

# Must taxpayers pay for official's 'fondling'?

WOMEN'S Solidarity was shocked to her that Mr Vero Mbahurua was recently found guilty of sexual molestation in Canada while representing Namibia on an official visit. We were even more horrified to read in The Namibian of November 3 that Mr Mbahurua was quoted as saying that in his culture it is not an offence "to fondle someone". We would like to make several points about this incident.

1. We often hear similar 'cultural' arguments applied to issues involving women. There are 'cultures' in Namibia which have endorsed racism in the past but this is never accepted as an argument for acquiescence to continued racism. By the same token, 'cultural' beliefs are no argument for continued sexism.

Furthermore, we wonder whose 'culture' Mr Mbahurua had in mind. We suspect that 'his culture' means the attitude of the men he knows, because we know of no Namibian women who agree to be treated as sexual objects against their will.

2. Every 'culture' in Namibia is subject to the Namibian Constitution and the laws of the land. Our Constitution forbids sex and race discrimination and guarantees human dignity to all persons, male and female, black and white.

Article 19 of our Constitution, which covers cultural freedom, clearly states that people in Namibia have cultural freedom subject to the condition that they do not violate the terms of the Constitution or impinge upon the rights of others.

If the incident in question had taken place in Namibia, we would have advised the woman to lay a criminal charge of assault or indecent assault. 'Fondling' a woman without her consent is just as much a crime in Namibia

as it is in Canada.

We hope that Government officials do not think that they are exempt from our Constitution and our laws - no matter what their 'culture', they are Namibians and they have a duty to obey our laws. Mr Mbahurua, as a legal advisor, should know better.

3. According to the report in The Namibian, Mr Mbahurua's fine was paid by the Commonwealth Parliamentarians' Association and was refunded by the Namibian Government. Why is this? Was fondling a hotel cleaner accepted as part of Mr Mbahurua's official duties? Are the Namibian taxpayers expected to pay for his disrespect for human dignity?

4. We would like to make a public appeal to the Namibian Government to take this incident very seriously. A Government official travelling abroad on official business represents Namibia and everything Namibia stands for. Women's Solidarity would not like the world to believe that Namibia is a country where such behaviour is condoned or ignored.

We believe this offence calls for the strongest public condemnation. We also question whether a person who shows such disregard for basic human rights is worthy to act as a legal advisor.

5. Finally we would like to applaud the courage of the woman who laid the charge against Mr Mbahurua in Canada. It must not have been easy for a hotel worker to speak about against such a prominent official, and we find this woman's example to be an inspiration to us all.

We hope that the Government will keep the public informed about the follow-up to this ugly incident.

WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY  
WINDHOEK