dwellers. In the Federation, I witnessed the enactment of self-help, in-situ upgrading, and eviction/relocation policies as well as hybrid combinations of these policies in each of the 20 towns and villages visited.<sup>28</sup>

Self-help as a housing solution supports bottom-up, collective approaches where shack dwellers themselves are in control of the housing process. In the Federation's case, shack dwellers' collective organization and incremental home-building approach is in many instances supported by municipal governments who, ideally, "create the conditions under which citizens can fully develop their potential to build and gradually upgrade their own houses in a safe and dignified way".<sup>29</sup> As of 2008, 574 Federation groups representing 22,894 households had been established. Collectively, the groups had saved N\$5,462,000 and built 1,550 new houses.<sup>30</sup>

## The knowledges, politics, and practices that facilitate Federation settlements

"Information is factual while knowledge is facts in context, facts made meaningful, or facts combined with experience. Knowledge is situated in specific places, formed by

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dupont et al., *Politics of Slums*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hunter and Posel, "Socioeconomic characteristics".

<sup>27</sup> Dupont et al., *Politics of Slums*: 62f.

<sup>28</sup> Those cities, towns, and villages include Katima Mulilo, Usakos, Omaruru, Walvis Bay, Swakopmund, Mariental, Rehoboth, Keetmanshoop, Nkurenkuru, Opungo, Rundu, Windhoek, Katatura, Outjo, Kamanjab, Eemhama, Omungwelume, Aminius, Gobabis, Okalongo, Outapi, Ongwediva, Oshakati, Ondangwa, Tsumeb, Grootfontein, Okakarara, Omatupa, Oteni, and Otjiwarongo.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Sutherland, Einar Braathen, Véronique Dupont and David Jordhus-Lier, "Policies towards substandard settlements", in: Véronique Dupont et al., (eds.), *The Politics of Slums in the Global South: Urban informality in Brazil, India, South Africa and Peru*, New York, Routledge, 2016: 49-78 (50).

<sup>30</sup> Cowser, *Power and Democracy*: 99.

interaction between actors, and is learned through concrete practices”.<sup>31</sup> In human endeavors, there can also be a lack of information and knowledge, as well as a lack of transparency in information and knowledge flows. Federasi who have successfully built their own homes produce and transmit technical knowledge (expertise in building construction); many more members however transmit folk (experiential) knowledge gained through their lived experiences of survival and resilience.<sup>32</sup> Federasi knowledge flows are constructed in different spaces – invited and negotiated – and are shaped by an Africana womanist ideological framework which privileges African women’s power, agency, and communal organization. In the Federation, information and knowledge flows were often blocked by power issues related to class and race, as well as ethnic, language, and logistical misunderstandings and miscommunications. The following sections discuss Federasi knowledges, politics, and practices.

## Knowledges

Since pre-colonial periods, African women have been mobilized to fight for their rights and even on behalf of the whole group. “‘Imperialistic strangulation’ – patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and gender imperialism – represents the multiple subjugations that act against the African woman’s self-assertion, self-expression, and self-retrieval”.<sup>33</sup> As Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie states, Africana womanism

is an explicit demonstration of the totality of giving expression to positive female and feminine bonding and collective self-assertion. The concept of group action by women, based on common welfare in social, cultural, economic, religious, or political matters, is indigenous and familiar to a majority of African women. Womanism manifests and enhances African women’s collective grouping, and positive bonding as opposed to ideological bondage.<sup>34</sup>

Nigerian writer Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s African Womanism is the conviction that gender questions can be dealt with only in the context of other cultural issues – inter-group disagreements, religious fundamentalism, language, and gerontocracy.<sup>35</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems’ ‘Africana Womanism’ deconstructs Black male sexism, reconstructs the Black family, and achieves female psychical and professional autonomy through the construction of positive, co-partnering relationships between black females and males – in struggle and in love.<sup>36</sup> For these theorists, Africana womanists are family centered, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with the male in struggle, whole, authentic, flexible, respected, recognized, male compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable,

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<sup>31</sup> David Jordhus-Lier et al., “Knowledge and power”: 115.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Jordhus-Lier et al., “Knowledge and power”.

<sup>33</sup> Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 1997: 22.

<sup>34</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 1994: 27.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Maparyan, *Womanist Idea*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Clenora Hudson-Weems, “Africana womanism and the critical need for Africana theory and thought”, *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 21 (2), 1997: 79-84.

ambitious, mothering, and nurturing. Most public Federasi spaces are living learning laboratories where very low-income black and colored women learn how to be powerful citizens with public concerns brought into the public square through the organizing work of the Federation. Further, Federasi public spaces are also shaped as invited and negotiated.

'Invited spaces' are spaces populated by local leaders who represent their respective communities (e.g., routine Federasi meetings held in Federasi community centers). 'Negotiated spaces' are those in which residents actively work to promote their claims (e.g., Federasi-initiated meetings with the municipal authorities in Walvis Bay about clearing a dune for housing). For Véronique Dupont and M.M. Shankare Gowda the most skillful leaders are able to negotiate successfully in both invited and negotiated spaces, and consult honestly with residents on important issues, working around and through communication blocks.<sup>37</sup> In other words, leaders are persons who share knowledge and power with others. Dupont and Gowda found that, in many informal settlement communities, residents were often not properly informed about projects affecting them (especially around removal and relocation issues), and that government agencies often lacked basic knowledge about the needs and priorities of shack dwellers.<sup>38</sup> For example, in their fieldwork with Cape Town shack dwellers, Jordhus-Lier and De Wet found that decisions that affected access to schools, hospitals, transportation, and other amenities were made *for* residents but not *with* residents.<sup>39</sup> With Federasi, a question remains as to whether they see the power balance between themselves and government officials as relatively symmetrical, and if so, whether they are willing to assert their power (in numbers) when necessary, to pressure government to meet their demands, especially if government cannot or will not support their housing goals.

Federasi women appropriate tenets of Africana womanism in the ways in which they band together to fight for their rights. Individual self-assertion happens primarily within the collective expression of the solidarity of the indigenous, female poor. The work is to stabilize the black family through communal support, collective savings, pro-social community work, and female bonding through the house building processes. To accomplish these tasks, women must have accurate information (facts), knowledge (facts made meaningful, facts in context), technical knowledge (for house and infrastructure constructions), folk knowledge of the social-emotional-political ways of shack dwellers, and a way to manage and clarify information and construct knowledge in situations of confusion that are made so because of language, ethnic, racial, and power differentials, as well as real differences in leadership styles. Whether Federasi are in invited or negotiated spaces shapes how knowledge flows, is blocked, and is constructed.

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<sup>37</sup> Véronique Dupont, M.M. Shankare Gowda, David Jordhus-Lier and Pamela Tsolekile De Wet, "Settlement Stories I: A question of knowledge", in: Véronique Dupont, David Jordhus-Lier, Catherine Sutherland and Einar Braathen, (eds.), *The Politics of Slums in the Global South. Urban Informality in Brazil, India, South Africa and Peru*, New York, Routledge, 2016: 79-114 (87).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.: 85.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.: 87.

## Politics

In the practice of leadership, context matters; for African women, context is shaped by inhospitable structures including racism, sexism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and patriarchal cultures.<sup>40</sup> Within these oppressions, African women cook, clean the house and yard space, bear and raise children, find food, as well as assist with plowing, hoeing, planting, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting, transporting, and marketing produce. Women and female children spend hours each day fetching water and firewood, yet manage to supplement or entirely provide the family's income by also working in the informal sector as traders and/or producers. African traditional lifestyles tend to be based on strict gendered divisions of labor and a public social separation of the sexes. Women tend to work, rest, and eat together, and perform women's dances and rituals together, as do the men in their respective social spheres.<sup>41</sup> As a result, many African women are known to excel in household management including farming, trading, and building, all of which involve some level of cooperation with others. The unequal sharing with husbands and other male family members around household responsibilities leave women and girls little time to study or pursue community roles.

The community level offers the most immediate opportunities for women to develop their leadership skills, strengthen their sense of identity and worth, and affect decisions on the distribution of community resources. The result is leadership that tends to have a low investment in formal authority, is more diffuse, opportunistic, and is shaped by qualities such as self-knowledge, idealism, and commitment. Ngunjiri posits that African women must be resilient and persevering, as they bind communities together. Because a group can have the audibility and visibility that individuals lack, African women also need a strong organization or network behind them in order to have leverage, voice, and power through which to obtain and channel resources.<sup>42</sup> Federasi women admit that if they act as solo agents, it is difficult, nigh impossible, to be successful in the face of appalling deprivations, but in community with other Federasi they draw strength, wisdom, knowledge, and power.

Senior Federation leaders believe that all members are leaders. Mahnaz Afkhami et al., agree, arguing that all participants in learning societies like the Federation are potential leaders, and that those same leaders are democratic, egalitarian, inclusive, participatory, and effective communicators in their practice.<sup>43</sup> Effective leaders communicate information, ideas, and perspectives democratically. Véronique Dupont et al. found that among shack dwellers – transparency, honesty, and clarity – were singularly important

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<sup>40</sup> Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa: Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2010: 6.

<sup>41</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *African Women and Leadership*: 8-10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.: 11.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Mahnaz Afkhami, Ann Eisenberg and Haleh Vaziri, *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*, Bethesda, Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, 2001.

communication skills to possess and deploy.<sup>44</sup> In Ruben's survey of the contemporary literature on leadership, he found five competency areas – analytic, communication, organizational, personal, and positional – that, together, are vital for leadership excellence.<sup>45</sup> In her study of Federasi leaders, Angela Cowser found that there were in fact, followers and leaders (55% self-identified as leaders), and that self-identified Federasi leaders' strongest skills are in organization and communication.<sup>46</sup> Many Federasi possess the technical and organizational skills needed to build houses, are able to peacefully mediate disputes, encourage cooperation and unity, and mobilize people across a wide range of communities and groups. Many Federasi value their ability to teach, coach, and encourage others well – within invited spaces. Leaders tend to emerge informally from within Federasi savings groups (bottom up), not from the top down. Evidence of those skills was manifest in their ability to successfully manage multiple construction and building maintenance projects simultaneously. In the field, I observed that Federasi were confident communicators in invited spaces, but were far less confident in negotiated spaces, and that follow-up and follow-through work after key meetings was often contested, muddled, and confusing. Powerful leaders, depending upon how they used power, either hoarded information or shared it freely with their members.

## Practices

Caroline Moser uses the concept of vulnerability to describe the insecurity of individuals, households, and communities in the face of continuing ecological, economic, social and political change. For many vulnerable people, these changes pose a threat to survival. A woman's ability to avoid or reduce vulnerability and increase her economic productivity depends not only on initial assets, but also on her ability to effectively transform those assets into income, food, and other basic necessities. Therefore, the more assets people have, the less vulnerable they are, and the greater the erosion of their assets, the greater their insecurity. Coping strategies often compel women to “establish their own spheres and niches of survival, most notably in the form of feminized networks, informal employment, and other income-generating activities” (all of which the Federation offers).<sup>47</sup> The Federasi concretizes networks in the form of 71 women-led savings groups which encourage members to save money regularly. The savings process is designed to maximize the daily contact people have with each other, and build trust and cooperation among the women.<sup>48</sup> As African womanists, Federasi

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Dupont et al., *Politics of Slums*.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Brent D. Ruben, *What Leaders Need to Know and Do: A Leadership Competencies Scorecard*, Washington, DC, National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Cowser, *Power and Democracy*.

<sup>47</sup> Caroline O. N. Moser, *Confronting Crisis. A Comparative Study of Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability in Four Poor Urban Communities*, Washington, D.C., World Bank, 1996: 65.

<sup>48</sup> Cowser, *Power and Democracy* : 135-160.

leaders see women's participation as critical in crafting a gender-sensitive strategy of community mobilizing, which sees men and women re-negotiating relationships within their families.

Elke Zuern argues that 'the politics of necessity' is not only about material needs but also "the right to be heard, to have a voice, to be consulted, and to become full members of the political community".<sup>49</sup> Feminine connectivity is a critical factor in building and sustaining resistance to authority systems oppressive to women. For example, shack dwellers who established and maintained social relationships with rural and urban socio-cultural formations (like the Federation) outside the shantytowns broadened their social and cultural repertoire.

Federasi regularly gather in invited spaces throughout Namibia to exchange information, experience, and skills as well as conduct community mapping. In these, Federasi gain practical skills, develop relationships with other shack dwellers across location and language, and learn to plan, manage, execute, and reflect on their own development agendas. Members also learn bookkeeping and loan management, settlement profiling, land identification, land auditing, and house construction.<sup>50</sup> These visits build upon the logic of experiential knowledges, of 'doing as knowing' and as a 'living-learning lab'.<sup>51</sup>

## Capturing voices: site description and methodology

### Namibian demographics and our research partners

Federasi savings groups are perhaps the most important public institutions in Federasi lives. In these groups, women find camaraderie, support, voice, and the full flowering of female leadership practices. Because most higher education and waged employment opportunities are foreclosed to Federasi because of their lower education statuses, the Federation becomes ever more important to female shack dwellers as a site of self-assertion and power. Savings groups, positive womanist bonding, rebalancing male-female power dynamics and feminized self-help housing all help poor women deal with the vulnerability and economic insecurity that is endemic to being poor. What follows is relevant demographic information about Namibia and about Federasi women that contextualizes the role the Federation plays in members' lives.

Located near the southwestern tip of Africa, Namibia has a population of about 2.1 million, about two-thirds of whom live in rural areas; it consists of black (87.5%), colored (6.5%), and white (6%) people. Tribal representation among its' indigenous black population varies; Ovambo are most common (50%), followed by Kavango (9%),

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<sup>49</sup> Elke Zuern, *The Politics of Necessity: Community Organizing and Democracy in South Africa*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011: 16.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Cowser, *Power and Democracy*.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Anne Harley, "We are poor, not stupid. Learning from autonomous grassroots social movements in South Africa", in: Hall, Budd L., Darlene E. Clover, Jim Crowther and Eurig Scandrett, (eds.), *Learning and Education for a Better World. The Role of Social Movements*, Rotterdam, Sense, 2012: 3-21.

Herero (7%), and Damara (7%). While English is the official language, Afrikaans, is the lingua franca. Namibia's primary economy consists of mining, commercial agriculture, and fishing. Its mixed economy tends to privilege the private sector. One of the richest countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Namibia is also characterized by a starkly unequal income distribution with most of the wealth concentrated among its small, white (and upper-income black) minority. According to the National Planning Commission, Namibia has one of the highest levels of per capita income in sub-Saharan Africa. However, a disproportionate percentage of its black citizens are impoverished. For example, its' white minority, along with an emerging black elite, have average per capita incomes of about N\$100,000/year; blue-collar black workers average N\$4,500/year. Underemployed and unemployed Namibians, including almost all Federasi members, average only N\$500/year. Moreover, more than 80% of arable land and 44% of total land surface is controlled by white farmers. Specific challenges include: a poverty rate of about 76%, unemployment rates of 40%-70% (depending upon region); and, an HIV/AIDS rate of 15.3%.<sup>52</sup> These broad demographics inform the profiles of our sample of 281 women.

Poverty among the study partners is correlated with education and employment. Thirty-five percent of Federation women in this study are waged employees; 66% of them are domestic workers. About 83% of respondents did not finish Standard 10 (equivalent to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S.), often because their parents were too poor to pay mandatory school fees. Over 50% of the women are 19–39 years old; about 25% are 40–49 years old. Only 19% are 50 years old and older. Most women are multi-lingual and almost all are heads-of-households (90%). Federation women who are not household-heads typically live in one of three configurations, as: adult children with their parents; older, married women who consider their husband as head of household; or co-habitators who consider their live-in boyfriends as head of household. The 281 women in our sample have responsibility for 1,123 dependents. There were an average of four dependents per family; nearly 85% of the respondents have at least one dependent living in their home. Dependents include biological children and adult children living at home, able-bodied adult males, orphaned children, widows, other relatives, sick and disabled persons who have been taken in, and fictive kin.

Over 90% of respondents are affiliated with a Christian church. About 49% of Federation women are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCN). However, 23% of Federation women in this analysis attend Pentecostal or non-denominational churches; 19% are Roman Catholic.<sup>53</sup> While many Federasi attend Sunday worship services, they

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Cowser, *Power and Democracy*.

<sup>53</sup> While on the ground in Namibia, I visited several different churches for Sunday morning worship (Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Non-Denominational, Methodist, United Reformed, and Dutch Reformed congregations). Except for the Methodist and Uniting Reformed churches, I saw no women visible as worship leaders. Because the church is an important site for spiritual formation and leadership development, opportunities to exercise leadership for poor, black females seems to be foreclosed. This makes Federation membership even more important.

often leave those services in the late morning to meet with their savings groups to do bookkeeping, plan enumerations, and enjoy fellowship. Those meetings often extend into the early evening. While church attendance is ritually and spiritually important, the deep relational and economic work which reduces vulnerability and increases power happens in the savings groups. The study population consists mainly of poor, female heads-of-household with limited formal education, multiple dependents, and religious affiliations. These economic and non-economic traits will be important for understanding Federation involvement.

### **Listening to Federasi women: research methodology**

Stacy Floyd-Thomas' emancipatory meta-ethnographic methodology was used during this study based on its emphasis on liberatory efforts among black communities of examining the lives of its most subjugated class: black women.<sup>54</sup> Applied to the Federation, this grounded theoretical approach focuses on the hermeneutic of low-income, black, female shack dwellers' social, economic, and cultural traditions. Moreover, this approach explores whether and how black female liberation occurs. Emancipatory meta-ethnography deconstructs the social myths that denigrate black women and constructs discourse in light of their experiences. Furthermore, it seeks to extricate the hidden value of black women's social and political formations from traditional scholarly analyses and discourses and enables scholars to transform a research process that can often be alienating and dehumanizing for both researcher and the researched. The disciplines of religion, theology, sociology, and cultural studies are brought to bear on this research topic.

This case study includes a triangulation of data collected via personal interviews, document reviews, and participant observation from January 20, 2010 – July 7, 2010. Each data gathering method is summarized below. The first author accompanied members of the Namibia Housing Action Group (NHAG, which is the administrative support arm of the Federation) and other Federation women as they traveled the country to conduct community exchange visits and Community Land Information Program (CLIP) audits. Participant observations occurred in the following communities: Aminius, Gobabis, Grootfontein, Henties Bay, Kamanjab, Katimo-Mulilo, Keetmanshoop, Nkurenkuru, Opungo, Omaruru, Ongwediva, Oshakati, Ondangwa, Outjo, Rehoboth, Swakopmund, Tsumeb, Usakos, Walvis Bay, and Windhoek.

Twenty Federation meetings at local and regional levels (invited spaces), as well as five meetings between Federation members and municipal authorities (negotiated spaces) were observed. In addition, in early July 2010 a meeting was held with the principal researcher and about 30 Federation leaders at their Windhoek headquarters to present preliminary research findings and solicit comments. Participant observations included assessing dynamics such as meetings, community discussions, church worship services, iconography, and group interactions that provided insight into the programmatic, social,

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Stacy Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*, Cleveland, Pilgrim, 2006.

and political environment of the Federasi. To produce thick descriptions of Federasi behaviors and attitudes, a controlled observation method via a participant observation data sheet was used to obtain primary data. For example, women were observed working in various stages of the home-building process – digging trenches, collecting brick-making materials, making bricks, and building walls. They were also observed performing daily chores such as: preparing children for school; making meals; cleaning their homes; caring for family members; and, attending formal and informal Federation meetings. Data were also collected using two questionnaires (provided upon request). A snowball sampling method was employed to locate interviewees. First, the 2010 Federation Questionnaire was used to query the entire sample about the organization in general, organizational challenges, and accomplishments, as well as the values and beliefs that influence Federation culture and environment. Questionnaire completion times spanned between 10-60 minutes. A second questionnaire was used to conduct in-depth interviews with six key Federasi leaders and three senior government officials who worked with the organization. These individuals were selected for their extensive knowledge of the organization and their high-level participation in the social and political life of the Federation. Each interview was audio-taped and lasted about one hour.

In order to perform a culturally sensitive study that accurately reflects the perspectives of our research partners, it was important to consider the implications of language differences on data collection and analysis. During field work, Afrikaans, English, Ovambo, Herero, Caprivian, Tswana, Damara, Nama, and Kavango languages were spoken. To insure accurate data collection, translators were present in each of the 30 towns and villages visited as well as during each Federation meeting that was attended. However, because the vast majority of respondents could speak and write in English, approximately 80% of Federation questionnaires were completed by respondents without the aid of a translator. In more remote villages and towns, translators were used because most respondents neither spoke nor were able to read English. In these instances, a questionnaire and pen/pencil were provided to each translator, who then sat with each respondent and completed questionnaires face-to-face. Hand-written field notes were transcribed within 2-3 days of the date they were recorded. Secondary data such as books, articles, and other historical material provided by NHAG, the Omaruru, Namibia public library, and the *Sister Namibia* library in Windhoek, augmented our primary sources. These multiple approaches to gathering source material reflect the desire to identify, interpret, explain, and document some of the dimensions of the complex, nuanced knowledges, politics, and practices of the Federasi.

### **Understanding Federasi women: analytical process**

Content analysis is a systematic analytical approach designed to identify patterns, themes, and meanings that emerge in various forms of data such as interviews, focus

groups, field notes, and written documents.<sup>55</sup> The perspectives of Namibian shack dwellers were analyzed using this method in order to “identify and explain the ways people use or operate in a particular setting and how they come to understand things, account for, take action, and generally manage their day-to-day life”.<sup>56</sup> The frequency of emergent themes was central to illuminating patterns within and across each data source as well as possible relationships between data and African womanism.<sup>57</sup> We employed a combination of deductive and inductive coding schemes. For example, using a deductive approach, major concepts from African womanism and women-centered organizing described in earlier sections guided the identification of language, beliefs, and behavior that may constitute, for example, womanist views or subjugated knowledges. Thus, we approached the data with some ideas of concepts related to mobilization and self-help in mind. However, this approach did not restrict other potential emergent themes. We also used an open coding process through an inductive process and gradually transitioned to a deductive approach to address the broader research questions. As illustrated by the following quotes, Federasi lives are informed primarily by African womanist and self-help ideologies.

### Collective mobilization among shack dwellers: findings

With national independence, Namibian women were often denied political positions. Thus, many women chose to disengage from formal politics and use existing women’s groups to focus on community-level concerns.<sup>58</sup> Because confronting politicians in the apartheid and post-apartheid eras was dangerous,<sup>59</sup> many women determined that Federation membership lowered the risk of retribution and raised the possibility of political success. With the transition to a democratic form of governance, the Federation now views the formal political process as a means to change the economic, social, and political situation of shack dwellers. Movements like the Federation help shape national and international norms around the allocation of government and donor resources, prodding them to implement reforms related to women’s rights and the diffusion of female-friendly policies.

As illustrated by the following quotes, Federasi lives are informed by African womanist and self-help ideologies which enable women to organize around the power, dignity, and organizational strength of poor, black, and mostly female shack dwellers.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Boston, MA, Allyn and Bacon, 2009; Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*, Beverly Hills, CA, Sage, 1980.

<sup>56</sup> Berg, *Research Methods*: 340.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Iken, *Women-Headed Households*.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Liping and Lebeau, *Beyond Inequalities*.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Fallon, *Democracy*; Mikell, *African Feminism*.

## The MBOP and poverty reduction

The following Federasi describe the movement's specific focus on the lives of impoverished people. The following two remarks show straightforward connections between the Federation and poverty abatement and were frequently mentioned by women in this study. According to the following respondent, Federation involvement can be correlated with a specific group of people and specific outcomes:

[The Federation] means to improve poor people in living conditions [...] My children enjoy the beautiful house that I built through the organization [...]. Community members need to know their rights and to follow the will of the Almighty God so that they can do things in the right way. (Rosa, a 38 year old bookkeeper and office administrator from Ongwediva)

The above remark summarily describes the Federation's mission in terms of who (poor people), what (improve conditions, learn their rights), where (Ongwediva), how (building beautiful houses), why (to follow God's will), and how (by doing things correctly). In addition, her use of active voice implies that 'when' is *now* for Federation members. This temporal aspect of her comment alludes to the short- and long-term benefits of Federation involvement. This comment is consistent with the larger purposes of successful MBOPs.

Similarly, the next comment provides additional details regarding the processes by which Federasi translate intangible traits such as hope, thrift, delayed gratification, activism, and mutuality into the ability to locate land on which to erect homes:

The Federation is also for poor people [...] the Federation teaches me co-operation with people, how to save money, give ideas, and how to talk in public meetings, to respect each other [...] My hope is – I have to fight, by all means as I can, so that I can find my own land. [It is] important that the more you save and attend meetings [...] you gonna get your own land. (Annika, a 31 year old self-employed seller from Windhoek, Hakahana)

This comment underscores the constant struggle for survival, and the power of regular savings, the savings group, and of a successful, women's MBOP to reduce vulnerability. Furthermore, group co-operation within and across townships as well as the requisite communication and collaborative skills to harness sweat equity and trust each other during multiple building efforts over time, reflect key tenets of an Africana womanist paradigm.<sup>61</sup>

Although these multiple outcomes may benefit male and female members, Federation involvement provides specific advantages to women based on their position at the bottom of Namibia's socioeconomic ladder.<sup>62</sup> Finally, the following comment by Nangula summarizes the correlation between Federation ideology and outcomes: "I live in a brick house and my kids live in a mud house. Now they see the difference the Federation can make" (a member of the Zambezi savings group). Nangula highlights the significance of

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<sup>61</sup> Hudson-Weems, "Africana womanism": 79.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Abdela, "Palm Tree"; Britton et al., *Women's Activism*; Cowser, *Power and Democracy*; Shindondola-Mote, *Plights*; Iken, *Women-Headed Households*; Ismail, "Poor woman's pedagogy".

homeownership in reducing vulnerability and hardship, and the way in which active MBOP membership can defeat isolation and desolation.

### **Africana womanism**

In Namibia, Africana womanism expresses itself as an expectation of mature, feminine knowledge, competency and responsibility. A Federasi Womanist respects, appreciates, and relies on the capabilities of women for her own survival and the well-being of her family and community. In this way, the Federation becomes a tangible mechanism by which Womanism can emerge, be embraced, espoused, and lived.<sup>63</sup> Federasi realize the importance of changing the minds of both men and future generations.<sup>64</sup> For example, Benjami, a 57-year old assistant chef from Keetmanshoop notes:

The Federation makes a difference in my life and also to my children's life [...] As a woman, I feel free to stand up and fight for my rights [...] I hope that my kids will follow in my footsteps.

Her comment acknowledges the generational, non-economic improvements that Federasi participation can engender. In addition, according to the following comment by Chamalla, a 32-year old produce seller from Mariental, the existence of the Federation bodes well for helping men embrace gender inclusivity; “[Women’s rights] must be encouraged, while at the same time, men must be taught to recognize women as equal partners.” Such comments (for example, “We can do anything men do” or “I feel free to stand up and fight for my rights”) reflect dramatic examples of personal and group transformations as well as expectations of systemic change to come.

Many Federasi describe the positive, intangible benefits of their participation. For example, according to Marta, a 29-year old female, self-employed cook and doll-maker from Kamenjab, the Federation provides:

the inner strength of the group members to go forward and not backward. It encourages women to stand on their own and not to rely on men [...] I am very proud for the women’s rights. ‘Cause we are now independent and are not under the men anymore.

As well as increased intestinal fortitude, confidence, and possible reductions in the incidences of male-on-female violence, members point to specific political and practical advantages: “The women do have rights that they were denied before independence. But today, we have equal rights, things have changed, and we are now more fruitful than ever” (65-year old pensioner from Keetmanshoop). And Benita describes other intangible benefits of involvement: “I as a woman, feel confident, ‘cause now we have rights to fight for ourselves” (32-year old domestic worker from Keetmanshoop).

As illustrated by the above three remarks, many Federasi directly associate the organization and associated movement with women’s rights and issues. Concepts (i.e., inner strength, pride, forward movement, equal rights, and encouragement) illustrate

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Townes, *Womanist Ethics*.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Shindondola-Mote, *Plights*; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, *Squatter Citizens*.

some of the expressive benefits of involvement. Moreover, it was common for respondents to consider the Federation as the catalyst needed for mobilized efforts in the fight for equal rights for indigenous women. Such views directly parallel an Africana womanist stance – where adherents are socialized to thoughtfully center themselves and other oppressed people, and critique social injustices, organize, become self-efficacious, and believe that they deserve better lives.<sup>65</sup>

### Self-help and women's rights

The Federation's instrumental goals and objectives – collective mobilization, personal and group savings, and female home ownership – are shaped by a complex set of ideas, beliefs, and values associated with Africana womanism and self-help practices. These ideologies and practices energize poor Federasi, in general, and female adherents in particular, to strive for female equality and homeownership. For example, Mary suggests: "I feel proud because of gender equality where women (can) be also owners of households and take part in decision-making" (32-year old community mobilizer from Eenhana).

Because most African political institutions still tend to be patriarchal and resistant to women's equal participation in governance, Federasi are keenly aware of their rights and the importance of standing up for them.<sup>66</sup> This newfound agency translates to an increased desire for political, economic, and social power:

Everyone has rights. We can do anything men do, so I have my own rights to do whatever I feel to do [...] I want everyone to stand up and use his or her hands to fulfill his or her needs [...] I want to help my family and to make my business successful – to run a big business. (Memory, 30-year old self-employed female from Aminuis)

In addition, this intersection means that the practical dimensions of a self-help tradition can become galvanized and routinized to organize power for female shack dwellers who have been most disenfranchised and historically oppressed in Namibian society. Furthermore, spiritual, emotional, and psychological links engender relational improvements between Namibian women and men as well as aspirations for even more dramatic systemic changes in the country. The following representative quotes illustrate how Federasi broadly understand the Federation, its goals, and benefits.

As noted in the following comment by Laina, a 49 year old domestic worker from Keetmanshoop, intangible features of Federation involvement such as love of self and others can transform a committed participant and compel her to work more concertedly with other members for expressive (i.e., increased love) and instrumental (i.e., working together to build houses) outcomes:

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Barnes, *Megachurch Culture*; Battle, *Black Church in America*; Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Cowser, *Power and Democracy*; Thomas, *Living Stones*; Townes, *Womanist Ethics*.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Fallon, *Democracy*; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *African Women and Leadership*.

To love people and work together [...] it makes a difference in my life and also in other people's lives [...] As a member, I feel proud and want to see my community working together to love each other.

The Federation gives women the power to negotiate with the state for in-situ redevelopments and security of housing tenure, often in the face of eviction and relocation threats. Eviction and relocation of shack dwellers away from their established locations to city/town peripheries increases vulnerability and often deepens poverty.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it is important to have organized power to resist these encroachments because informal settlement locations are often close to employment opportunities which in turn are critical for livelihood and survival. MBOPs like the Federation offer members the power of the collective to negotiate for these types of concessions. As marginalized citizens, Federasi women demand the right to be heard, to be consulted, and to become full members of the political community.

### **Women's communal leadership**

Just as the neo-liberal Namibian government has adopted a mantra of self-help, Federasi ideology has meant that some women are envisioning more systemic change that includes women at the helm. Results from this third theme suggest that Federation involvement provides ideological and practical guidance for members to envision a better future and the tools to begin to make such beliefs a reality. Such tenets also reflect African womanist features which suggest that historically disenfranchised women are capable of championing their own destinies. For example, the following comments suggest that an important outcome of Federation involvement has been belief in women's leadership at every level of society. Kayla, a 29-year old office administrator from Katima-Mulilo, believes that the Federation is directly responsible for encouraging women toward public leadership and training them accordingly: "It's really good to have women's leadership because this helps us to learn as women and improve our lives. It helps us to feel ownership in the Federation." And just as Federasi expect women to lead, their involvement appears to increase expectations in other arenas: "I feel good because women can be head of the house, be a leader, (be a) pastor" (Shandi, 42-year old domestic worker from Nalitungwe).

Central to this theme is a change in ideological views among Federation participants to believe that women are adept as well as entitled to greater leadership involvement in society.<sup>68</sup> The following responses suggest these heightened expectations:

[The Federation] is very good. 'Cause in early years, we didn't have any say in things, but now we can even sit and work in Parliament – through women's rights. (Mari, a 33-year old small business owner in Kamenjab)

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Dupont et al., *Politics of Slums*.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Abdela, "Palm Tree"; Kavita Datta and Cathy McIlwaine, "Empowered leaders? – Perspectives on women heading households in Latin America and southern Africa", in: Caroline Sweetman, (ed.), *Women and Leadership*, London, Oxfam, 2000: 40-46.

The above comment points to historic exclusionary tactics in negotiated political spaces as well as more recent gender improvements that she links to the existence of the Federation. Such practical outcomes also reflect some of the more activist constructs associated with Africana womanism.<sup>69</sup> Contemporary experiences of multiple improvements for women have led some respondents to predict even more dramatic changes on the political front:

It's good 'cause we want to see a woman President through this rights. Although I will be buried, I will be very happy about that in Namibia 'cause we can do it. (Rose, 36-year old hotel launderer from Usakos)

It's good (women's rights) and it protects us against the men [...] and one day we may have a woman leader (President). (Lenda, 47-year old unemployed house worker from Omaruru)

These perspectives describe past sexism in government as well as the importance of the women's rights movement which is embedded in Federasi practices. More specifically, Rose and Lenda's remarks point to future aspirations that Namibia may be led by a woman and illustrate the political and social changes in ideas, values, and beliefs that are influenced by the Federation. And according to the following more sobering comment, increased political organizing undermines patriarchy and its associated deleterious outcomes:

It's good for us (women) 'cause we want to see a woman president and then the men won't have the right to chop off our heads [...] [her hope for the future] to be in a safer and electrical city where the men might not chop off our heads and to be in a free and democratic land. (Marta, 32 year old unemployed female from Kamenjab)

For some respondents, the above comment hearkens to the recent past (and present) associated with unsafe conditions for women and their children as well as potential backlash for women who questioned male authority or demand their economic, political, and social rights.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the remark suggests that the specter of violent patriarchy continues to loom large for some Federasi women. However, the final comment below by John, a 29 year old *male* general worker from Keetmanshoop suggests that the systemic changes imagined by most of the study respondents are not far-fetched: "I think that it is a great thing that the women also got their rights and I think that some women are great leaders."

### Exchanges and community mapping

Because leadership is group-centered, and because Federasi orthodoxy holds that all people have the capacity to be leaders, women mentoring other women is an important

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Hudson-Weems, "Africana womanism": 79; Kolawole, *Womanism*; Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves*: 11.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Buys and Nambala, *History*; Ipinge and Lebeau, *Beyond Inequalities*; Iken, *Women-Headed Households*; Mikell, *African Feminism*.

method of teaching and sharing knowledge.<sup>71</sup> Thus, senior Federasi women travel widely (e.g., exchanges) in Namibia and to other countries in the developing world to teach other poor women how to mobilize and exchange information, skills, and experience. During these exchanges, Federasi share practical construction skills, build relationships, and help the inexperienced execute their own development agendas. In order to change the ideologies, politics, and economics that fundamentally shape women's lives, women must know each other's lives and experiences and reach across all kinds of cultural, ethnic, racial, and geographic barriers. And during Federasi exchanges, gaining and sharing knowledge of other women's lives means that women must not only learn but unlearn, working to discern ways in which their self-conceptions and conceptions of others may derive from oppressive ideologies.<sup>72</sup> To create this kind of collective leadership, public speaking and negotiating skills are geared towards creating mutually supportive leadership teams, not singular individual leaders. Within these teams (Federasi savings groups), women engage in mutual support and inter-personal sharing which enable members to pursue their dreams and tackle difficult personal challenges. And achieving both personal and communal goals can give Federasi members a new sense of confidence. Self-efficacy, along with the mutual support developed within the group, enables many women to lead their savings group, and in so doing, strengthen their families and communities.

## Discussion and conclusion

While these feminized networks help many women, often the poorest and most destitute women find themselves deeply isolated and socially marginalized. Federasi mobilizers were often unable to reach many of the most destitute, isolated women. For the deeply isolated, Federation membership was not the mechanism to alleviate or reduce their poverty. The current study is important for understanding how female members of the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia make sense of persistent poverty, the hope for a better future that Federation membership represents, as well as how African womanism, self-help, and communal leadership practices work to reconstruct human dignity for the poor. The three emergent themes that reflect the Federation as a catalyst for women's rights, as an incubator for poor women's leadership development, and as an MBOP that moves women from shack dweller to home owner, illustrates some of the mechanisms that enable its members to engage in everyday forms of resistance. Federasi women understand poverty individually and collectively as a condition which must be confronted and defeated through their work in the Federation. Concretely, they are using emancipatory ethnography (enumerations and community mapping) to perform Federasi-initiated audits of informal settlements throughout Namibia. At the center of their work is a deep understanding and articulation of self-interest; that is, a

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Abdela, "Palm Tree"; Datta and McIlwaine, "Empowered leaders"; Ismail, "Poor woman's pedagogy".

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Eugenia DeLamotte, Natania Meeker and Jean F. O'Barr, (eds.), *Women Imagine Change: A Global Anthology of Women's Resistance: From 600 BCE to Present*, New York, Routledge, 1997.

striving for self-respect (women and their children deserve to live in a safe, affordable home), self-determination (the power to reshape futures), self-preservation (home ownership and Federasi membership), and self-recognition (they are worthy to live dignified lives).<sup>73</sup>

Ninety percent of Federation members are women and most of those women are mothers. Active membership enables women to participate in negotiating with public officials and private businesses for equipment, building materials, land, and utilities in order to build their own homes. We contend that such characteristics are indicative of an Africana womanist ideology that is embedded in the ideological tapestry, processes, practices, and programs of the Federation.<sup>74</sup> The women [and men] are persistent in claiming their space and place in the world, whether others acknowledge it or not, and are building the capacity to expand and deepen their public lives through creative, group-initiated actions.

Yet Federation participation is not a panacea. Respondents here candidly discuss trials as well as triumphs as they attempt to push back against the historical remnants of apartheid, patriarchy, and conservative religious dictates. Moreover, the threat of physical dangers, competing ideologies, as well as blocked knowledge flows, inconsistencies among members in repaying loans and attending meetings undermine the already tenuous mutuality needed to maintain the organization's processes.<sup>75</sup> Yet, based on our results, the vast majority of members remain undaunted in their quest for women's rights, economic stability, and stable housing for themselves and their families.

Findings here also illustrate how Federasi understand the organization as well as its multiple tangible and intangible benefits. These results suggest that its prevailing ideology fosters self-efficacy, love, pride, commitment, delayed gratification, and power among its members.<sup>76</sup> Economic expectations and temporal improvements (for example, saving and building houses) also provide evidence of what is possible through communal cooperation.<sup>77</sup> Additional research is needed to further consider the male presence in the Federasi, as well as other ideological views that may influence mobilization. In addition to connecting beliefs and subsequent behavior among Federasi, these results make a strong argument for the influence of Africana womanist beliefs to help explain the organization's effectiveness.<sup>78</sup> Yet, what can confound and contradict

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Cowser, *Power and Democracy*.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Barnes, *Black Megachurch Culture*; Battle, *Black Church in America*; Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Maparyan, *Womanist Idea*; Thomas, *Living Stones*; Townes, *Womanist Ethics*.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Britton et al., *Women's Activism*; Buys and Nambala, *History*; Iken, *Women-Headed Households*; Peter Katjavivi, Per Frostin and Kaire Mbuende, (eds.), *Church and Liberation in Namibia*, London, Pluto, 1989.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Mitlin and Satterthwaite, *Squater Citizens*.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Fallon, *Democracy*; Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter, *African Women South of the Sahara*, New York, Longman Scientific and Technical, 1995; Mikell, *African Feminism*.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Patricia H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

womanist cooperation are issues such as in-lawism, hierarchical power dynamics, inconsistent levels of cooperation, and limited relationships between Federasi leaders and other relevant women's organizations. However, for most members, the ideological imperatives embedded in the Federation's stance translate to real-world improvement for its members, their families, and the broader Namibian society.

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