

**Acceptance Speech by Dr. Helena Ndume on
Accepting the United Nations Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela Award**

I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the honor of being selected to be the first female recipient of the prestigious United Nations Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela award. My deepest appreciation goes to SEE International for nominating me and I shall forever remain grateful for the recognition that I have received. Allow me to state categorically that although this is a personal award, it is and will always remain as a result of dedicated teamwork, involving hardworking Namibian and international health professionals.

Growing up in my home town of Tsumeb in northern Namibia I could not have possibly imagined to one day be standing before the World Body receiving an award, let alone to be privileged to receive it in the company Mr. George Sampiao who has provided exceptional leadership to his nation and changed lives for the better. It is an honor Sir!

I was born during my country's illegal occupation by apartheid South Africa. I was 15 years old, when, like thousands of other young Namibians, I fled the country to escape the violence, imprisonment, the inferior Bantu education and torture. We fled into Angola where we were met by combatants of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and safely escorted to Zambia. In Zambia we were settled in SWAPO Health and Education Centres and continued with our education anew!

I was amongst the first bunch of youngsters to be send to The Gambia were I finished my secondary school. Since "home" was SWAPO camps in Angola and Zambia I went back to Angola and was assigned to work as an administrator to the SWAPO Secretary of Transport, while waiting to be send to a university.

My first choice (dream) was to become a fashion designer, but when I told this to Mr. Nahas Angula, at the time SWAPO Secretary for Education (who went on to become Namibia's Prime Minister), he told me straight to my face that "independent Namibia will need medical doctors and not fashion designers". I narrated this episode to Dr. Libertina Amadhila (then Namibia's only female physician) who told me that she agrees with Nahas Angula and that she will not take no for an answer. She immediately recommended that I be send to the University of Leipzig to study medicine. Looking back, I am glad that I listened to their wise advice and will I remain forever grateful for their guidance. Dr. Amadhila has been my mentor and an enduring inspiration both professionally and academically.

My life wasn't without challenges. I nearly did not finish my studies! Just got married and expecting then I was informed that my husband had died at the front line. It was devastating. But thanks to the excellent counsels from the University and the Heinke family who took me into their care, I managed to graduate. My son and I remain indebted to them.

I returned to Namibia in 1989, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of the United Nations, SWAPO of Namibia and the ANC of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela who exerted enormous pressure on the apartheid regime in Pretoria. The name Mandela evokes special sentiments in me on a personal basis. It was on the day of his inauguration as first democratically elected President of a free South Africa that I met the man who was to become my husband, my dearest husband