Nkomazi women and development

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PREFACE

When the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) commissioned this research, it wanted to know more about the survival strategies of rural women and to what extent its policies when implementing the R350 million NIEP project would impact on their lives and livelihoods.

At the time that this project was implemented, the DBSA gender policy was new and it resulted in the planners setting aside tracts of irrigated land for communal gardening by women's clubs. The gardening club members each gained access to 1 500 m^2 of land. What the study learned from these women was contrary to the expectations of the planners, the implementing agent, as well as the Department of Agriculture: these small gardens were not merely being used to feed the household. Food security was certainly a consideration, but the women's main aim in becoming small food gardeners was to bring in an income. They produced surpluses but have had difficulty selling their produce.

The implementation process failed in that it did not ensure that these women had the same access to markets as the sugar cane farmers. This was partly because this need was not anticipated by the implementing agents, and partly due to the lack of capacity of these institutions to provide support for small farmers in the marketing of their produce. The sugar cane aspect of the programme, by contrast, ensured delivery of the cane to the private sector, and these farms have been profitable.

With only 15 per cent of women earning formal incomes, the research shows that the unemployment and underemployment figures among these rural women are very high. They will take up informal work opportunities as they arise. These are mostly entrepreneurial activities aimed at bringing in an income. Low wages and very small cash returns in the informal sector result in women's efforts only bringing in 25 per cent of that of their husbands, reinforcing the belief that men are the main breadwinners in this patriarchal society. In reality, some men have failed to support their households, partly due to the loss of employment opportunities. Furthermore, the growing number of single women-headed households may suggest that women in certain circumstances are striving to survive on their own.

Apart from the programme's intervention to ensure that women gained access to irrigated garden plots, 26 per cent of the commercial farmers in the Nkomazi West portion of the project were women farmers. When qualitatively assessed, however, it became clear that even when farms were registered in their names, 'women farmers' were usually no more than 'managers' and were often only labourers. In Nkomazi, the commercial sugar cane farms generally remain under male jurisdiction.

The research findings leave us with the realisation that rural women will seek income-generating opportunities no matter how difficult the circumstances. The message to the DBSA and to other developers working in this area is to ensure that the planning and implementation of projects include women. Perhaps, more importantly, the research makes us realise that women will participate in such projects in order to generate an income.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nkomazi Irrigation Expansion Programme (NIEP) provides an opportunity for examining the participation of women in a major development programme financed by the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA). As it is DBSA policy to ensure that both women and men have equitable access to development resources, better understanding of the position and situation of rural women, and the factors that influence their participation in socio-economic development could help direct the DBSA's approach to rural development. This study investigates the situation of women in the Nkomazi West area of the Mpumalanga province and analyses their role in the NIEP.

2. THE RESEARCH

This study was initiated in April 1996 and focused on the Boschfontein, Sibange and Langeloop settlements included in the NIEP in Nkomazi West. Between April 1996 and March 1997, a team of fieldworkers used participant observation and face-to-face unstructured and semi-structured interviews to gain information from the 140 identified households.

This methodology yielded both qualitative insights and quantitative information. Fear of a male bias in the research proved to be unfounded, as there was no important difference between the information gathered by male and female fieldworkers.

3. WOMEN AND THE HOME

Rural women's home lives are determined on the one hand by 'culture' and tradition, or what remains of these in the form of custom. On the other hand, there is what the anthropologist Colin Murray refers to as 'the give and take of daily life', ie the resource issues people have to cope with every day.

Modern influences mean that Nkomazi women are no longer subject to the dictates of custom and 'culture' only and it is therefore also important to consider the effect of the 'give and take of daily life' on the stages of womanhood. These factors have resulted in a mix of social trends – whereas custom tends to enforce uniformity, individual circumstances and personal realities differentiate the lifestyles of rural women. Certain trends have become evident, as set out below:

• The daily routine of **young girls** is fairly uniform. All attend school, and in the afternoons they go home to change, do their homework and perform their household duties. Their parents' social and economic situation naturally influences and shapes young children's lives, chores and access to commodities like clothes. Most young girls, however, face the burden of male domination from a very young age. They generally show the respect towards elders in

general, and men in particular, that their culture demands.

• The lives of **teenage girls** are more markedly differentiated by the respective socio-economic situations. Education is particularly important. Matric has become the norm and tertiary education the ideal. The paths to matric vary, however, and tertiary education remains a dream for the vast majority of rural teenage girls. While most girls attend school, interruption of their schooling as a result of pregnancy has become commonplace. Matric is, however, no longer a passport to a better future – tertiary education or a good marriage have become additional factors. Most girls' futures are therefore inevitably bound to their fathers (for further education) or their future husbands (for a stable, comfortable marriage), or to both.

• **Married women** begin married life in the households of their in-laws as *makoti*. It is when a girl becomes a *makoti* that the pressures and restrictions of traditions in a patriarchal society become evident. Custom and culture demand submissiveness from a married woman. Besides all the rules she must obey and all the work she has to do, a *makoti* often has to contend with critical in-laws. The triangle of mother, son and wife is therefore often fraught with tension when the couple resides with the husband's parents. Control of the husband's resources is usually the root of the tension and hostility between an *makoti* and her mother-in-law. Although many *makoti* get along well with their mothers-in-law, they are glad when they can move to their own stands and homes. This phase of a married woman's life marked by domination by her in-laws ends either in residential independence when husband and wife move to their own stand and the *makoti* becomes an *umfati*, or in divorce if the husband sides with his mother and the *makoti* returns to her father's family.

Married women's lives are determined not only by the form of their marriage and family relations, but also by their husbands, their attitudes, behaviour and material situation. It is in the give and take between husband and wife, in the content and nature of their relationship in a male-dominated society, that a married woman's life is shaped.

In Nkomazi the well-being of many households depends on team effort, with both husband and wife contributing towards household needs and expenses. Some degree of household (or marriage) stability is needed for husband and wife to work together for the well-being of the home. Besides a stable relationship, secure employment or a regular income is essential for couples to work together. When men become unemployed, for whatever reason, a greater economic burden is placed on their wives. Wives therefore play a crucial role in their families' short-term and long-term survival strategies.

In stable households where the couple works together for the welfare of the household, the relationship between them is the anchor of the home. But when men do not support their families the wife becomes the anchor, and many Nkomazi women have to cope with uncaring husbands who neglect them and their children.

• In many cases **divorce** is the only alternative to neglect. Although a stable second marriage may follow divorce, divorced women are more likely to stay single, engage in a series of monogamous unions, or avoid being dominated by men. When a woman leaves her husband, she usually returns to her father's home, taking the children with her. If she **remains single**, she will eventually move to her own stand, usually not too far from her family of origin since, as the sole provider, she needs all the support her family can give. Relatively young divorced

women, who remain single without entering into either a formal or informal union with a man or having children with him, are certainly in the minority. Most divorced women enter into formal unions with other men. Although some may have stable second marriages, others have a succession of monogamous unions with different men.

• Although **serial monogamy** is not the rule for divorced women, many enter into relationships with married men who have responsibilities towards their own wives and children, which makes these relationships essentially unstable and often short-lived. They are often followed by other relatively short-lived unions. The only stable factor in the succession of serially monogamous unions seems to be the parents' home, to which divorced women can return whenever a relationship fails.

Some divorced women seem to treasure the freedom divorce brings from male domination and residential dependence. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of establishing lasting relations with men. Divorced women who may or may not have suffered male abuse, are seldom prepared to sacrifice their residential independence and freedom, and marry again. By establishing a lasting relationship with men but maintaining their residential independence, women see themselves as free of the kind of male domination which seems more possible in marriage.

• **Widows** may also either remarry or remain single. A widow's situation is largely determined by her husband's material position at the time of his death. Some widows are left relatively well provided for while others have to take care of themselves. Some have financial security, others must work to make ends meet, and many older widows are waiting for a state pension. The only hope for many poor widows is an income from their children and the state pensions to which they are entitled in their old age. Pensions have fundamentally changed the situation of elderly women. Those who do not yet qualify for an old-age pension are usually dependent on others. An old-age pension, however, transforms dependence and elderly women's pensions are a critical source of income in many poor households in Nkomazi. The true significance of a *gogo* (grandmother) in the home is in the opportunities she creates for married daughters (if the older woman is living with a daughter or a daughter is living with her) and daughters-in-law (if the *gogo* resides with a married son). In Nkomazi, hundreds of women can work and even pursue a career and contribute to the well-being of their homes because older women, mothers or mothers-in-law, take care of their children.

4. WOMEN AND WORK

While women have joined men in the labour market to help support their household financially, men generally see to it that the **division of domestic work** remains rigidly enforced. Besides cultural explanations, the domestic division of labour is also pragmatically justified.

Local perception, based on custom and 'culture', sees men first and foremost as providers who have to 'look after cattle and goats' and 'seek jobs in Johannesburg', and women as being at home while their husbands work. In reality, however, many men have failed to find or even seek work and do not have livestock or fields. Most women are therefore compelled to work.

Whereas custom largely specifies the division of domestic work, the labour market, the household's needs and women's responsibilities control the division of work outside the domestic sphere. The need for **women to work and contribute economically** to their households is determined by marital status, household composition and material circumstances. More girls are, however, completing their matric as part of a strategy to find employment. The result has been some interesting shifts in lifestyle:

- Female household heads and single women generally need to work to support or help support their families. Married women are forced to work if their husbands are unemployed, neglect their families, or simply do not earn enough. At the other end of the scale, a small but growing group of women work because they have professional careers or well-paying businesses.
- Although many women need formal employment, finding work is very difficult. The **labour market** for Nkomazi women is limited to government employment, farmwork, work in Onderberg towns and employment locally, and wages are low. Although the number of women in formal employment is growing as more and more girls continue with tertiary education after completing matric, it still lags far behind the number of men in formal employment.
- The shortage of jobs forces Nkomazi women into **informal economic activities**, and it is by selling or hawking that as many as 40 per cent of Nkomazi women either make a living or contribute to household incomes. Some sell commodities and others their skills, while others engage in rural production. Informal trade in vegetables, food, clothes, beer and other commodities provides a regular income for some rural women and an occasional income for others. In the past 'selling' was the domain of the less-educated but the situation has changed. Women who have completed a high school education do not want to work on farms, which are the refuge of the truly desperate, and many matriculated women today earn a living in the informal sector. Now that more people are turning to this sector to make a living, skills can give women an advantage, although the market for services is also limited. Many Nkomazi women have tried their hand at hairdressing, dressmaking, divination and healing, and other skills such as candle-making and fence-making, with varying degrees of success in generating an income.
- As parts of Nkomazi are virtually peri-urban today, many 'rural' families have no access to arable land, and opportunities for **rural production** are limited. Although some households may have a large piece of land, no family can really live off their land. With men working away from home, subsistence agriculture is very much a woman's affair. Ploughing is largely done by tractor, paid for by working husbands, but it is also often paid for out of a *gogo*'s pension. From then on the work is done by hand and by women. Residential stands in Nkomazi are large and spacious, and as more households do not have access to arable land or fields, agricultural activities have moved to the stands which are used as small 'dryland fields' and vegetable gardens if there is tap water close by. The cultivation of stands is almost exclusively the responsibility of women.

5. THE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ROLE OF NKOMAZI WOMEN

Public life in the Nkomazi settlements is lived out in all manner of meetings and forums. Nkomazi women tend to maintain their subjection to male domination through a continued culture of silence in meetings, depicted by women sitting on the ground while the men sit on

the benches. Even when women are invited to speak at meetings, they often merely emphasise what men have already said.

Poverty and the inadequate provision of basic services force many Nkomazi women into community management work. Because they are poor, they organise themselves into support groups, savings and business groups to address their own and their households' immediate needs. Women suffer most as a result of poor services and they therefore take responsibility for basic services and infrastructure provision in various ways. They organise themselves into women-only groups that take care of collective needs, often the extension of their domestic consumption needs.

To this end, women have to protect their organisational capacity so as to advance their interests. Despite their apparent silence in meetings, their actions have been incisive when protecting their own interests or those of the community. Strategically, they 'pick their battles'. At times this has meant that they have to compete with men, at other times they even have to oppose them, or take the lead and gather male support for a protest.

Not only has it become politically correct to allow women to participate in meetings but, particularly since the national election in 1994, women have also risen to leadership positions through their display of community management skills. Initially representing their women-only groups on community-wide structures such as the Reconstruction and Development Committees (RDCs), they were able to display their community management skills at mixed group meetings.

Women's newly found leadership positions are apparently not dependent on their level of education. Public office in local government, however, demands higher levels of education. Committee responsibilities are usually only given to people who have attained a matric or post-matric education. Women who take up leadership positions on committees generally have to contend with their husband's resistance to their public roles. Some women have a higher level of education than their husbands and participate in public affairs with their husbands' sometimes reluctant support.

Community leadership in Nkomazi is, therefore, no longer the domain of men only. Leadership has become an important aspect of the women's community management role. Their newly found positions in local government have, however, exposed a seeming lack of confidence in the male-dominated forum. This is due possibly to their lack of exposure in holding public office. Despite women's visible climb to these positions, they then appear to revert to submissiveness to men. This is largely tactical, however, and in general Nkomazi women have succeeded in taking up community leadership roles despite their cultural constraints.

6. WOMEN AND THE NKOMAZI IRRIGATION EXPANSION PROGRAMME

The Nkomazi Irrigation Expansion Programme (NIEP) was planned to include the disadvantaged Nkomazi communities in regional development arising from the construction of the Driekoppies Dam. The programme will eventually develop more than 7 000 hectares of irrigated land in Nkomazi East and West. In Nkomazi West, the main intended development – the commercialisation of subsistence agriculture through sugar cane farming – will

eventually benefit about 550 commercial farmers who are to be established on cane fields of between 2 and 10 ha. The programme's relevance to women revolves around the following:

- Women outnumber men as direct beneficiaries of the NIEP: 343 women and 277 men are directly involved in completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West. This is mainly because 263 women's club members were allocated food plots in community gardens. Men, however, dominate commercial sugar cane cultivation, and are the principal registered beneficiaries of the NIEP.
- Besides being the direct beneficiaries of projects, women were also involved in the construction phase. When the projects are in operation and farming activities commence, women will also be found as labourers or managers of commercial sugar cane fields. The DBSA's loan conditions, which state that local small-scale contractors should be employed during the construction of the NIEP projects and that labour-intensive construction methods be used, created opportunities for women from poorer households to share in the benefits of the NIEP as **construction labourers**. The women who worked as labourers on NIEP projects were rural widows, single mothers, neglected wives and the wives of unemployed men. Many workers were Mozambican refugees. Manual labour in the harsh Lowveld sun is hard work and wages are low. Although wages were later increased, digging trenches in the Lowveld heat in hard, rocky soil managed to attract only the most desperate. Men from very poor households also worked as labourers for construction companies and small contractors, but most manual labourers on NIEP projects were women.
- Many women who worked for small-scale contractors during the construction phase of the NIEP projects continued to work as **farm labourers** when projects became operational and the newly established sugar cane farmers needed labourers to work their fields. Although wages are low, work on the project fields provides employment for women from poor families. Many women who used to travel to work on white-owned Onderberg farms now earn a steady income closer to their homes and they feel their situation has improved.

The intention of instituting a **community garden** of 10 or 15 ha in every project, for 60 to 100 women each to work a 1 500 m^2 irrigated garden plot, was to include more women in the NIEP and to provide food security for poor households. Community garden members who use their food plots to feed their families are generally happy with the outcome of their ventures. Their main aim is to minimise expenses rather than make money. A food plot helps many to feed a large household, and others can save money that would otherwise have been spent on food.

Many community garden members are, however, disappointed. Surrounded as they are by commercial sugar cane development, they had high hopes of feeding their families and financing household purchases from the produce of their food plots. They had joined the community gardens to earn an additional income and were prepared to work hard to turn their subsistence food plots into small commercial ventures. They have, however, reaped little reward for their efforts. Although they need technical assistance, marketing the produce is their biggest problem. To unlock the potential of these units and help women to make the most of the opportunity that the NIEP has provided, there needs to be a comprehensive support programme for serving the needs of community garden members.

Commercial sugar cane farmers have farms of between 2 and 10 ha. Although most of these farmers are men, many women are involved in the main commercial development as

registered farmers, farm managers or supervisors and labourers on their husbands' farms. Statistically, almost a quarter (23 per cent) of the registered farmers on completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West are women. As a result of the application (and manipulation) of the selection criteria and principles, 23 per cent (68 women out of a total of 291 commercial sugar cane farmers) were registered as farmers on completed NIEP projects. Statistically it may seem that women farmers (as many hope to see them – decision makers, hirers, firers and masters of the labour force) are slowly appearing in Nkomazi. Women's participation should, however, not only be viewed statistically.

When qualitatively assessed it becomes clear that even when farms are registered in their names, 'women farmers' are usually no more than 'managers' and are often only labourers. In Nkomazi, commercial sugar cane farms generally remain under male jurisdiction. Although there are exceptions where women farmers control their farms and the profits, sugar cane farms registered in the names of women are generally controlled by their sons, the families of their deceased husbands, their working husbands or aged fathers. Even though Nkomazi women are in many ways structurally excluded from the main NIEP development, many were the driving force behind their husbands' selection as sugar cane farmers. Some encouraged their husbands to become project members. Once projects are implemented, the role and involvement of farmers' wives become more structured and they become involved in various ways and to different degrees. A significant number of the sugar cane farms are in the hands of women who manage and supervise them on behalf of absentee or working husbands. Some wives see their husbands' farms as an opportunity to help their families and wives who work on their husbands' farms regard their labour on the cane fields, and that of other family members, as contributions to the welfare of their family.

But just as there are men who cannot take care of their farms as they have other work, there are farmers' wives who do not have time to spare for farmwork. The majority of these wives contribute in other ways to the economic well-being of their households and they continue with these activities for sound economic reasons. Among these women are teachers and successful hawkers, and it would not make sense to leave a teaching post or an informal business that pays even as little as R300 per month, to save R250 on wages for hired labour.

The social impact of the NIEP on Nkomazi women can only be properly assessed over time. Some poor households, however, who were accustomed to annual incomes of anything between R8 000 and R15 000 suddenly found themselves with incomes of R20 000 to R35 000. This had an immediate social and economic impact on women as homes were extended and electrified, and household appliances and other commodities were purchased.

The benefits of the sugar cane development generally seem to be directed at families. Where men are the farmers the benefit for the family ultimately depends on the husbands' discretion, even though wives are consulted. When women are the registered farmers, family members claim a share of the benefits of the farm, even if the farms are under male control.

Relatively few people have benefited as much from development in the area as the cane farmers, and the benefits are obvious to all. Yet many people state that their situations have improved. Many women who used to travel to work on commercial farms in the area found work closer to home as labourers during the construction phase of the projects. Most cane farmers employ labourers, especially after the first harvest. A full-time worker usually earns R250 per month and when there is weeding to be done, one or two more people, usually

women, can earn R150 per month weeding from 8 am to noon. Little as it may seem, especially compared to the sugar cane farmer's income, this money saves a poor family from going to bed hungry.

While development in Nkomazi favoured men, it did not bypass women.

7. CONCLUSION

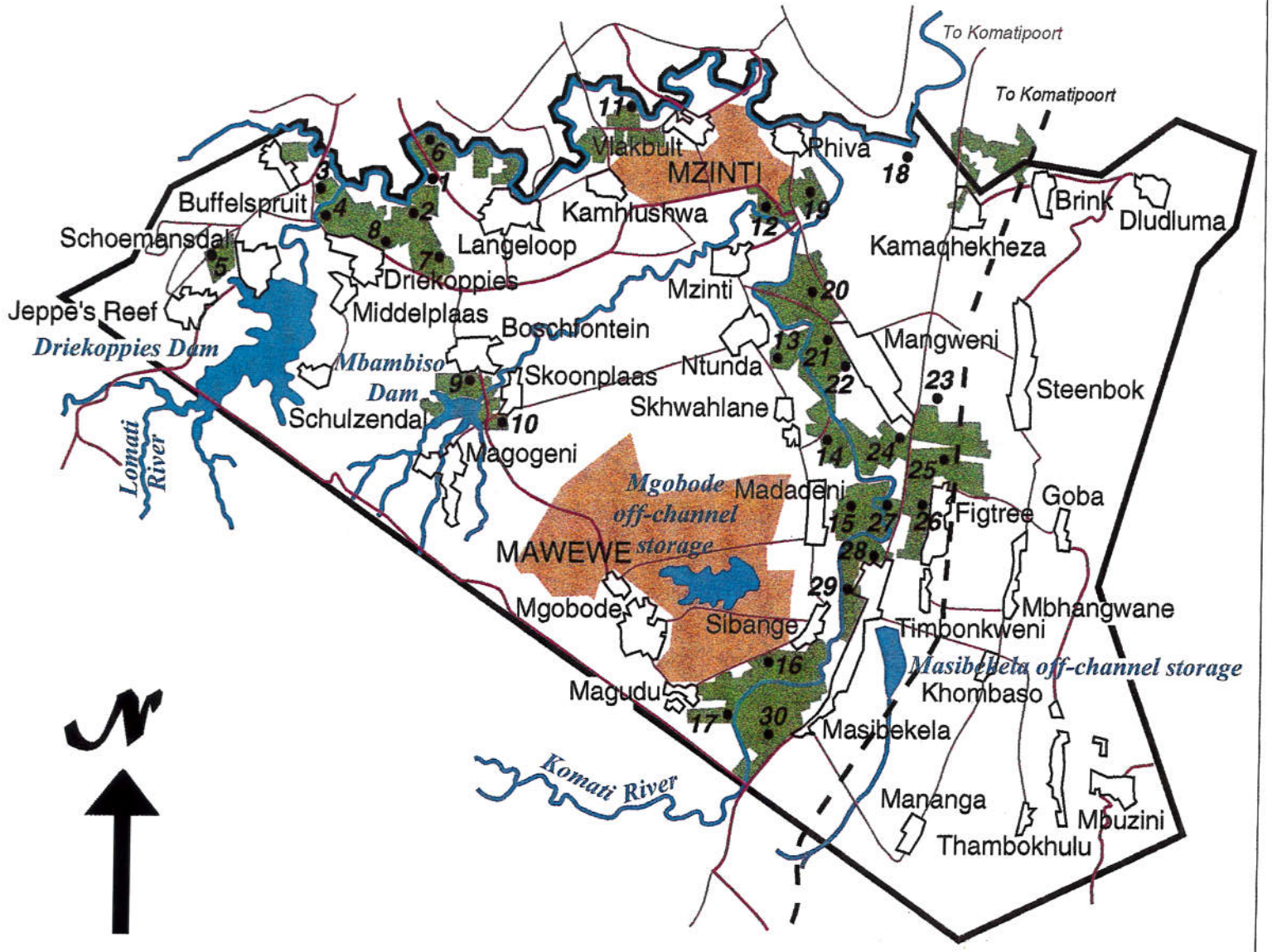
The living conditions of Nkomazi women and their families have forced them into productive activities outside the domestic sphere. Meeting these needs, approximately 63 per cent of Nkomazi women contribute an income or cash to their families' survival. Of these, 40 per cent are involved in informal income generating activities as women are forced to generate self-employment opportunities to supplement their families' income by, for example, hawking or beer brewing. A further eight per cent are involved in rural production for household needs. Most of these women also attempt to sell off their surpluses to bring in an income.

By its nature self-employment allows women to get in and out of these opportunities dictated by the various demands on their lives, but offering paltry incomes. The number of women involved in the informal sector can therefore fluctuate even higher to include most women who regard themselves as 'unemployed' in the formal sector, suggesting that all women interviewed in this research contribute to their household's cash income. As a result of the division of work in the workplace and women's domestic responsibilities, women's aggregate contribution is, however, only about 25 per cent of that of their husbands. In Nkomazi this preserves the gender-based division of labour, and the view that the men are the main providers.

In the context of the NIEP, the division of labour between men and women and the perception that men are the main providers, have largely determined access to scarce development resources. At least among the beneficiaries it has legitimised the unequal representation and participation of the sexes in the programme.

Poverty and the inadequate provision of basic services therefore force many Nkomazi women into community management work. Women know from experience that they will be the ultimate victims of decisions that go against their own interests and those of the community. They are therefore ready to lead local protest and, more significantly, to attempt things that will place them in a better position in the household. It is clear that many inequalities remain, but gradually patterns are emerging that may suggest a change in traditional gender relations.

NKOMAZI IRRIGATION EXPANSION PROGRAM



PROJECTS:

I A	I B
1. Langeloop II	6. Langeloop I
2. Inhlangu East	9. Boschfontein Irrigation I
3. Realocation	10. Boschfontein II
4. Inhlangu West	15. Madadeni
5. Schoemansdal	16. Sibange
7. Mbongozi	20. Walda
8. Ngogolo Sugar	22. Mbhunu B
11. Vlakbult	23. Mfumfane
12. Mzinti	26. Figtree C - Ntiya I & II & Joyce
13. Ntunda	29. Spoons 7A
14. Skhwahlane	30. Spoons 8 Driekoppies
17. Magudu	
18. Tonga	
19. Phiva	
21. Mangweni	
24. Shinyukana	
25. Ntiya	
27. Figtree A	
28. Figtree B	

Irrigation Projects

Cattle/Game Ranching Projects

Railway line

Road

1 0 2 4 6 8 km

Cartographer: Mariana Booysen,
Specialists Business Unit; DBSA.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nkomazi Irrigation Expansion Programme (NIEP) provides an opportunity for examining the participation of women in a major development programme financed by the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA). As it is DBSA policy to ensure that both women and men have equitable access to development resources, better understanding of the position and situation of rural women, and the factors that influence their participation in socio-economic development could help direct the DBSA's approach to rural development.

This study investigates the situation of women in the Nkomazi West area of the Mpumalanga province and analyses their role in the NIEP. Although the threefold role of women provides the broad framework for the analysis of these women's circumstances, the study concentrates only on the reproductive and productive roles of women, and not on their community management role. This is a major shortcoming of this report, as it does not reflect the strategic gender needs of women.

The underlying assumption of this study is that women's homes, and the relations and perceptions at home, determine their personal lives, their position in the community and their participation in development. To understand clearly the role of Nkomazi women in the NIEP, the relations and perceptions that define women's positions in their homes, and give form and structure to their lives, are discussed first. Thereafter their reproductive and productive roles, and their economic contribution to their households are analysed. Finally, their role in the NIEP is explained.

2. THE RESEARCH

The NIEP operational area is divided into Nkomazi West and Nkomazi East divided by the Komati River. This study is based on research that was initiated in April 1996 in the Boschfontein, Sibange and Langeloop settlements of Nkomazi West.

Boschfontein and Sibange are both 'deep rural' villages. Langeloop is closer to more sophisticated infrastructure and is one of the larger Nkomazi West settlements. Two NIEP projects were implemented at Boschfontein in 1993 and 1994; the Langeloop project was completed in 1995 and the Sibange project was still in progress during 1996. The villages therefore represent a mix of 'deep rural' and relatively more sophisticated villages on the one hand, and both completed and current projects on the other. To determine the impact of the NIEP it was also considered necessary to include information from Madadeni, as the yields at Boschfontein had been disappointing because of low water levels in the Mbambiso Dam during 1994 and 1995.

Six fieldworkers from Boschfontein, Langeloop and Sibange were involved in the study from April 1996 to April 1997. Each identified 20 households with whom they had natural contacts from their personal social networks. This brought the number of households for in-depth study to a total of 120.

The research concentrated on women and their relations to other household members, and women involved in the NIEP. The fieldworkers, who were systematically guided, used

participant observation and face-to-face unstructured and semi-structured interviews to gain information from the households. Data collection continued until the end of March 1997.

This methodology yielded both qualitative insights and quantitative information. Fear of a male bias in the research proved to be unfounded, as there was no important difference between the information gathered by male and female fieldworkers.

3. WOMEN AND THE HOME

Rural women, like women everywhere, do not form a uniform group. They may be young girls, married or unmarried women, single mothers, divorcees or widows. Some of them are also homemakers, breadwinners, labourers, teachers, nurses or pensioners. Their home lives are determined on the one hand by 'culture' and tradition, or what remains of these in the form of custom, and on the other hand by what the anthropologist Colin Murray calls 'the give and take of daily life'. Although Nkomazi women live in structurally disadvantaged, poverty-ridden communities, their lives are not all the same. Custom and structure explain their circumstances only in part, whereas knowledge of their personal experiences promotes better understanding.

3.1 Culture and custom

A baby girl who started life in the vague and undefined past of 'the time of our *gogos*' had a fairly predictable future ahead of her, if she survived the first few hazardous years. Women's roles during each stage of their lives were clearly prescribed. Each of these stages is still perceived to exist today, but they are broader and incorporate new problems as well as new opportunities. As the traditionally prescribed script was not 'written' to deal with the new occurrences, the dialogue is open to improvisation. Culturally, seven stages of the life cycle can be distinguished, each being associated with culturally defined behaviour patterns:

- As babies and small children *(umtfwana)* are cared for and have no real responsibilities, gender distinctions are not important.

- Little girls (*sidzanezane*) between roughly the ages of 6 and 12 learn to do housework and help look after babies. Girls must show respect for their elders, 'kneeling before them when giving them food and sitting down when spoken to'. They must also pay attention to what they are told, and when sent on errands are not supposed to play around and waste time. At this age awareness of gender becomes manifest and little girls 'must be home before dark'.

- Young girls (*litshitshi*) of 13 to 18 years have real domestic responsibilities and must learn to cook, wash the dishes and help in the fields. They must 'kneel and show respect' when presenting food to their elders. They must help their elders and look after smaller children in the household. At this age young girls become aware of boys and 'could fall in love and become pregnant, so they have to watch out in their dealings with boys'. They may have boyfriends, some believe, but are not allowed to have a sexual relationship with them. Another, more modern, opinion is that they should avoid boys and be 'serious about their school work'.

- A young unmarried woman (*intfombi*) of 18 and older should be able to take care of all domestic duties, as 'she is now marriageable'. She also has to wash her parents' clothes and clean their house. By now she probably has a 'gentleman'.

- Young married women start their married lives in the household of their in-laws as *makoti*, that is 'married to a son' of their in-laws. The young wife has to rise early 'before the morning star', make the fire, prepare breakfast and heat water for washing. Custom dictates certain rules of behaviour – the young woman has to behave with servility and respect towards her in-laws, especially her father-in-law.

- When a married woman and her husband leave the homestead of the husband's parents to live on their own stand, the status of the woman changes from *makoti* to *umfati*. An *umfati* is no longer under the direct control of her mother-in-law. A divorced woman living on her own stand and with her own household is also an *umfati*. Married women who return to their parents' homes, and women who have never been married and are still staying with their parents, are referred to as *ingqugqe*. Their duties are similar to those of an *intfombi* and they are expected 'to wash their unmarried brothers' clothes'.

- *Gogos,* or grandmothers, usually live in households with their grandchildren. A *gogo* does not do hard work any more; she guides and supervises the other women in the household and looks after her grandchildren.

In a rapidly changing rural world, Nkomazi women are no longer subject only to the dictates of custom and 'culture'. It is therefore also important to consider the effect of the 'give and take of daily life' on the stages of womanhood. Custom and 'culture' (the actions and perceptions associated with ideas shared by men and women in Nkomazi), however, remain important in shaping these women's lives. Whereas custom tends to enforce uniformity, individual circumstances and personal realities differentiate their lifestyles.

3.2 Circumstances and reality

It is generally accepted that times are changing. Education has become important for women as well as men, and money is more influential than tradition. Young girls attend school and many women work outside their homes. This has shortened the time available for domestic duties. Although attitudes have changed, however, women still need to do the housework at home. School girls do chores such as helping to cook and sweep. When young women *(intfombi)* who work away from home are visiting, they 'need to rest' and are excused from the domestic work an *intfombi* would normally do.

Many changes in rural Nkomazi have made the domestic role of married women much easier. Electric and gas stoves have made collecting firewood a thing of the past for many, and fetching water is much easier when there is a tap on the stand.

3.2.1 Young girls

The daily routine of young girls is fairly uniform. All attend school, and in the afternoons they go home to change, do homework and perform their household duties. As the younger ones usually have fewer household responsibilities, they have more time to play. But even very small girls sometimes have a baby on the hip or a younger sibling in tow when they and

their friends are playing around the house or in the streets.

Young girls' undefined duties are to run messages or errands for their parents or the older women with whom they live. They are expected to 'be quick' and the amount of time they spend playing with their friends on the way to the shop and back depends on how strict their parents are or how urgent the errand is.

Their parents' social and economic situation naturally influences and shapes young children's lives. Some girls have better and newer clothes, and some have more household chores than others while still very young, but on the whole their days are very similar.

While young girls may escape the burdens of domestic life, male domination is felt from a very young age. Young girls generally show the respect towards elders in general, and men in particular, that their culture demands. A female fieldworker's description of a young girl, Sara, outlines the cultural expectations of young girls:

> Sara respects her father and knows that she must kneel down when he is talking to her and be quick when she is sent to the shop. If she fails to do that she fears he will beat her with a stick.

When given the chance to articulate their feelings towards what they perceive as culture and custom, the whole peer group appears to rebel against it. Many young girls are very outspoken about their dislike of 'culture', which they conceptualise for the most part as the outward trappings of traditional life.

One 9-year-old girl

> ... does not obey 'culture'. She prefers modern life. Her mother styles her hair in a modern style and buys her fashionable clothes. She doesn't want to wear an *indlamu* and *umawasho* [traditional dress]. She wants to cook on a stove and sleep on a bed, not on a mat.

Her friend, another 9-year-old, also dislikes the traditional *indlamu*:

> It is made 'from torn material'. She likes 'mini-skirts and dresses', and she also doesn't want to 'work like a slave, and hoe the mealie fields every morning'; she wants to go to school to be educated.

In fact, peer-group pressure seems to be against tradition:

> 'To believe in culture is to lock yourself in a jail. If a girl comes from a home where they obey culture, you can sometimes find she differs from those who come from a home where they disobey culture. She behaves like a slave. Yes, she can be respectful, but she looks like a fool.'

Yet, in the end, there are limits to young girls' defiance. They may wear mini-skirts, attend school and church, and voice their opposition to what they perceive as 'culture', but they are not so foolish as to disobey their fathers openly.

3.2.2 Teenage girls

Teenage girls and *tintfombi* are also concerned about being fashionable. They start to think about boyfriends and husbands, and how custom will affect their married lives. A 16-year-old girl in Std 7 says:

> A traditional girl may be married off to a old man so that her parents can get cattle in return. She, however, chooses to be a fashionable girl and is 'in love with a boy'.

Political changes have also shaped the views of some teenagers. A young woman explained:

> 'Nowadays is the new South Africa; to obey culture is like moving backwards instead of moving forward.' She also wears fashionable clothes, not traditional clothes, and if her friends saw her with an 'old man' they would think she is 'mad'.

Teenagers not only use political arguments against culture and custom, but also religion. Many girls feel that culture is in conflict with Christianity. One of them

> ... disobeys culture because she goes 'to church every Sunday'. Those who obey culture are also 'worshipping gods and demons'.

Whatever teenagers' complaints against culture, it is their personal and household circumstances that determine their lives, rather than culture. In contrast to small girls whose daily routines, irrespective of their household circumstances, do not differ much, the socio-economic situation of teenage girls' households can become dramatically important.

Education and school are the common themes of teenagers' lives. Matric has become the norm and tertiary education the ideal. The paths to matric vary, however, and tertiary education remains a dream for the vast majority of rural teenage girls.

Many girls today do 'fall in love with a boy' of their choice. This, however, is more often than not a prelude to the responsibilities of single parenthood. In the past, falling pregnant while at school meant the end of a girl's school career, but today most girls return after a year or two to complete their interrupted studies. However, not everyone manages to do so. One girl recalls that

> ... she was in Std 7 when she fell pregnant. The baby's father denied responsibility and was not prepared to help. She was unable to continue her schooling and her parents were very angry.

Another woman eventually managed to continue her education, but at a price:

> She first fell pregnant while in Std 7. Six years later she fell pregnant again, while in Std 9. She married the father of her second child and is now completing Std 9 at the adult school.

It is not only motherhood that brings young girls in contact with the sometimes harsh reality that determines their lives. All girls perform routine household duties. Whether they reject culture or not, girls help to prepare food for the home, wash dishes and do the washing over

weekends. The social and economic situation at home, however, forces some girls to take on more than their normal share of domestic responsibilities, in addition to their studies.

> Zanele, who has just turned 16, comes from a poor extended family, where she often has to see to all the household duties and look after the little children while her mother and her stepfather, who both love *umcombotsi* [traditional sorghum beer], 'follow the social route' [go drinking]. In addition to her household duties she does piecework locally, washing and ironing to pay for her school fees and school uniform.

Others are subject to other circumstances:

> Zodwa lives with her married sister, a young educated (Form V) woman, and her young supportive husband, who is employed in Barberton. Zodwa's sister, who is a very busy young woman, pays for the girl's education and Zodwa in turn gives 'all the assistance her sister could ask for'. She helps in and around the home and sells snacks at school for her sister.

While attending school has become the norm, interruption of their schooling as a result of pregnancy has become almost a general pattern among girls.

The tragedy of rural teenage girls' lives is that, despite the importance they attach to matric and all the effort it takes to complete their schooling, matric is no longer a passport to a better future – this requires either tertiary education or a good marriage. Most girls' futures are therefore inevitably bound to their fathers (for further education) or their future husbands (for a stable, comfortable marriage), or to both.

3.2.3 Married women

Married women usually live in male-headed households. Like the Nkomazi society at large, the majority of these households are male-dominated, though not always supported by men. While the so-called traditional household with its stable prescribed relationships has long become ethnographic history, the existence of the subsequent 'divided family' with physically absent but materially supportive male members is now also debatable.

Rural men and women often join forces in their family's struggle for survival. In many households, though, strife and discord reign. Warring between the sexes often tears homes apart so that new residential arrangements have to be developed. The picture is not altogether bleak, however; more than 50 per cent of the Nkomazi households studied are 'normal' and stable, with both husband and wife contributing, or at least trying to contribute, to the well-being of their homes.

Strife and lack of stability in households invariably influence the position of women in the home. Stability today does not lie only in prescribed relationships and customs, but also in joint effort and a pragmatic division of responsibilities. Stable families are generally nuclear families, whereas in the larger extended households relationships are more complex, leaving more scope for disputes and quarrels.

The multigenerational household is often idealised as a secure, safe and nurturing environment containing the traditional crèche and old-age home, where the old are respected,

the young are educated and the unemployed find social security. This is, however, a one-dimensional view. Social reality is often volatile and the main protagonists are very often the mother, her son and his wife.

- ***Makoti:* living with in-laws**

Women begin their married life as *makoti* in the households of their in-laws. The custom of patrilocal residence is still widely practised in Nkomazi, and almost all young married couples reside with the husband's parents for the first years of their married life. This custom, or at least its perpetuation, is reinforced both by culture and by the economic situation of young men who may or may not be ready for marriage, but who certainly cannot afford their own homes when they marry and are thus dependent on their parents.

It is when a girl becomes a *makoti* that the pressures and restrictions of traditions in a patriarchal society are most truly felt. Thoko's relationship with her husband epitomises the life of a *makoti:*

> Thoko obeys and respects her husband. She keeps her head covered and does not wear short dresses. She also kneels before him when giving him his food.

Custom and culture demand submissiveness from married women, as Gertrude confirms. She

> ... respects and obeys her husband, and listens to everything he says to her, as *lobola* was paid for her.

Although many *makoti* silently accept the burdens custom imposes on them, Selina could no longer cope with culture and her in-laws. She left because

> '... custom makes you to be a thing bought by *lobola*, and you are a slave in that home'. She had to wake up early, hoe the field until sunset, and then go home and prepare food for everyone.

Besides all the rules a *makoti* must obey and all the work she must do, she often has to contend with critical in-laws. Ruth eventually left with her husband to live in their own homestead. Her relationship with her mother-in-law shows how often the triangle of mother, son and wife is fraught with tension when the couple resides with the husband's parents. Ruth

> ... was kneeling down to her and was forced to do so from the beginning of her marriage. She then saw that her mother-in-law was enslaving her, controlling her son to give her little money.

The relationship between a *makoti* and her mother-in-law is usually a reaction to the behaviour and attitude of the third person in the triangle, the son and husband. Both women are usually in direct competition for his resources. A mother-in-law explains why her son's wife left:

> 'Things became bad because of her, my son gives everything to me when he enters the yard.'

The *makoti* had left because she felt her husband sided with his mother and not with her.

Competition for control of domestic resources (and not so much the relationship between husband and wife) eventually becomes too much for many *makoti*. Msesi

> ... left her husband Magagula after about five years of marriage and two children, because her 'mother-in-law did not want her'. She returned to her father's home, where she met another man with whom she had five children. After about ten years she returned to Magagula, with whom she now has a very close relationship. They 'go drinking together, and he helps her carry wood and water'.

However, if the son and husband does not support the household and spends his money elsewhere, his mother and his wife will often jointly try to force him to fulfil his obligations. In households where sons do not support their wives and children, the relationship between the husband and his mother can be hostile. If the son is not contributing, his wife and children become a burden to his parents, a situation neither the mother-in-law nor the wife can endure for too long before their relationship also turns sour.

Conflict over the husband's money and control of his domestic contribution is not confined to the *makoti* and her mother-in-law. *Makoti* and their sisters-in-law may also argue over a man's income. Many single or divorced mothers living in their fathers' households claim support from their married brothers. Hostility from sisters-in-law who feel that their brothers should contribute more towards the household and less directly to their wives, is the rule rather than the exception. A *makoti* puts it plainly:

> 'I don't like Pazima and Sainah, and they hate me.'

Control of her husband's resources is the root of the tension and hostility between a *makoti*, her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. The one who controls the husband's resources determines the residential relationship.

> Thandi and her husband lived with his widowed mother before he died in a car accident. During all these years Thandi 'was in the hand of her mother-in-law'. After her husband's death she was nominated as the beneficiary of a monthly pension from Kriel power station where her husband had worked. Now that Thandi was in sole control of the main source of household income, her mother-in-law decided to leave and went to stay with her own daughter.

In many households, however, relationships are more relaxed. Busiwe, who lives with her husband and mother-in-law, feels

> ... there is no need to kneel for a man if he knows that his wife respects and loves him. Those are the important things and not the kneeling.

It is by no means only the women who feel this way. Idah

> ... respects her husband but is not forced to follow customs and cultural rules. Her husband explained that the custom demanding that wives should kneel 'was for my grannies long years ago'. He wanted her to be free and not a slave. Yet sometimes she kneels before him just to show respect.

Although many *makoti* get along well with their mothers-in-law, they are glad when they can move to their own stands and homes. One woman said:

> 'I was suffering so much until we moved to our own stand. I was like a person who came out of prison.'

Another *makoti* explained that

> ... when they moved into their own house, she was free from the bonds of custom.

For every rural married woman this stage of residence with, and domination by, her in-laws will come to an end. The following description identifies the principles that signal the end of residential dependence:

> William, a pensioner and the head of a four-generational household of 14 people who live in a big modern house, invested wisely while he was employed. He owns a car and a tractor which he uses to supplement his pension. His mother, aged 85, lives with him and receives an old-age pension. William's son Esau (who works in Arnot and earns a good salary), his wife and their two children, also used to live with the family. Esau's wife, however, moved, leaving her two children behind, as she could no longer get along with her mother-in-law. The latter had demanded that Esau give his money to her and not to his wife. The other son and his wife, who are both unemployed, still reside with the family.

A young *makoti* whose husband has just started working, or is unemployed, is residentially dependent on his family. She has little choice in the matter and must accept being dominated by both the male and female in-laws. In the normal evolution of the domestic cycle, however, a mother with two children cannot be subjected indefinitely to control by her in-laws. Emotional and psychological rejection of domination and control by their in-laws and, most importantly, a separate and stable income, will make residential independence possible for many *makoti.*

When the wife demands independence, the husband (as long as he is not the youngest son) must take serious action and make choices that will determine their future residential and family relations. If he decides to remain with his parents, his wife will probably leave and return to her father's home; if, however, he sides with his wife, they will move to their own stand.

> Zodwa and her husband were staying with the large Mandlazi family. She was one of three *makoti*. Zodwa had to leave school when she became pregnant while doing Form IV but returned to school to complete Form V. Her husband, who used to give his father and mother money to support his wife and children, also gave money to his wife. Her in-laws criticised Zodwa for attending school while she was a *makoti*, and because her husband gave her money. This led the couple to seek their own stand. They left to escape domination by and antagonism from the in-laws who were jealous merely because the young husband took care of his wife.

The phase of a married woman's life marked by domination by her in-laws ends either in

residential independence when the *makoti* becomes an *umfati*, or in divorce when the *makoti* returns to her father's family.

▪ *Umfati:* a married woman's life

Married women may experience quite different marriage relationships. Although monogamy is the rule, there are still many polygamous marriages in which seniority formally determines a wife's situation. However, the position of married women is determined not only by the form of their marriage and family relations, but also by their husbands, attitudes, behaviour and material situation. It is in the give and take between husband and wife, in the content and nature of their relationship in a male-dominated society, that a married woman's life is shaped.

Tradition, however, has not disappeared altogether. Though the rural world is filled with taxis, hawkers and spaza shops, 'tradition' often continues to pay for the upkeep of households, the well-being of wives and the future expectations of daughters.

> Benjamin is a traditional healer and also receives an old-age pension. He collects roots and herbs in Nkomazi which he sells in Pretoria. He supports his household, and his son and daughter study at a college in Pretoria. His wife does not work. He prefers her to stay at home and take care of her household duties.

The 'traditional' home where the husband works and the wife is restricted to domestic responsibilities is no longer the rule in rural Nkomazi. Although high unemployment levels continue to confine many women to the domestic sphere, more and more married women contribute financially to the well-being of their homes. Their contribution is largely determined by the household economy and particularly by the husband's economic situation.

§ Working together for the welfare of the home

While money is generally tight, the well-being of many households depends on team effort, with both husband and wife contributing towards household needs and expenses.

> Jim is a welder who makes safety doors and window frames, and undertakes all kinds of repairs from premises on the main road in Mzinti. His wife purchases fresh vegetables, dry beans and peas wholesale, and resells them in smaller quantities. Like most other women who sell to the local community, she covers the pension pay-point circuit. In this way she helps to support their six children, of whom three are at school and three are still at home.

Although working together does not necessarily bring an end to male domination, it at least fosters a closer relationship between husband and wife in households where the welfare of the home hinges on economic contributions from both.

> Anna sells food at the local primary school and bus stop. Andrew, her husband, is a traditional healer who, when his practice is quiet, thatches other people's huts and makes wooden and metal utensils for an extra income. Although they are poor, their joint efforts help them to provide for their four children.

In poor households the incomes of the women are critical to their families' strategies for survival. In the above examples, Jim and Andrew are self-employed and their incomes vary from day to day and therefore their wives' incomes are vital. At the other end of the self-employment scale are men like Richard:

> Richard invested his retrenchment package wisely. He started his taxi business with a second-hand minibus and now has two taxis and a full-time driver. Success has rubbed off on his wife, who now runs a successful spaza shop from home, while before she used to sell 'soup and Niknaks' at the local primary school.

Richard is one of the small number of relatively successful emerging small-scale businessmen. His good fortune created an additional business opportunity for his wife to earn an income. This, however, is not the general reason why husbands with regular incomes help their wives open spaza shops or start up other small businesses. They do so as a means of obtaining 'income security'. Wage-earners will establish small enterprises for their wives in order to provide additional household income and to assure the family of some income if the husband should become a victim of (ever-threatening) unemployment.

> Sara's husband earns a good salary on a mine near Hendrina. When his friends were retrenched on neighbouring mines, he and Sara opened a spaza shop. As she is frequently ill, they pay someone else to work in the shop.

It follows that some degree of household (or marriage) stability is needed for husband and wife to work together for the well-being of the home. Survival, accumulation of wealth and security are not the only reasons why couples both work to contribute to the household. Young, residentially independent married couples who have left the husband's family to live on their own, are 'building their homes' and need an income to survive and to invest in building material, furniture and other necessities.

> Zodwa's husband, who has a good job on a power station in Hendrina, sent her back to school to complete matric after she fell pregnant while doing Form IV. Now she is selling clothes as a hawker, buying from Durban and selling locally in order to 'pay the instalments'. She is helped by her younger sister Zanele, who is 15 years old and at school, and who stays with her as part of an agreement between Zodwa and her mother. Zodwa pays for Zanele at school and Zanele assists her at home.

Besides a stable relationship, secure employment or a regular income is essential for couples to work together. A husband's role as primary provider is, however, always subject to the uncertainties of the labour market. When men become unemployed, for whatever reason, a greater economic burden is placed on their wives.

> Amos, who had a history of full-time employment, lost his job at Hall & Sons in March 1996 following a strike. He now helps his wife to make grass brooms which they sell at local pension pay-out points, along with brooms she buys in Swaziland. Two of their five children have completed Form V but have failed to find formal employment. The eldest buys aluminium three-legged pots in Maputo and sells them in the Transkei, and from his profits he helps to support the family.

Here the wife's business, which formerly provided supplementary income for the household,

suddenly became its primary source of income. Many households do not, however, have a secondary income to fall back on.

> When Josias was retrenched from Ermelo Mines after ten years, he used his retrenchment package to complete his eight-roomed house. Confident that he would soon be employed again, he left for Johannesburg. After a month in which he covered the Rand from East to West in a futile attempt to find work, he returned home. At home the family, who was used to better while Josias was working, were having 'tea without Cremora' and 'bread without Rama'. After a few months of sheer desperation, a cousin organised him a job at a Barberton sawmill. While Josias is glad to be employed again, his present work does not pay as well as the mine, and his wife has since started to brew and sell *umcombotsi* to help support their large family.

In many stable households with supportive husbands the incomes which wives generate provide

- vital additional income for poor households with irregular incomes from self-employed husbands
- additional income and prosperity in the materially better off households of small entrepreneurs, enabling them to accumulate household fortunes
- 'income security' for wage-earners who are subject to the uncertainties of the labour market
- the primary household income when husbands lose their jobs.

In stable families the wives play a crucial role in their families' short-term and long-term survival strategies. Although this has changed the economic role of the women, it has not necessarily freed them from male domination. Busiwe's situation demonstrates how subtle male domination can be:

> It is said of Busiwe, and not without envy, that 'since she got married, she doesn't know what hunger is, or what it is to suffer'. Her husband only completed Std 4, but now owns four taxis as well as a private car. When Busiwe completed matric her husband did not want her to continue studying or to find work, so he gave her a spaza shop instead. She even has the help of a 'nanny' to look after the house and their five children.

In some ways, however, Busiwe's comfort is a golden cage. Her spaza shop is not so much an effort to generate additional income as it is something to keep her occupied, content and tied to her home, as her husband demands.

§ Women who anchor the home

Although the husband, who is culturally perceived as the main provider, may generate an income, this alone does not guarantee the well-being of the household. It is equally important that he should support his household. Consequently, what men do with their money is as important as what they earn. In stable households where husband and wife work together for the welfare of the household, the relationship between them is the anchor of the home. But when men do not support their families the wife becomes the anchor.

> Idah's husband works on a mine in Barberton. At times he does not send any money or visit their home. Once, when she sent their son to see him, he gave him R200 to take home. But she knows her husband earns R1 200 per month. When he does visit, he comes with another woman whom he hides at his mother's house. As Idah cannot rely on him to support her and their children, she works as a labourer on the 'white' farms. Although farm wages are low they survive and her five children can attend school.

Similar situations exist in a large number of Nkomazi households, and many of these women have to cope with uncaring husbands who neglect them and their children.

> Even though Emily's husband owns a taxi, she has to support herself and her two children on the money she earns from selling brooms, 'Niknaks' and biscuits. Her husband received a retrenchment package in 1990 and bought a taxi. The rest 'was spent on beer'. He spends a great deal of his time and the income from his taxi on another woman, a *sangoma* with a large clientele, and they visit hotels in Swaziland.

Though nominally male-headed, households suffering from such male neglect become female-supported. Often the burdens and responsibilities that wives have to carry increase as the husband's neglect grows. The worst cases are those husbands who are actually a liability and have to be supported by their wives' meagre incomes.

> When Sara's husband used to work in Hendrina he never sent any money home and visited the village only once a year, and even then he was accompanied by another woman. As Sara is uneducated, she was forced to work on 'the farms' to support her eight children. At present she is employed in Malelane and earns R440 per month. In 1992 her husband accepted a retrenchment package and 'wasted the money on beer'. She tried to get him to build a house for them, but he could only get as far as making the cement blocks and measuring the foundation before his money ran out. The house stood uncompleted until Sara could eventually afford to roof part of it in 1996. In addition to financing the building of their house, Sara now also has to support her husband, after he had not supported his family for years.

Women are not, however, totally at the mercy of unfaithful husbands nor do they accept male neglect. Sometimes women take control of the relationship.

> Vainah is her husband's third wife. She told him that she was not such a fool as his first two wives who allowed him to 'run around with other women'. The couple will be together until they are 'taken away by death'. If he does not return home from his work at month-ends, she leaves for Hendrina to find out what is going on, asking him: 'What are you here for while you are off? Are you staying for women who just love your money? Let's go home now.' Her mother-in-law actually asked her whether she was in love with her son or his money, as she is 'always shouting at him about money'. Her attitude has, however, paid off: she is now the owner of a spaza shop. Now that she has income from the spaza she no longer worries so much about her husband's infidelity.

In many cases divorce is the only alternative to neglect. Although more and more women realise that they can claim maintenance, such claims are little more than demonstrations of rural women's increasing awareness of their rights and unfortunately seldom bring financial benefits.

When Maria's husband left her for another woman, she tried to get him to pay maintenance because he was employed, but she failed. She had to work for other local people so that her family could survive. She blames her husband for the fact that her children did not complete school. Four of her children are now employed and manage to send money home every month to help support the household, which includes two of their own children.

3.2.4 Single women

Single women may be widows, divorcees or women who have never married. Of the many single women in Nkomazi, very few have never been married. Marriage is still the norm and staying single is not generally considered an option. Being single does not necessarily mean the end of relationships with men, but redefines these relations.

- **Divorced women**

Male neglect and female adultery are the main reasons for divorce in Nkomazi. Marriages in which the men do not support their wives and children, and engage in extramarital relations, more often than not eventually end in divorce. Husbands' infidelities, though, are seldom the sole cause of divorce. Many marriages break up when the men neglect their homes and have relations with other women while their wives and children suffer from lack of support.

Whereas male infidelity or 'unfaithfulness' is in a sense tolerated, female infidelity is branded 'adultery' and is quite often enough reason for a husband to 'chase' the 'adulteress' from his home. In spite of these double standards, which may have both a cultural and a material explanation, male neglect is the primary cause of divorce, particularly when it is manifested by domestic violence against women.

Although a stable second marriage may follow divorce, divorced women are more likely to stay single, engage in a series of monogamous unions or avoid being dominated by men.

- **Women making it on their own**

When a woman leaves her husband, she usually returns to her father's home, taking the children with her. If she remains single, she will eventually move to her own stand, usually not too far from her family of origin since, as the sole provider, she needs all the support her family can give.

Sonny, a member of the Holiness Union Church, was separated from her husband some 19 years ago. She and her children returned to her father's home, where she established a small business selling fruit and vegetables. With her income and the help of her family she supports her family of five children, of whom three have completed Form V and one is currently studying at a technikon. The children are all expected to help with her business and domestic duties. Ever since Sonny left her husband she has remained single, and although she might have had relations with men, these have been superficial and she does not have children from any other man.

Relatively young divorced women who remain single for many years without entering into either a formal or informal union with a man, or having children with him are the exception.

- **Serial monogamy**

Most divorced women enter into formal unions with other men, and although some may have stable second marriages, others have a succession of monogamous unions with different men.

> When Emelinah was 15 years old she ran away from home because her parents had given her to Mandlazi, an old man who paid eight cows for *lobola*. She fell in love with James who also had to pay eight head of cattle as *lobola* to Emelinah's father who, according to a ruling by the chief, had to return Mandlazi's *lobola*. After the birth of her first child, Emelinah heard that James, who worked in Barberton, was staying with another woman at work. She returned to her parents, who approached James for his outstanding *lobola*. James thereupon packed her clothes and drove her and her parents back to their home. After a lengthy stay with her parents Emelinah moved to Swaziland where she lived with John, a married man with children, with whom she had five children. John, who could not withstand his own children's demands that Emelinah and her children should leave, wrote a letter informing her that 'she should move from his home with her children'. To support her family she sold vegetables at a nearby coal mine and moved to the home of Elliot, with whom she had another two children. When they separated she hired a car, packed a few of her belongings, and returned with all her children to her parents' home. A short-lived relationship with Mkhabela, with whom she had one child, followed before Emelinah, whose eldest son and daughter were already married by that time, moved to her own stand. After four 'husbands' and nine children she does not want to marry again because 'men have played the fool' with her. She now lives without a husband looking after her grandchildren and waiting for her pension.

Though serial monogamy is not the rule for divorced women, many enter into relationships with married men who have responsibilities towards their own wives and children, which makes these relationships essentially unstable and often short-lived. They are often followed by other relatively short-lived unions. The only stable factor in the succession of serially monogamous unions seems to be the parents' home, to which divorced women can return whenever a relationship fails.

Returning to their parents' home effectively means that the divorced woman returns to her mother, even though this is traditionally perceived as a return to the father, who remains responsible for his daughter. Many returning daughters find only their younger brothers and their mothers in their fathers' homes. Relationships with brothers' wives usually become strained as the brother (who represents the father) must support his mother, his own family and that of his sister.

Households consisting mainly of mothers and daughters often develop into women-oriented households. Such households, deriving from the combined effects of divorce and the bond between mother and daughter, demonstrate the difference between culture and practice in Nkomazi society. Although custom holds that married daughters remain their fathers' responsibility and the daughters can therefore return to their father's homes when their marriages fail, they seldom return to their fathers if their parents are separated.

> Sinah, a pensioner married to her second husband, Frans, had children from her first husband as well as from a former 'lover'. After two failed marriages, her eldest

daughter Missiore returned with her children, born from two fathers, to her mother, who was by then married to Frans. Her second daughter Nana also returned to her after her two marriages had failed. Although Nana later married a man from Bushbuckridge, her two daughters remained with Sinah, who became solely responsible for them when Nana passed away. Missiore's daughter fell pregnant while doing Form II and, although she stayed with the young father of her child, she later returned to Sinah because 'those people treated her badly'. Nana's daughter also had to leave school because she was pregnant but, as the young man denied responsibility, she has not left Sinah's home.

- **Avoiding male domination**

Some divorced women seem to treasure the freedom divorce brings from male domination and residential dependence. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of establishing lasting relationships with men.

> Elizabeth, a divorced woman in her early fifties, was first married to Nkomo. They separated when her first-born son died soon after his birth. Then Dlamini took her to his home in Swaziland to 'perform the traditional Swazi wedding, followed by the real wedding party'. After they had two children, things changed. In 1979 things went bad. Dlamini was no longer interested in her and beat her regularly until she ran away to her sister. They discussed Elizabeth's problem and decided that she should return to her husband. They stayed together but, by the time she was expecting their third child, he started to beat her again. She was patient until their last child was born. Then she could no longer bear the situation and she and her children returned to her parents at Sibange. Elizabeth 'swears that she will never go back to Dlamini again'. At her father's home she built a one-roomed mud house, but when her brother complained that he could not support her and her children, she moved to her own stand. For the last ten years Elizabeth has had a stable relationship with Silombo, a truck driver and a resident of Sibange. Although they have three daughters, Elizabeth lives on her own stand and does not want to marry Silombo. Silombo, a polygamist, shares his time between his and Elizabeth's homes. Although Elizabeth has to work on the farms and make *umcombotsi* to survive, Silombo, who has a good income, supports and helps her.

Divorced women like Elizabeth, who may or may not have suffered male abuse, are seldom prepared to sacrifice their residential independence and freedom, and marry again. By establishing a lasting relationship with men but maintaining their residential independence, women see themselves as free of the kind of male domination which is possible in marriage.

3.2.5 Widows

After the death of a husband, widows may, like divorced women, either remarry or remain single. The situation of widows, however, differs in two very important respects from that of divorced women:

- A widow's future is largely determined by her husband's material position at the time of his death.
- Widows are usually residentially independent, although there are exceptions, such as young women whose husbands die while they are still living with their parents.

Some widows are left relatively well provided for while others have to take care of themselves. Some have financial security, others must work to make ends meet, and many older widows are waiting for a state pension.

▪ Insurance and financial security

Many husbands who were employed at the time of their death contributed to pension funds or life assurance policies. This provides financial security for their families.

> Sara's husband was one of two people killed during an incident at the local bottle store in Langeloop. As he had 'insurance at work', Sara now receives R900 per month from her husband's employer. For this family of four life continues much as before.

The financial security a monthly pension provides has changed the lives of many widows.

> Since her husband died in a car accident on the way home from work, Thembi, a young mother of four children, has received a monthly pension from Kriel power station. Now that Thembi is in control of the money she has returned to school and at the age of 32 she is completing Form V. She has also joined the church choir and is planning to join the local women's club.

Widows, as legal recipients of their husbands' pensions, have more freedom of choice and the opportunity to pursue their own ideals. Pensions are also a shield against domination by in-laws and men.

> Eva, a middle-aged widow whose husband passed away 14 years ago when they were living with his family, settled on her own stand and married a second time. As the beneficiary of her husband's pension she was able to move to her own stand and escape domination by her in-laws as a *makoti*. Her second husband lives with her on her stand. Having an own income and residential independence protects her from male domination in a male-dominated society.

Most widows, however, are not so fortunate, as is highlighted below.

▪ Working and waiting for a pension

Widows whose husbands did not contribute to a pension or insurance fund (or who had no cattle) must shoulder the responsibility for their children on their own. Farmwork and informal economic activities provide some income, but an old-age pension is always a welcome relief.

> After her husband died Maria had to raise seven children on her own. She worked on the farms for many years until she received her old-age pension. Three of her children are still at home, and although they have all completed Form V, they cannot find work. One of her daughters has three children. She occasionally works in the house of a local schoolteacher who pays her R150 per month.

For some women their husbands' deaths have made no real difference to their economic position.

> Esta continued to support her household of six people by working on farms and 'climbing lorries every morning and afternoon' as she did before her unemployed husband's death. According to Esta, 'there is no difference between the death and aliveness of her husband'.

The only hope for many poor widows is income from their children and the state pensions to which they are entitled in their old age.

> Idah, a widow in her late fifties, suffered when her husband was alive because 'he stayed at home looking after *umcombotsi* [beer]', and suffered after his death because 'there is no pension'. She worked on farms until one of her sons started to work. He is supporting her and she looks after his children while she waits to qualify for an old-age pension. Life changed when she became a grandmother (*ugogo*) and her son needed her to look after his children.

3.2.6 *Ugogo*

Old women may live with their husbands on their stands, with their sons on their sons' stands, with their daughters on either the daughter's or their own stands, or on their own. Some are married, others are widows and yet others are divorced. Whatever role 'culture' assigns to elderly women, their situation is influenced by their residential status and the fact that they have a regular income in the form of an old-age pension.

Pensions have fundamentally changed the situation of elderly women. Those who do not yet qualify for an old-age pension are usually dependent on others. An old-age pension, however, transforms dependence and women's pensions are a critical source of income in many poor households in Nkomazi.

Older women quite often reside with their sons. According to Swazi custom, the youngest son inherits his father's home and accepts responsibility for his mother. When an old woman stays with her son she is residentially dependent. This affects her relationship with her daughter-in-law and, unlike the relationship of a *makoti* and her mother-in-law when the young couple reside with the wife's in-laws, the relationship is much more balanced. Both women depend on the husband, and if he neglects the household it is not uncommon for them to form an alliance to force him to support his family. This alliance is especially significant when they suspect that he is not supporting them because he is spending his money elsewhere on a third party.

Although both mother and daughter-in-law need to be highly pragmatic to survive in these circumstances, they are sometimes also emotionally involved.

> Maria's husband 'always has girlfriends' and when he is not sending money, she 'must look at her mother-in-law'. When Maria threatens to leave, her mother-in-law refuses to let her leave with her grandchildren and fights with her son about his womanising.

An elderly woman usually has the financial backing of her pension, but she needs people to take care of her. In turn, she often looks after her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One woman expressed her vulnerability in this respect:

If it happens that Dinah goes away, this mother will be alone.

Other households are supported solely by an elderly woman's pension:

> Doreen's husband always has 'aches and pains' and is therefore more often unemployed than employed. Doreen decided to go back to school to complete her education because she wants to be able to find something better than to 'go to farms holding a hoe, destroying weeds'. This was possible owing to her mother-in-law's assistance and pension that supports this household of eight.

The true significance of a *gogo* in the home is in the opportunities it creates for daughters (if the older woman is living with a daughter or a daughter is living with her) and daughters-in-law (if the *gogo* resides with a married son). In Nkomazi hundreds of women can work and even pursue a career and contribute to the well-being of their homes because older women, mothers or mothers-in-law, take care of their children. Although the important role of old women is appreciated in Nkomazi society, the fate of a *gogo* is vulnerable as it is determined at the level of individual and personal relations.

> Sesane's husband brought his divorced mother home to take care of his children. After he was killed in a car accident, his wife received a monthly pension of R900 and his mother decided to return to the Malelane farm where she had worked before. Owing to her economic independence, the daughter-in-law was able to take care of her own children and the *gogo* was no longer needed for this task. The old woman returned to her former employer so that she would not have to depend on her daughter-in-law, who now controlled the household's money.

3.3 Men and moments in women's lives

Whichever way, the agents of the most decisive moments in Nkomazi women's lives are men. Although much has changed in Nkomazi, it is not a totally new world. Old habits die hard and the most likely response to a changing environment – and one which is in accordance with the wishes of the dominant members of the society – is to keep the status quo. Many customs survive, but few with such tenacity in the face of mounting opposition as male domination.

Girls are taught from their earliest days to respect men. A female's life starts with images of men in control. While male authority may be eroded in comparison with the 'old days', it is still very much alive in interpersonal gender relations. The destinies of women are therefore bound to their fathers, husbands and other men in their lives.

Fathers are responsible for the framework of their young daughters' lives. Middle-aged women who complain that their fathers forced them into marriage emphasise the unhappiness that followed:

> Elinah was forced by her father to marry a man who left her with eight children. Her father wanted cows for *lobola*. She still cries about the suffering it has caused her, as she has to work on farms.

Although fathers may influence the choice of a partner, husbands determine the content and

quality of married life.

> Elinah's husband, an unemployed man who 'looked at his kraal as his source of income', eventually had no more cattle on account of his drinking. He 'then followed his cows after a serious illness', leaving her to suffer to this day.

Although girls nowadays choose their own partners, many younger girls with babies find that the young fathers are reluctant to accept their responsibilities. In many cases this is a decisive moment in a young woman's life. For some it means the responsibilities of parenthood without a husband; for others it means marriage. Some return to school after a year or so to complete their interrupted studies while others may not manage to do so.

> While doing Form II, Sibongile fell pregnant. The boy who was the father denied that it was his fault and was not prepared to marry her or to pay 'damages'. She was unable to continue her schooling as her parents were 'very angry with her'.

Whether a husband is her parents' choice or her own, a woman still has to see whether he will support his family. Some are fortunate and marry a 'wise man' who knows how to work with money; others end up with husbands who drink too much or are womanisers.

> Sara worked on 'the big farms' and her husband Abel worked in Hendrina. Today she is 'still working, although Abel is now at home'. He is 'selfish; he sometimes goes and lives with other women'. Sara 'has that problem in her life' that she suffers to support the children, and then her husband leaves them to live with another woman.

For others, however, getting married was a happy event and confirms that women's lives can be successfully tied to men.

> Norah's parents died when she was young. She suffered until she married. She has not forgotten her 'previous life' because there were 'no parents, no brothers and no sisters'.

Although many women associate marriage with hardship, marriage sometimes delivers women from hardship.

> Talita's father was hacked to death and burnt by a group of youths calling themselves '*Shosholoza*', a group that was a rare mix between a soccer club and a sangoma's following. They blamed him for the death of his son who had died in a motor accident. Her mother then passed away before she could 'take off her mourning clothes', and Talita was left alone. Her sister then introduced her to her husband, a welder from Mzinti. He built them a home in Sibange and she is helping him by 'hawking vegetables'. He came to her rescue 'when she was left alone at her father's home'.

Some women are pregnant or have children without husbands, while others do not have husbands because they cannot fall pregnant.

> When Dyna becomes involved with men, they 'wait to see if she becomes pregnant, but nothing ever happened, and they all left her'. She has been to medical doctors and *tinyanga* but nothing has helped. She realised that she 'had to forget about marriage, since no one is going to marry her as she is a barren woman'. She works in Germiston

> and has built a four-roomed house, filled with furniture, in which her young brother stays while she is in Germiston.

The other critical ingredients which are inextricably bound to the men in the women's lives are money and employment, or the lack of these. Shortage of money influences a girl's life from an early age, and although men are not always the agents of their own misfortune, men more than anybody else are responsible for the material situation in their homes.

Jobs are essential to the well-being of women. If a husband is retrenched things are bad; when he is employed again things look better. As one woman said:

> The big problem is her husband's retrenchment from Sasol and now she needs to supply the home's needs by selling *umcombotsi*. It was better when he was working, as she gets only a little money from the beer. But then he found work again, and whereas 'she suffered before her husband was employed at Ngodwana, now she has a better life'.

Women also want jobs for themselves. Single women and women in female-headed households need jobs to support their homes in the absence of men. Although many married women want jobs to gain some form of independence, others seek jobs in order to meet the needs at home. One woman said:

> 'I am looking for a job so that my son can go to college and complete his studies.'

For many women their old-age pension brings relief from drudgery, and for many it is their first reliable source of income.

Several women have been forced to become more self-sufficient because male heads of households do not support their families and because of the increasing incidence of female-headed households and single mothers. A positive outcome of all this is the realisation that an alternative exists to the customary way of life.

3.4 Culture and domination

Although rural women have different views of 'culture', they state unanimously that tradition favours men and subjects women to men. Busiwe, a young married woman and a local ANC organiser, explains that

> '... men basically protect their power through culture; most women hate culture because it destroys their right as women'.

Her friend believes

> '... women are being oppressed by men using culture. They tell them this is good, that is bad'.

For these articulate women and many others the important matter is the welfare of their families. Busiwe explains that

> ... there is nothing to be gained whether she respects the rules and customs or not. Her worry is how to make a living and generate an income for her 'home'.

It would not be incorrect to generalise the view that money speaks more loudly than tradition nowadays. The chains of a modern monetary economy have been added to those of tradition, and girls who have to learn to cook and clean at home also need to be formally educated so as to find employment. Although female attitudes are fast changing and many women bear domestic as well as economic responsibilities, male domination as such has not changed. Many women are realising that their new economic role has a hollow ring to it, and this influences their views and attitudes towards culture and custom.

Definitions of 'culture' and custom are not given. Custom is determined by experience and is present as perceptions in the minds of people. Nkomazi women's experience is roughly determined by the stages in their life cycle and differs from stage to stage. Perceptions of culture vary according to differences in experience and are informed by the salient features of every stage:

- Small girls conceptualise culture as its outward appearance. In their view 'culture' means wearing traditional dress and hoeing the fields, while they want to go to school with their friends and play their favourite skipping game, 'Big John Tate'. *Umthetho* is therefore seen as the things to be avoided, and the children hate culture because they associate it with the things they dislike.
- Young girls who want to be fashionable and who are in love with boys reject culture. Culture, in their view, is about respect for men and forced marriages to old men who have cattle. Christianity and the new political dispensation provide them with the moral justification for rejecting culture.
- *Makoti* living with their in-laws want to escape 'culture', which they associate with domination by their in-laws, and to settle with their husbands on their own stands and build their own homes. Married women living with their husbands in their own homes mutely accept 'culture'. The social and economic situation of the average married woman forces her to live under male domination, and she therefore accepts 'culture', however reluctantly. If their husbands meet their cultural obligations to support their homes, women are satisfied and accept and obey culture. When these obligations are not fulfilled, however, married women rebel against the men.
- Old women like culture. They want to be respected, and culture and custom prescribe respect. Many of the elderly women feel that children and young people could be more respectful, and they lament the lack of respect shown.

Nkomazi women's rejection of culture is actually an appeal against those aspects of culture that threaten them. Male domination is one such aspect, and although such domination is not confined to marriage, it is within marriage that it is most severely experienced. One divorced woman claims that since her divorce she is 'out of her husband's law'.

The perception of marriage implicit in this statement not only confirms male domination but also suggests women's disapproval of the laws of domination. Another divorced woman explains that since her divorce she has been 'free from the bonds of culture, affirming women's association of domination with culture and their protest against it.

When young women reject culture on political grounds, using the rhetoric of the new South

Africa, and on religious grounds, equating culture with the worship of demons, they are generally rejecting male domination, which they inevitably experience as they start becoming interested in relationships.

From a development perspective what is important is whether these young women can effectively marshal politics and religion as allies in a struggle for the 'liberation' of the workplace and development.

4. WOMEN AND WORK

4.1 Introduction

In traditional Swazi 'culture', labour or work was strictly divided between men and women. Although the cultural division of labour has largely fallen away, custom continues to assign different roles and responsibilities to men and women. It is generally accepted today that men are the breadwinners. Both sexes believe that

> '... a husband's responsibility is the income'.

Some even go as far as to say

> '... it is a failure not to do this job'.

It is also generally accepted that the woman's sphere is the house and that most, if not all, routine domestic work should be done by women. Many women are, however, also employed outside the home, or contribute to the upkeep of their families through informal economic activities and rural production.

4.2 Domestic work

In Nkomazi, women and girls look after the children and see to the domestic chores such as cooking, washing clothes and ironing. They keep the house and the yard clean, fetch water if they have no water on tap, and fetch firewood in the veld every second or third day. When there is a large load of big sticks and logs to be fetched, this becomes the husband's duty if he has suitable transport. The women's tasks are otherwise regular, monotonous and time-consuming.

Although both men and women use tradition to explain the domestic division of labour, cultural explanations of women's domestic responsibilities are more often than not more about what men do not do than what women do. The following is a typical male explanation of the domestic division of labour:

> 'It has always been the custom of Africans that women are responsible for certain work, which if a man is found doing he is blamed for being stupid.'

Another man's remark demonstrates how what men 'don't do' has become entrenched in daily life:

'He does not cook, he has a wife.'

These ideas, sanctioned by 'tradition' and popular belief, are not relics of the past and are still valid for almost all Nkomazi men and many women. A mother expects her young daughter to

> ... do as much work at home as herself, cooking, fetching firewood and water. She has to be well trained in this work for her future when she is married.

The domestic division of labour is also pragmatically justified. Both men and women argue as follows:

'A woman has to do this work because she is always at home and the man is at work.'

This explanation would have made sense if it were indeed the situation.

The notion that men work outside the house as breadwinners while women do the domestic work may sound perfectly justified to both sexes in a society as male-dominated as rural Nkomazi. The domestic division of work is not, however, at all related to work outside the domestic sphere. Whether men are busy generating an income or just sitting at home, and whether women work outside the home from dawn to dusk, does not alter the division of domestic work in the household. If another woman in the household cannot take over the working woman's duties, the latter has to do these herself after work or at weekends. While women have joined men in the labour market to help support their household financially, men generally see to it that the domestic division of work remains rigidly enforced.

Besides providing material support for their families men are expected to build and repair their homes, fence the stands and make bricks for home improvements. These are said to be men's domestic duties, as 'they are strong'. It is indeed very rare to find a man like Samuel, a miner who when he is at home helps his wife fetch wood and water, and sometimes even sweeps their home so that his wife can attend night school.

Local perception, based on custom and 'culture', sees men first and foremost as providers who have to 'look after cattle and goats' and 'seek jobs in Johannesburg'. However, it is the material world that determines men's and women's work, and reality often differs from culture or custom. Many men have failed to find or even seek formal employment and do not have livestock or fields. At the same time most women are forced to work. Even men realise this:

> 'Originally women were supposed to be housewives. However, due to the high demands from the family, women do seek jobs.'

Although more and more women help to support their families financially, the domestic division of work persists, with everyday routine chores being women's responsibility and the more occasional work that of men.

4.3 Women, work and household economics

Whereas custom largely specifies the division of domestic work, the division of work outside the home is controlled by the labour market, the household's needs and women's

responsibilities. The need for women to work and contribute economically to their households is determined by marital status, household composition and material circumstances. However, as more and more girls are completing Form V (the equivalent of matric or Std 10) as part of a strategy to find employment, it is slowly becoming the norm for girls to complete their schooling and then search for a job or prepare for a career.

Female household heads and single women generally need to work to support or help support their families. Widows whose husbands were employed and left them with pension benefits have regular incomes and their families manage to survive quite comfortably without the widow needing to work outside the home.

Married women are forced to work if their husbands are unemployed, neglect their families, or simply do not earn enough. At the other end of the scale, a small but growing group of women work because they have professional careers or well-paying businesses. This group includes teachers, nurses, government officials and police officers, and can be classified as the new rural elite. Their households usually have dual incomes and the women work to maintain the middle-class lifestyle typical of a suburban couple.

As the need for many Nkomazi women to work is related to their husband's work, an understanding of men's work is important here.

Approximately 50 per cent of the household heads of Sibange, Boschfontein and Langeloop are men who hold formal sector jobs. Most are employed at mines at Barberton and on the Highveld, the power plants at Kriel and Hendrina, and the pulp mill at Ngodwana. By village standards they are well paid (R1 000 – R1 800 a month) and are able to support an average-sized household. The women need not work if their husbands limit themselves to one household. But, as one complains:

> 'He never sends money, he lives with a cherry there in Barberton.'

Incomes earned in the formal sector cannot compete with those of successful entrepreneurs such as taxi owners. As a rule, these entrepreneurs' wives also own or manage spaza shops. The luxury of an additional income and the entrepreneurial spirit for expanding business interests, rather than necessity, are the reasons why many successful men's wives run spaza shops.

The worst paid jobs are in local employment. Men working for local people as gardeners and herdsmen, and farmworkers employed by local sugar cane farmers earn approximately R300 per month. Their wives are therefore forced to work to make ends meet. Many Nkomazi men work on the nearby commercial farms and farm wages are relatively low, except in the case of drivers.

In addition to the difficulty of finding employment, women can work only if their household circumstances permit.

> The three eldest daughters from a large multigenerational household are all formally employed. One is a nurse at Skhwahlana clinic, the other two work at a nearby game lodge as a nurse assistant and a general assistant. Their father, who is now a pensioner, used to be formally employed and actively supported his family and encouraged them

to study. And as all three have 'fatherless' children, the supportive household to which they contribute financially takes care of their children and enables them to follow their own careers.

Women who work and contribute financially to their homes may be formally employed or involved in informal economic activities. Some are involved in rural production, while others are unemployed. Table 1 gives an indication of married women's economic contributions, over and above their domestic role, in 65 male-headed families.

Table 1: Married women's income contribution to the household economy, in 65 randomly selected male-headed Nkomazi households, 1996

Form of employment	Number	% of total
Formal employment	10	15
Informal employment	26	40
Rural production	5	8
Unemployed	24	37
Total	65	100

Table 1 suggests that approximately 55 per cent of rural women contribute an income or cash to households, although this figure may overstate their contribution as the activity of (an unknown proportion of) women engaged in informal economic activities varies from infrequent to sporadic. A further interesting finding from this random sample of 65 male-headed households is that 10 (or 15) per cent are supported by women. In these households the male heads are unemployed or neglect their families and consequently depend on the women's incomes.

Participant observation, however, suggests that the number of women involved in informal employment is in constant flux. The nature of self-employment allows for easy entrance and exit from the informal sector dictated by the various demands on women's lives. The incomes generated are small and many of these women considered themselves 'unemployed' which is understood as 'not employed in the formal economy'. Most of them expressed their desire for a sustainable income that would significantly contribute to the household's well-being. Furthermore, those women involved in producing food for their household's consumption generally also tried and sell their surpluses Given this information, it can be deducted from Table 2 that as many as 85 per cent of women will enter the informal economy at different times.

Table 2: Contributions by husbands and wives to aggregate household income in 55 randomly selected male-headed Nkomazi households, 1996

Family member	Total monthly income of 55 households (R)	Contribution as a percentage of total household income	Average monthly income per person (R)
Husband	67 700	80	1 200
Wife	16 110	20	300
Total	83 810	100	1 500

Table 2, derived from a sample of 55 randomly selected male-headed households where both husband and wife are 'working', outlines the relative contributions of Nkomazi couples to household income.

It is clear that even outside the female-headed households (which depend largely on women), there are considerable numbers of married women who contribute substantially to household incomes in male-headed families. Their economic contribution is, however, limited by the very poor wages and sparse opportunities available to rural women.

4.4 The labour market

Although many women need formal employment, finding work is very difficult. The labour market for Nkomazi women is limited to government employment, farm work, work in Onderberg towns and employment locally. Wages are low. In a survey of 140 households

- a few women earned R1 000 per month
- one woman had a monthly income of R1 500, the highest found among the women
- the average wage was approximately R300 per month.

Although the number of women in formal employment is growing as more and more girls continue with tertiary education after completing matric, it still lags far behind the number of men in formal employment.

Women in government employment may be labourers, nurses or teachers – fields that are becoming progressively more accessible for young rural women now that completing matric has also become the norm for females. The problem is that even in a society where many grandmothers look after their grandchildren, women – owing to the restraints of family life – are simply not as mobile geographically as men. Moreover, many families are started at a young age, with most girls returning to school after the birth of their babies. There are, however, many rural women who successfully find formal employment in the local public sector.

> A 27-year-old single mother who lives with her parents, both of whom are pensioners, and her two brothers who are both doing Form V, is able to work shifts at Shongwe Hospital because her mother can take care of her child. She fell pregnant in Form III, and after the birth of her child she decided to go back to school and completed Form V in 1995. Then she 'applied to Shongwe Hospital and the reply came back to call me for an interview. Then I got a uniform for work. I started in 1996. I am a nurse'.

The biggest problem for all is simply the shortage of jobs, as completing school by no means guarantees employment. It follows that education alone cannot solve the problems facing young women in Nkomazi. Having one's matric does not guarantee a job but does heighten expectations. Some matriculated girls have to work for local better-off families as a 'nanny'.

4.5 Informal economy

The shortage of jobs forces people into informal economic activities. As many as 40 per cent of Nkomazi women either make a living or contribute to household incomes by way of

selling or hawking. However, as stated earlier, women who considered themselves 'unemployed' also participated in these activities from time to time. Most women who classified their activities as 'rural production' to produce food for the household either sold their surpluses to add a little cash to meet the household's needs, or farmed as an ancillary activity to other self-employment. The informal sector figure is therefore the sum of those who considered themselves unemployed, those who defined themselves as 'unemployed' and those who are involved primarily in rural production, bringing the figure to 85 per cent.

Some sell commodities and others their skills, while others engage in rural production. Participant observation suggests that the figure could, in fact, be as high as 70 per cent because, when questioned, women who described themselves as 'unemployed' engaged in informal sector income-generating activities when the need or opportunity arose.

4.5.1 Trade

Informal trade in vegetables, food, clothes, beer and other commodities provides a regular income to some rural women and an occasional income to others. In the past 'selling' was the domain of the less-educated. The situation has, however, changed. Women who have completed a high school education do not want to work on farms, which are the refuge of the truly desperate. Today, many matriculated women earn a living in the informal sector.

> Anna, a single mother, and her child stay at her parents' home. Her father, who is employed and earns R1 500 per month, bought a freezer so she could sell frozen food, as she could not find work after completing Std 10.

In the past, brewing and selling beer or *umcombotsi* was an activity for older women, but this is also changing. Irene explains:

> 'When doing Std 9 I became pregnant and left school to give birth to my child. I decided to go back to school and completed Std 10 in 1992. Because there is no work I started to sell *umcombotsi*, cold drinks, vegetables and fruit.'

While more women are trying their hand at selling something, some women have been brewing and selling beer for years to support their families.

> Maria, a single mother, has brewed *umcombotsi* once a week on Tuesdays for the past ten years. She says she is 'forced' to brew, because she depends on making beer to support her children. She spends R50 on sugar and 'King Korn' to make 100 litres of beer which she sells for R80, leaving her with R30 profit for every R50 she invests.

While some are forced to brew beer, others brew and sell it mainly as an additional income to a husband's salary or an old-age pension.

> Sara's husband is a mineworker who earns R1 800 per month. She brews and sells *umcombotsi* towards month-ends, and makes approximately R400 per month.

Women also sell food. Those who have a refrigerator or freezer, an item much desired by many who are not already paying 'instalments' on one, can stock and sell fish, 'heads and feet' of chicken, and other meat, as well as cold drinks and iceblocks, which are popular with

the schoolchildren. Many women sell vegetables and fruit, and although vegetables may sometimes be the produce of their own gardens, women usually buy vegetables in bulk and repack them in smaller quantities for sale.

The poorest women sell vegetables and fruit by walking through a neighbourhood with their produce in a dish on their head, or by offering packets at bus stops or wherever people are to be found. Some women have established regular outlets. Schools provide a reliable clientele, and at each school a few women have captured the school trade, selling soup, sweets, iceblocks, fruit and the ubiquitous 'Niknaks' at breaks.

> Maria, an enthusiastic hawker, really chases this market. At breaks children queue in front of her makeshift table just outside the school ground for anything from bananas to sweets. Her children also sell snacks in the classroom, helping her to make more or less R400 a month from the school trade.

Others have established outlets of different types:

> Dora, a single mother from Sibange, has quite an operation buying, repacking and selling fruit and vegetables to workers at Transvaal Sugar. Although her overheads are relatively high as she has to travel to Malelane almost daily, she makes about R800 per month.

Informal trade becomes more formalised when a spaza shop is opened, either at the roadside on a piece of vacant land or next to the front gate on the owner's stand. Spaza shops are usually better stocked but need a larger capital outlay. Many are, at least initially, financed by a husband's salary.

It is difficult to estimate incomes from the sales of food, snacks and vegetables. These can be very small if women are selling a few vegetables from an enamel dish, but rise to anything from R150 to R400 per month or more for better established operations.

Selling clothes is also a popular means of supplementing household income. As clothes hawkers buy their merchandise in Durban and sell it locally, capital is needed to cover travel expenses and buy stock. A regular income therefore seems a prerequisite for this activity.

> Naomi's husband works in Barberton and earns R1 200 per month. With his help she travels to Durban to buy clothes which she sells at home, before returning to Durban to buy more clothes. She explains: 'Because there are no jobs I decided to buy clothes from Durban and sell them in Langeloop.'

People living in this part of South Africa are ideally situated to exploit the so-called 'pot' market. The bright aluminium three-legged pots, a hybrid of the old traditional black cast-iron pots, are purchased in Maputo 'from size 4 to size 20' and sold as far as the former Transkei, as pots there do not 'have the quality'. Pots are usually sold on credit and the hawkers collect the money from their customers at the end of the month. Although overhead costs are high, turnover can be substantial. People sometimes enthusiastically talk of making R5 000 per month, but after the costs have been deducted even the most successful pot sellers make less than R1 000 a month.

Encouraged by some women's success and driven by the shortage of jobs, almost every unemployed woman, it seems, 'wants to start a small business'. Although many women are indeed successful, starting a small business is easier said than done. Besides the administrative dangers inherent in any business, there is also the growing danger that the local and other accessible markets will soon become oversupplied with the same goods.

A woman recalls:

> 'My husband bought me a fridge and I was also selling clothes. But I left that business because the customers sometimes do not come back to pay their debt, and because of that I became bankrupt.'

Even the popular pot trade has its bad debts.

> 'I gave the customers credit. At the end of the month I went back to collect the money, but the customers did not pay. So I decided to work on the nearest farm because at the end of the month I get better money.'

It remains to be seen where all these activities in 'sales' will lead to, as some markets seem to have reached saturation point. For the time being they provide some people with an income, and offer hope and illusions of success to those who have not already been disappointed.

4.5.2 Services and skills

Now that more people are turning to the informal sector to make a living, skills can give women an advantage, although the market for services is also limited. Many Nkomazi women have tried their hand at hairdressing, dressmaking, divination and healing, and other skills such as candle-making and fence-making.

Women who have 'hairdressing salons' at home may earn up to about R500 per month. They usually work from 'modern' houses and advertise haircuts and treatments such as 'German cut', 'Fishtail cut' and 'perms'. Apart from needing hairdressing skills, they have to purchase hairdressing materials which necessitate some financial input.

Sangomas do not choose their careers so much as they are chosen for them, and some are financially successful.

> 'As time went on the number of people coming for healing increased and it is easy for me to live on the money I get as a *sangoma*.'

Some experience the opposite:

> 'People coming became less and it was hard to earn a living as a *sangoma*. I decided to look for a job and got one as a domestic worker. I was earning R350 and although I am not satisfied with that little amount of money, it is more.'

In the late 1980s and early 1990s non-governmental organisations and parastatals formed women's clubs all over Nkomazi and enthusiastically transferred dressmaking, candle-making and fence-making skills to club members. These efforts and initiatives were intended

to provide the women with income opportunities but unfortunately bore little fruit. Candle-making never really got off the ground, some clubs sold a few rolls of fences but profits were disappointing; and the rows upon rows of ethnic dresses and sewing machines bear silent witness that many women have mastered dressmaking skills but their clubs could not find regular outlets.

4.5.3 Rural production

As parts of Nkomazi are virtually peri-urban today, households far outnumber fields and many 'rural' families have no access to arable land. In some long-established households, however, agriculture still plays an economic role in women's lives. Although some households may have a large piece of land, families cannot really live off their land. With men working away from home, subsistence agriculture is very much a woman's affair.

Ploughing is largely done by tractor, paid for by working husbands, but ploughing services are often also paid for out of a *gogo*'s pension. From then on work is done by hand and by women. Most households do all the farmwork themselves, although some employ people to help with weeding and harvesting. There are also some desperately poor people who cannot even afford to pay for ploughing.

> Emma, whose husband left her 17 years ago, has to support eight children by selling clothes. To save on the food bill she also cultivates a dryland field inherited from her father. She does all the work on her field herself, and as she cannot afford to pay for ploughing, she ploughs with a hoe. Then she has to weed and harvest by hand, all by herself, as she says 'the children don't want to work, only to eat'.

Residential stands in Nkomazi are large and spacious, and as more and more households do not have access to arable land or fields, agricultural activities have moved to the stands which are used for a small 'dryland field' and a vegetable garden. Although some stands are ploughed by tractor, most people use hand hoes to prepare the soil and plant maize, pumpkins and peanuts during early spring. Green mealies are very popular, as one woman explains:

> 'I plant enough, so that my children cannot cry for green mealies when it is sold by someone.'

Vegetables are planted only if there is tap water close by. The cultivation of stands is almost exclusively the responsibility of women. In a 'peri-urban' settlement like Langeloop, 50 per cent of households maintain a vegetable garden on their stands. As the provision of domestic water to Nkomazi settlements is upgraded and improved, vegetable production on stands will expand (as has happened at Madadeni) and women's contribution to household food security in this manner should increase.

All in all, more women make a living working on other people's land than on their own. Some women help local farmers on their fields to earn a 'little something to take home to their children'. Most work on the nearby commercial farms, picking and packing subtropical fruit for the local and export markets. The farms seem to be women's domain, possibly because farmwork is among the least enviable jobs – it is usually avoided by all but the most desperate women from poor households, and abandoned wives and widows. Women generally try to avoid 'jumping trucks mornings and evenings' or living in labourers' quarters

during the week to work on the farms. For many, however, this is the only way to earn the R300 or R400 their families need each month simply to survive.

4.6 Pensions

Among the best and most regular of female incomes are old-age pensions. These pensions allow elderly women to leave farm employment and to look after their grandchildren, enabling their daughters to work or seek work elsewhere. A certain amount of government-subsidised child care can, after all, be said to exist in rural Nkomazi. For many female-headed (and male-headed) households pensions are their only social and economic security. Although these households may struggle to make ends meet, the social implications are at least partly positive: their pensions make old women valued members of such households.

4.7 Conclusion

Although Nkomazi women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities remain largely unchanged, these responsibilities have expanded beyond rural production. To meet the needs of their families, some 55 per cent of Nkomazi women contribute an income or cash to their household economies. Owing to the low wages paid to women and meagre incomes from informal economic activities, women's aggregate cash contribution is only about 25 per cent of that of their husbands.

5. THE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ROLE OF NKOMAZI WOMEN

5.1 Women at meetings

Meetings are a critical aspect of public life in the Nkomazi settlements. There are mass community meetings that represent the interests of the community; meetings of associations and clubs that represent particular community interests; and committee meetings where interests groups are represented. At mass meetings women are always in the majority; at association or club meetings their attendance depends on the association's interest or their representation of their absent husbands at, for instance, farmers' association meetings; and women's club meetings are very regularly attended.

Committee members are elected and female members represent particular interests such as water, housing and crèche facilities. Recently women have taken up prominent roles on committees, such as that of chairperson, treasurer or secretary. Women are particularly prominent at political meetings and many are on the branch executive committees of political parties, Reconstruction and Development Committees (RDCs) and the Representative Councils for local government.

Matters that concern Nkomazi communities, organisations and interest groups are always debated at meetings. Decisions are made publicly, binding communities or members to public agreements. The matters on the meeting agendas of associations, clubs and committees include land use, farming problems, domestic water supply, housing, services, infrastructure and community facilities. Meetings are held regularly. The executive committees of most associations meet weekly, even if there is nothing new on the agenda. This regularity serves to cement community and social networks.

Community meetings or meetings of associations normally take place within cultural bounds. Whether members are meeting under a tree or in a hall, the men usually sit on benches and the women sit on the ground, many arriving at meetings carrying mats to sit on. This seating arrangement demonstrates the higher social status of men, and women's social recognition of this status. This inevitably influences women's behaviour in meetings. They are usually quiet despite the importance of meetings in the public life of the rural community, and despite the fact that women are sometimes invited to speak. The men on the benches dominate discussions; the women usually listen.

> When the Magudu community met to approve the farmers selected for the NIEP project in their village, the small community hall was filled with both men and women. The chairman of the meeting, realising that the women had not spoken, remarked on their silence, and from the table came the invitation for the women's opinion to be given. To break the ensuing silence and in an almost mocking tone, rose the plea '*Khulumani bo*' (Say something) from the men on the benches. The women responded with little more than a shy collective giggle. One woman mouthed an opinion that did not invite further discussion from the men, as she was mainly endorsing what the men were saying. These responses confirmed to the men that farming and farmer selection were men's matters, despite the fact that many of the women would end up farming on behalf of their husbands.

This format of meetings is also reflected when women's matters are discussed in community meetings.

> When women's clubs of Sibange were invited to discuss their participation in the NIEP, men managed the meeting. The men present were the chairman of the farmers' association, and at the time also the chairman of the local RDC, the local headman and his assistant, and a few farmers. They took up the dominant seats at the front and informed the women, who had to listen, that those who were interested in the community garden should submit their names to the headman. Only when the discussion turned to the size of the plots, the number of women that would participate, the selection of participants and other issues that directly involved them, did the women engage in the discussion.

This passive role is also played by women at committee meetings. The decision since the national election in 1994 that women need to participate more actively in democratic institutions has changed women's public role in many ways. But, even though women have gained positions on the committees, they generally still fail to articulate independent views in meetings.

> Unlike the case with other associations, the Nhlangu Farmer's Association executive committee is made up of two-thirds men and one third women. The committee meets regularly on Tuesday evenings. One woman, who writes well, keeps the minutes from her seat on the ground. Although a spirit of cooperation marks meetings, the women are generally quiet. Male members of the Nhlangu executive who do recognise the important role women can play, will, after a long discussion in which only the men on the benches participate ask: '*Bo maki, nithini?*' (Mothers, what do you have to say?) or '*Bo maki niya vuma na?*' (Mothers, do you agree?).

Despite the consciousness since 1994 that women have equal status, they have not, in these meetings, assumed empowered positions but are relegated to being observers.

Although this inequality among men and women is less evident in meetings of representative and political structures, women members do not speak with much more liberty. These structures include local RDC meetings and, in particular, branch meetings of the African National Congress (ANC), the dominant party in the region.

5.2 'Why we are silent in meetings': women's own explanations

Many women complain that they are not given a chance to speak. Sara explains that women are ignored:

> 'It is not our aim to be quiet when we are in meetings. It could sometimes be painful for the women, but we do not even get pointed to although we have been raising our hands for a chance to speak. You will find that only men are being pointed at allowing them an opportunity to speak.'

Thulile argues that women are silent because their views are not taken seriously. She says:

> 'Even if we are given a chance to speak, our point of view as women is dismissed. We say nothing because we know that our opinions as women are not considered.'

Women's silence and the fact that their views are ignored are all manifestations of prevailing culture and tradition. According to Busisiwe:

> 'As black women we have no power over our husbands, we only accept everything from our men. We have been taught to listen when a man is talking. Most of the time the chairpersons are men and then women cannot give words to men in front of many men.'

Many women accept this. An older women explains:

> 'According to custom it is only men who have something to say at meetings, not a woman. It is only men who have a right to stand in front and say something and it is quite right.'

Domestic subordination that seems to follow inevitably from the cultural norms that subject women to men, silences the voices of women in public. Lina says

> ... that if she were to raise an idea her husband could beat her or even divorce her for undermining his authority. She does not want her man to be embarrassed among other men. She just has to sit down and listen because she always accepts what her husband says. Her husband must always rule her because he paid *lobola* to her parents. Her parents would be surprised if they were to hear that she undermines her husband in

> front of other men. Her parents might even send *inhlawulo* (a restitution gift for forgiveness) if they notice that their daughter does not have manners.

Domestic subordination preventing women from talking for themselves, also prevents them from talking on behalf of their husbands. Norah says

> '... it is because most of the women who attend meetings where both sexes are present are there on behalf of their husbands. So women do not say things in case their husband hears about it and she says things he does not agree with, for then she will be in trouble.'

Women are shy because 'from birth women are told not to talk too much' and 'to obey men and give them all the chances'. This shyness prevents them from speaking in public as an elderly pensioned woman's explanation to a male fieldworker emphasises:

> 'Women are the only shy people in the world. I'm sure you have experienced that when proposing love to them, they look down and sideways, all this shows shyness.'

Anita's acknowledgement could be representative of many women:

> 'I am too shy to speak in front of men. Women have that manner because men are our head and owner.'

The culture of male domination and domestic subordination intimidates women into silence. According to Thabisile:

> 'It felt as if something heavy had been placed on me, and I failed to voice it out.'

A middle-aged mother from Langeloop's remark further explains the intimidation women associate with public meetings. She maintains:

> 'I do not have much to say at the meetings. But what surprises me is that when the meeting is over lots and lots of ideas prevail on my mind.'

The fact that women are silent in general meetings does not mean that they are unable to speak in public. In their women-only meetings they are not inhibited.

> 'Most of us are ashamed of talking in general meetings, but we do talk at church workshops where only women meet once a week. We advise each other on how to take care of our families and our husbands, and when we get together in 'societies' (eg burial societies, women's church groups) we raise strong points.'

When women are given the opportunity to speak in general meetings, they usually only endorse the dominant point of view:

> 'When women are given a chance to talk by the chairman who says "Let the women give a word", women respond strongly speaking "men's words".'

The fact that women do not actively participate in general meetings and have been socialised to accept a subordinate position in community meetings does not, however, reflect their actual community management role. Women's silence in general meetings gives expression to male domination and the culturally defined subordination of women in interpersonal relationships. Observations of 'the give and take of daily life' show that women's public participation has had decisive implications and contradicts the culturally imposed subordination.

5.3 Women's community management role

Poverty and the inadequate provision of basic services force Nkomazi women into community management work. Because they are poor and 'must make ends meet', they organise themselves into support groups, savings and business groups to address their own and their households' immediate needs. Women suffer most from poor services and they therefore take responsibility for the provision of basic services and infrastructure in various ways. Organising themselves into women-only groups that take care of collective needs, which are often the extension of their domestic consumption needs, they are able to provide for their practical and gender needs.

Women have taken on strategic struggles to protect their organisational capacity and, in so doing, have demonstrated a manner of addressing their strategic gender needs. Despite their apparent silence in meetings, their actions have been incisive when protecting their own interests or those of the community. Strategically, they 'pick their battles'.

Women's organisations in the area have either been self-initiated in order to address either their own or community needs, or have been initiated through outside intervention. As mentioned in an earlier section, care groups, candle-making and sewing groups were formed all over Nkomazi in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but evidence exists that these have not been sustained. These groups, whose members through their own initiative have sought to address more immediate needs, were able to redefine themselves.

> At Boschfontein, the Ayihlome Maswati sewing club was established several years earlier with a small loans fund from the then Kangwane Economic Development Corporation (KEDC). They experienced the same problems that lead to the demise of similar projects in the area. The main problem was the lack of marketing opportunities for their products. The women decided to change the organisation into a stokvel, established through a monthly contribution of R50 from its 37 members. The equity in the fund was used to extend loans to members and outsiders. A R100 loan must be repaid at the rate of R120 within 30 days, repayment over a longer period will cost the borrower R120, including 25 per cent of the capital amount at an effective annual interest rate of over 300 per cent. The members also use the equity fund to purchase second-hand clothing in bulk from Johannesburg and with the money raised they resell the clothes, benefiting from the profits made.

Although the Ayihlome Maswati women's club redefined and sustained itself through transformation, such transformation is, however, not always successful.

> The Intamakuphila women's club (which means 'to try to live') in Boschfontein also borrowed money from the KEDC to establish itself for clothes-making in 1992. The

group managed to repay its loan to KEDC but has subsequently disbanded because it could not redefine itself successfully into a stokvel that makes its business from second-hand clothing.

Self-initiated women's groups such as street groups and funeral associations are formed to provide support for members in times of need and misfortune. Although members of pensioners' associations and stokvels also provide mutual support, they function primarily as savings and business clubs. The community management role of rural women is not limited to groups and organisations serving their own interests. Nkomazi women are also involved in projects and organisations managing broader community interests.

Boschfontein women, who were addressed by the social worker from Shongwe Hospital, established the Thuthukani pre-school project. A committee was elected which decided to establish a crèche for children aged 4 years and older. The pre-school collects R10 a month for each child and is well run. The chairperson of the committee realised the need to accommodate children younger than 4 years and established her own crèche, which has also managed to sustain itself through income for child-care. Since non-governmental organisations providing educare training held workshops for the Thuthukani teachers at the Mzinti Agricultural Training Centre, the confidence of the 'unqualified' pre-school and crèche teachers has grown.

Women's community management role goes beyond women and women's issues, and they also influence decisions in the interests of the broader community in the presence of men. At times these women have to contend with male antagonism and competition, as described in the following case studies.

The Sibange crèche committee had applied to and received a grant from the South African sugar industry's Siyakana Fund, created from a percentage of the earnings from sugar cane farmers for community development projects. The grant money would be enough to complete two classrooms for a pre-school. Nora, the chairperson, and Siphiwe, the treasurer, represented the crèche committee of ten women on the Sibange RDC. When they presented their project to the RDC they came in for considerable criticism from the RDC chairman, Richard K, over a period of several meetings, ostensibly for bypassing the RDC in the matter. At one of the meetings he accused the crèche chairperson of 'eating the money'. His main aim was seen to be to gain control of the crèche project by trying to discredit the women. Richard K, who was also the chairman of the Sibange Farmer's Association, was an intimidating leader who had steamrollered several projects. The crèche committee did not, however, back down. Siphiwe presented the RDC meetings with well-kept records of the income and expenditure of the building process being undertaken by local builders under their control. They continued, despite the opposition from the chairman, and the pre-school building was completed. Siphiwe was trained as a pre-school teacher and the facility delivers an important service to the community. Richard K's opposition to the women in the community ultimately led to the demise of his role as a prominent community leader. He was not re-elected as RDC chairman and was replaced by a chairman who has a greater understanding of the contributions women make to the community.

Similarly, women played an incisive role in deciding about the upgrading of Madadeni's domestic water.

> Suffering from an unreliable water supply, women were hampered in their daily activities by having to wait for hours for water from a reservoir that fed their village which lies more than 4 km from the river. When the Nkomazi Irrigation Expansion Programme (NIEP) was implemented in 1994, Madadeni's irrigation farmers – who were to benefit from the NIEP – offered the community the opportunity to have water pumped to the village for domestic use. A special mass meeting was called to discuss the offer. The engineer for the scheme suggested that yard connections were possible at a R60 connection fee, and the running costs of the pump's electricity and chlorination of the reservoir would be covered by a R5 flat rate per month for each household. From the benches men voiced their opinions that they had never before paid for water and there was no likelihood that they would do so in future. A murmuring arose among the women, seated to one side in the shade of a building. One woman rose to say that the men were 'easy talkers': 'When they arrive home at night they expect the food to be prepared and they also expect water to wash themselves. It is the women who spent many frustrating hours waiting for water from the reservoir that was seldom full because of its unreliable supply,' she argued. This evoked a series of female speakers, each supporting the other. It was then that Magolide, a former headman and respected leader in the community, stood up to speak. 'We are living in new times,' he said, 'The women are important. We need to listen to them. Women even have positions in government nowadays.' (This was after the Government of National Unity was established following South Africa's first democratic election in April 1994.) The meeting decided overwhelmingly that the connection fees would be paid and the running costs for the water would come from household expenses.

In the above example, women – in their own right and in the interest of the community – had to oppose the men who objected against a flat rate payment for water, and their collective stand was decisive in upgrading domestic water provision at Madadeni. Women are therefore capable of protecting the interests of their community through collective action.

Farmer selection throughout the NIEP was always a prickly affair. Farmers who had organised themselves into farmers' associations would lay claim to the land identified for the development of irrigation projects. These situations often resulted in conflict between land-right holders and farmers' associations, but the matters were settled through public negotiations.

> When the NIEP reached the dryland fields of the Nhlangu Farmers' Association alongside the village of Driekoppies, the selection process demanded a series of sifting processes to accommodate the more than 120 land-right holders. Owing to soil quality, the presence of rocks and of wetland areas, only 58 farmers could be reselected, each to be settled on 2 hectares of land. On the day the staked-out farms were being allocated to the selected farmers, a prominent local resident, well known for his command of supernatural powers, arrived. He claimed that he had the rights to 6 ha, or three of the plots, following an earlier exchange of land with the Driekoppies headman. The headman was nowhere to be found that day. Fearing the man's supernatural powers, none of the farmers spoke against him. (*Nyangas* are believed to exercise both positive powers in the interest of the community or negative powers against individuals, resulting in misfortune, and for this reason they can enjoy either popular support or the fear of the community.) A woman, however, stepped out of the gathering and voiced

her opposition to this outsider coming in and claiming land at the last minute. The claims had already been settled through a lengthy process, which had resulted in several farmers being 'disappointed' because of the shortage of land. The woman's opposition was followed by an outcry of protest from the women farmers, who make up 40 per cent of the Nhlangu Farmers' Association. Encouraged, the men took a stand, albeit half-hearted, and the executive of the association endorsed its earlier decision, forcing the man to leave with no settlement of his claim.

Women display the capacity to act on behalf of broader community interests. At times this has meant that they have had to compete with men for positions, at other times they have even had to oppose them. In the interests of the broader community women also gather the support of men in leading a protest.

5.4 Women leaders

Women rise to leadership positions through their display of community management skills. This is not dependent on their level of education, except for public office in local government which apparently does demand higher levels of education. Committee responsibilities are usually only given to people who have attained a matric or post-matric education. Women who take up leadership positions on committees generally have to contend with their husband's resistance to their public roles. Some women have a higher level of education than their husbands and participate in public affairs with their husbands' sometimes reluctant support.

Doreen, 30 years of age, has matric and was elected by the community as the secretary of the Sibange Housing Committee. Her husband is often unemployed. When she first told him about the public office to which she had been elected, he said he did not want her to 'go up and down and be here and there' because he expected her to be at home. Doreen explained: 'In our village we need to develop, but if there is a member of the community who refuses to stand up for their village there will be no development.' Her husband calmed down and allowed Doreen to continue with her appointment.

Since the national election in 1994, women's representation on committees has, unlike before, become politically correct – almost mandatory. Despite their presence, even public office, it appears that these women seldom act independently of their male compatriots to whom they defer for guidance and direction. Some women, however, use this exposure to launch themselves into public life. The most visible platform for them to articulate themselves is in ANC branch meetings. Once visible there, they are able to move into a publicly elected office.

Busi, a very busy 36-year-old woman from Langeloop, is a hawker and the mother of six. Her husband Penuel's mother also lives with them. Busi matriculated in 1992, having left school in 1979 in Std 8 for the birth of her first child. She describes herself as 'just an ordinary member of her party', but she was elected to the branch executive committee and has since been the only woman on the executive committee. She says the men often 'obey' her and listen to her when she gives her opinions and ideas at the committee. She is also able to immediately resolve conflict when it arises in the executive. Busi says Penuel has never discouraged her from this role. A quiet person

who dislikes talking, Penuel only voices his opinion when it is necessary. Busi says, 'Penuel is in fact proud of me and would like me to get a job in local government.'

Experience on the branch executive committees has resulted in several women holding higher office.

> Ruth, a committee member of the Jeppe's Reef ANC branch, arrived in her ANC colours, dress and turban at the first meeting where the Nkomazi West Steering Committee would be elected. Among the farmers that gathered there she made her presence felt when she interpreted a difficult situation and explained it to the farmers. They thanked her, patronisingly saying *'Siyabonga sisi'* ('Thank you sister', alluding to her youthfulness). Although Ruth has no ties with agriculture, she was elected as a member of the committee – she had convinced the men at the gathering of her ability to serve on a committee.

Holding a higher office has also benefited women.

> Sophie, a member of the Phiva ANC branch executive committee was elected to the Phiva RDC and later to the Nkomazi West Local Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC) as secretary. She mediated a situation where two farmer's associations in Phiva were competing for NIEP development in their area. The Vulindlela Farmers' Association then made her a member and she will be established as one of the Phiva farmers when the development takes place.

Their newly found positions in local government have provided opportunities for women in public office, but as they enter this lofty position, they once again appear to become silenced by their seeming lack of confidence in the male-dominated forum. This is due possibly to their lack of exposure in holding public office. Despite their visible climb to these positions, women appear to revert to subjecting themselves again to men.

> Rose and Mia are both members of the Nkomazi West Representative Council. At the meetings prominent male branch members of the ANC flank both Rose and Mia. The women usually wait for their male 'comrades' to talk, and then come out in support of the men's positions. This suggests that they may still be developing in terms of their own independence and ability to articulate independently their own opinions in political office.

Many Nkomazi women are growing into leadership roles and community leadership in Nkomazi is no longer the domain of men only. Leadership has become an important aspect of Nkomazi women's community management role.

5.5 Conclusion

Poverty and the inadequate provision of basic services force Nkomazi women into community management work. Because they are poor and 'must make ends meet', they organise themselves into support groups, savings and business groups to address their own and their households' immediate needs. Women suffer most from poor services and they therefore, and in different ways, take responsibility for basic services and infrastructure provision.

Women know from experience that ultimately they will be the victims of decisions that militate against their interests and are therefore ready to lead local protest. In these, and possibly in other ways as well, Nkomazi women struggle to manage their neighbourhoods. In doing so they implicitly accept the nature of their gender subordination. Their community management role of 'items of collective consumption, as an extension of their domestic role', has empowered the women of Nkomazi to take up community leadership roles despite their cultural constraints.

6. WOMEN AND THE NKOMAZI IRRIGATION EXPANSION PROGRAMME

6.1 Introduction

For decades the Onderberg's natural resources were commercially utilised largely by the white farming community. The Nkomazi Irrigation Expansion Programme (NIEP), which was planned to include the disadvantaged Nkomazi communities in regional development arising from the construction of the Driekoppies Dam, will eventually develop more than 7 000 hectares of irrigated land in Nkomazi East and West. In Nkomazi West, the main intended development – the commercialisation of subsistence agriculture through sugar cane farming – will eventually benefit about 550 commercial farmers who are to be established on cane fields of between 2 and 10 ha.

Viewed from the socio-economic context of Nkomazi and its need for development, this will benefit relatively few Nkomazi households directly. In an attempt to increase the impact of the NIEP and to reach women from poorer families who were bypassed by the main development, community gardens are also being developed as a means of contributing to household food security. Community gardens of 10 and 15 ha accommodate between 60 and 100 members of women's clubs on food plots of 1 500 m^2 each.

Because the NIEP commercialises subsistence agriculture, subsistence land rights are inevitably affected. Farmers who had to relinquish their land rights were compensated with 3 000 m^2 fields at Madadeni and 1 ha fields at Sibange. The following beneficiaries can therefore be distinguished:

- Commercial sugar cane farmers
- Women's clubs on community gardens
- Land-right holders who forfeited rights to dryland fields

In Nkomazi West, seven projects have already been implemented: Boschfontein Phase 1 in 1993, Boschfontein Phase 2 (for farmers of Jeppe's Rust) in 1994, Madadeni in 1994, Langeloop in 1995, Driekoppies in 1997, Nhlangu, Mbongozi, and Sibange in 1997.

The NIEP came to a halt in 1997 because the Mpumalanga province was not granted borrowing powers by the central government. A further six projects scheduled for the 'post-Driekoppies' phase have therefore been delayed indefinitely.

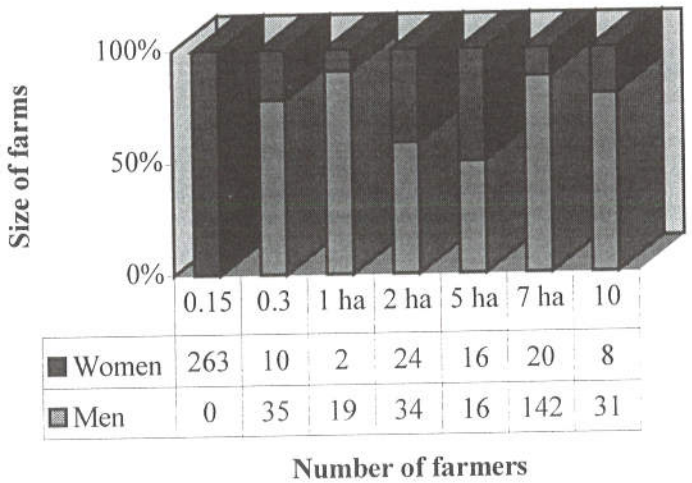
6.2 NIEP beneficiaries and women's participation

Table 3 summarises information from the completed projects and shows that women are represented in all the categories of beneficiaries, but in a highly unequal manner. There are marked differences between men and women in the type of cultivation undertaken (sugar cane or food plots), in the area cultivated and in the returns from farming.

Table 3: Size of plots of male and female participants in completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West, 1997

Farm size	10 ha	7 ha	5 ha	2 ha	1 ha	3 000 m²	1 500 m²
Men	31 (80%)	142 (88%)	16 (50%)	34 (59%)	19 (90%)	35 (78%)	
Women	8 (20%)	20 (12%)	16 (50%)	24 (41%)	2 (2%)	10 (22%)	263 (100%)
Total	39	162	32	58	21	45	263

Chart 1: Men and women participants in completed NIEP projects: Nkomazi West 1997



Women outnumber men as direct beneficiaries of the NIEP: 343 women and 277 men are directly involved in completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West. This is mainly because 263 women's club members were allocated food plots in community gardens. Sugar cane cultivation, however, is dominated by men, and men are the principal registered beneficiaries of the NIEP. Table 4 summarises the participation of men and women in commercial sugar cane development.

Table 4: Participation in commercial sugar cane development, by gender, on completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West, 1997

Participants	Men	Women	Total
Number	223	68	291
Percentage	77	23	100

Besides being the direct beneficiaries of projects, women were also involved in the construction phase. When the projects are in operation and farming activities commence, women can also be found as labourers or managers of commercial sugar cane fields.

6.3 Labourers

As mentioned above, women who work as labourers on NIEP projects may be

- employed by contractors during the construction phases of the projects, and/or
- employed as farm labourers on projects when sugar cane cultivation starts.

6.3.1 Construction workers

The DBSA laid down loan conditions which stated that local small-scale contractors should be employed during the construction of the NIEP projects and that labour-intensive construction methods be used. This has created opportunities for women from poorer households to share in the benefits of the NIEP as construction labourers. Many of these women construction workers were previously employed as farm labourers on NIEP projects.

> Rose, a widow aged 55, worked on an Onderberg farm for 11 years before she was employed on the Sibange project. She claims she earned R7,50 a day plus food rations on the farm. As a construction worker she earned R15 a day. She was happy to work so close to her home and planned to work for her brother, who is a sugar cane farmer, once the construction is completed.

The women who worked as labourers on NIEP projects were rural widows, single mothers, neglected wives and the wives of unemployed men. Many workers were Mozambican refugees.

> Irene and her husband were both unemployed before they started working for JR Construction, earning R30 per day between them. With the money they bought maize meal, soap and candles, and they were also able to pay school fees for their three children. Irene explains that the presence of sugar cane has helped them a great deal and they plan to work as farm labourers once the farmers start planting sugar cane.

Manual labour in the harsh Lowveld sun is hard work. Digging the trenches for the main water supply and in-field irrigation pipelines is organised on a piecework basis, and women construction workers earned R15 per day on average on the earlier NIEP projects. Wages were later increased, but digging trenches in the Lowveld heat in hard, rocky soil managed to attract only the most desperate. Although men from very poor households also worked as labourers for construction companies and small contractors, most manual labourers on NIEP projects were women. Single and deserted women, the wives of unemployed or chronically ill husbands, or the young Mozambican girl whose boyfriend had failed to return, had to undertake this hard work to support their families.

> Peggy and James came from Mozambique in the late 1980s. As James had deserted her, the construction of the Sibange project for more or less ten months provided her with the material means to support her five children. She found the work hard, the wages low and the hours long, and when she got home she had little time left for her domestic duties.

Whereas men's work is finished at the end of a working day, working women's domestic duties start once they are back home, and what they and their daughters cannot do during the week has to be done over the weekend. Although construction work is physically demanding, a single mother with two young children finds it is much better working close to home:

> 'I am very glad because the job is next to my home. When I knock off from work I am able to cook while it is still light, watch my children and clean my house. It is much better than before. When I worked on the white farms, I used to stay at work for many days before coming home.'

6.3.2 Farmworkers

Construction labourers and farmworkers are not necessarily mutually exclusive groups. Many women who worked for small-scale contractors during the construction phase of the NIEP projects continued to work as farm labourers when projects became operational and the newly established sugar cane farmers needed labourers to work their fields. Those who could not find work on one of the cane fields had to find some other means of supporting themselves and their families. Some have returned to work on the nearby white farms and others are back to selling vegetables.

Those who find work on the cane fields are employed by individual sugar cane farmers on either a permanent or a temporary basis. Work on sugar cane projects is less demanding than construction work. Instead of digging, the women move the irrigation draglines and weed the fields. Salaries are negotiated with employers and therefore vary, but full-time workers generally earn about R250 per month whereas women employed temporarily for weeding earn about R150 per month working mornings only.

Among the farmworkers on NIEP projects there were the following:

- A 40-year-old widow, Maria, who is a full-time worker on one of the Madadeni farms – as the only breadwinner she needs the work to support her five children
- An abandoned young mother of two small children ('My husband works at Barberton and forgot about us')
- A poor couple, both of whom work as farm labourers, who use their income to buy necessities and pay school fees for their four children
- A Mozambican refugee who explained: 'Development has helped me, I am now able to buy mealie meal for my children.'

Not all labourers are as grateful as the Mozambican refugees. However, work on the project fields provides employment for women from poor families. Many women who used to travel to work on white-owned Onderberg farms now earn a steady income closer to their homes.

> Sara, who works for a Madadeni farmer, explained that she is no longer 'jumping lorries' mornings and evenings to get to work. Now she comes home in the afternoon to look after her home and children.

Because they are working closer to their homes, women working on NIEP projects feel their situation has improved. Although wages are low, the R250 paid to permanent workers saves many poor families from going to bed hungry.

6.4 Community gardens

The intention of instituting a community garden of 10 or 15 ha in every project, for 60 to 100 women each to work a 1 500 m^2 irrigated garden plot, was twofold: to include more women in the NIEP and to provide food security for poor households.

Many community garden members are disappointed because they have had to watch their efforts go to waste, as there was no market for their surplus tomatoes and other vegetable crops. Others, however, are happy as their families 'are no longer hungry'.

Many women who are members of community gardens come from extremely poor households where 'hunger nearly killed us at home'. There are also those from moderately poor and even better-off households who use community gardens to obtain an additional income. Community garden members can therefore be classified into

- those who plant to feed their households
- those who produce for home consumption as well as a surplus to sell.

6.4.1 Food plots for food security

Community garden members who use their food plots to feed their families are generally satisfied with the outcome of their ventures. Their main aim is to minimise expenses rather than make money.

> Salita, a widow and pensioner, has two grandchildren staying with her. Sifiso, who is now in Grade 1, was left with her at a very young age. Salita's son and his wife have never returned for Sifiso and neither do they send any money. She also has a 5-year-old granddaughter living with her to help her around the house. Salita joined the community garden to 'have some food to eat'.

A food plot helps many to feed a large household.

> Sara and her husband, who are both pensioners, have to support a household of eight. Two of her sons are working but they have not been home for more than two years. She says her garden has enabled her to feed her children and grandchildren.

While a food plot may not actually generate an income, vegetables and other crops produced can save money that would otherwise have been spent on food.

> Three sisters are married to the same husband. He follows the pension pay-point circuit selling dry beans and peanuts. The household of 13 has no other income. The sisters cultivate the same food plot and the family consumes its total produce at home.

Many women appreciate the contribution that community gardens make to their households. In an environment with few opportunities, community gardens can improve the living standards of the poor.

> Patricia, a pensioned widow who has to support herself and six other household members, decided to join the community garden club rather than 'stay at home with hunger'. She says 'there is now a difference at home'.

In poorer households a food plot can provide an economic role for an unemployed wife.

> Thoko, a young woman, and her husband, a taxi driver who is looking for another job, have three children to support. In their home her husband takes care of the household expenses and she produces vegetables for the family.

Although community gardens have contributed to food security in poor households and offered small-scale production opportunities to many unemployed Nkomazi women, the full potential of these modest production units for improving the position of rural women has not been realised. The experience of those members who hoped to produce vegetables for the market has demonstrated this deficiency.

6.4.2 Vegetables for the market

Surrounded as they are by commercial sugar cane development, many community garden members had high hopes of feeding their families and financing household purchases from the produce of their food plots. They had joined the community gardens to earn an additional income. Linah's expectations are shared by many:

> Linah's husband, employed at a bricklayer's wage of R1 000 per month, battles to support his wife and their three children. Linah decided to join the club and plant and sell vegetables to assist her husband financially.

Those like Linah who joined community gardens for more than just food on the table and who wanted to make money from their gardens are, however, frustrated and disappointed. They encounter many problems in their attempts to produce a marketable surplus of reasonable quality vegetables. A club member explains:

> 'The soil is not well all right, the plants like to die and are eaten by worms.'

In many cases, pests and the lack of technical support have proved to be a definite problem:

> Janet and her son live with her parents who are both farm labourers. Since Janet decided to return to school to complete her matric with 'the help of our garden', her mother cultivates their food plot. According to her, 'the main problem is the vegetables are spoilt by worms. The vegetables become too ugly for selling, so we just eat them at home'.

Moreover, when market gardeners are fortunate and harvest surplus vegetables of reasonable quality, they have difficulty in marketing their output. Club members see marketing as their biggest problem.

> In the first year that Dinah worked her plot she harvested a great deal of onions, only to see them rot for want of a market. Linah agrees that when insects have not spoilt her vegetables, they rot as the women have no 'market to market' their produce.

They, and all the other market-oriented club members, envy the relative ease with which sugar cane farmers manage their lucrative crop. Many therefore believe that their future also lies in sugar cane. Some feel strongly that if the other club members would agree, they should turn over all the plots to sugar cane cultivation, as do club members who are not very active on their food plots and who are looking for an easy alternative. However, those who feed their families from their plots disagree. As Thoko says:

> 'Ploughing vegetables is all right, we cannot all plant sugar cane just because some people are lazy.'

Many community garden members work hard to turn their subsistence food plots into small commercial ventures and even provide other poor women with employment. However, they reap little reward for their efforts. To unlock the potential of these units and help women to make the most of the opportunity that the NIEP has provided, there needs to be a comprehensive support programme for serving the needs of community garden members, who by far outnumber the commercial sugar cane farmers.

6.5 Commercial sugar cane development

Commercial sugar cane farmers have 2 ha farms at Nhlangu, one of the projects developed at Driekoppies, and 5 ha farms at Mbongozi, the other Driekoppies project. At Madadeni, Sibange and Langeloop the farms are all 7 ha, and 10 ha at Boschfontein. Although most farmers are men, women are involved in the main commercial development as registered farmers, farm managers, or labourers on their husbands' farms.

6.5.1 Women farmers

Statistically almost a quarter (23 per cent) of the registered farmers on completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West are women (see Table 5).

Table 5: Registered commercial sugar cane farmers, by gender and farm size, on completed NIEP projects in Nkomazi West, 1997

Farm size	10 ha	7 ha	5 ha	2 ha	Total
Men	31 (80%)	142 (88%)	16 (50%)	34 (59%)	223 (77%)
Women	8 (20%)	20 (12%)	16 (50%)	24 (41%)	68 (23%)
Total	39	162	32	58	291

When the statistics are disaggregated it is clear that the majority of the women registered as farmers have either 2 ha or 5 ha farms. The great majority (201, or 70 per cent) of the 291 commercial farmers cultivating 7 and 10 ha farms are men, while only 28 (14 per cent) are women.

Men's domination of the commercial sugar cane development is easily explained. According to the chairman of the Mabondweni Farmers' Association at Langeloop:

> 'The only problem that caused women not to be many is that when going for registering only landowners with proof of ownership were allowed to register. Most of the original land-right holders were men and still alive, so women were having less chance of being members.'

A woman registered as one of the Langeloop farmers clarifies this:

> 'It is because you were being registered only if you had land-right documents. So women do not have land-right documents unless the husband had passed away.'

Registration as a farmer on NIEP projects and access to commercial sugar cane development are determined by

- land rights, the main criterion for selection on projects developed on land where people had established land rights ('morgens')
- farmers' association membership, the main criterion for projects established on communal land
- the loan conditions of the Mpumalanga Development Corporation (MDC) and the Financial Aid Fund (FAF). People who are 60 and older do not qualify for either an MDC medium-term loan for irrigation infrastructure or an FAF production loan. These farmers therefore nominate a relative who does qualify for a loan as a registered farmer and usually also enter into a legal contract with the nominee to protect their interests.

At Boschfontein, Madadeni, Langeloop and Sibange, where projects were developed on existing fields, land rights were the main selection criterion. As land rights in Nkomazi are generally held by men, 86 per cent of the registered farmers on these projects are men. The main selection criterion for the Mbongozi project at Driekoppies, developed on communal (neutral) land, was membership of the Mbongozi Farmers' Association. On this project, 16 of the established 32 farmers are women. However, it cannot be concluded from Mbongozi that making membership of the farmers' association the principal criterion for selection of participants would give women a better chance of inclusion in the main development. Farmers' associations dominated by men are waiting for their projects, currently on hold, to be developed on 'neutral' land. Although membership of a farmers' association will be the main selection criterion, indications are that only 10 to 15 per cent of the farmers will be women.

As a result of the application (and manipulation) of the selection criteria and principles, 23 per cent (68 women out of a total of 291 commercial sugar cane farmers) were registered as farmers on completed NIEP projects.

Statistically it may seem that woman farmers (as many hope to see them – decision makers, hirers, firers and masters of the labour force) are slowly appearing in Nkomazi. Women's participation should, however, not only be viewed statistically but also qualitatively. Are women who are registered as farmers indeed farmers in their own right, empowered to make their own farming decisions and, most importantly, to decide what to do with the farm income?

Women who are registered as sugar cane farmers may be land-right holders who inherited their land rights from a husband or father, members of a farmers' association, wives of land-right holders, wives of farmers' association members who were registered in their husband's place, or daughters nominated by aged parents who did not qualify for MDC or FAF loans.

Some women who inherited their husbands' land rights were themselves elderly. Annah explains:

> 'Most of them are too old, so they had to change their names and placed their youngsters.'

Women who were too old to qualify for loans generally surrendered ownership and control, transferring their land rights and association membership to a child to register as the farmer. Unlike women, men who were too old to qualify for credit nominated a child to be registered, but protected their rights contractually. In this way most men over 60 years of age remained in control of their fields, while older women with land rights usually passed ownership and control to one of their sons.

Younger widows who inherited land rights registered as farmers. More often than not, however, their farms are controlled by their sons. Minah's situation is a typical example of what happens when a husband's position in the development project is transferred to his wife:

> Minah's husband, selected and registered as a sugar cane farmer, passed away before the implementation of the Langeloop project. She was selected to replace him. Although she is the registered owner of the farm, she works as one of the labourers when weeds are being controlled and labour needs increase. Her son Moosa, appointed as farm manager, controls the farm and pays her when he pays the other labourers.

Sometimes the late husband's family keeps control of the farm which the widow has inherited.

> Amen was selected by his mother and the Lubisi (his father's) family to control and manage her farm and farm income. He has a good relationship with his family and the aunts and brothers of his father.

When women are the registered farmers because their husbands have steady jobs elsewhere, their husbands are still in control, albeit from a distance. One of these men explained:

> 'The women are there just because they have made use of their husbands' names. I am saying this because most of the farms are being managed by them, even mine as well. I am always committed. I am a businessman.'

Even when farms are registered in their names, 'women farmers' are usually no more than 'managers' and are often mere labourers. In Nkomazi, commercial sugar cane farms generally remain under male jurisdiction. Although there are exceptions where women farmers control their farms and the profits, sugar cane farms registered in the names of women are generally controlled by their sons, the families of their deceased husbands, their working husbands or aged fathers. In most cases the relationships are informal and decided within the family.

> When Linah's husband died, the Mhlongo family chose her, the first wife, to replace him and chose her second son as the manager of the farm.

When an elderly man nominates a daughter to register as the farmer because he is too old to qualify for a loan, relationships are much more formal.

> Stella's parents were both too old and Stella is the registered farmer as well as the manager of their sugar cane farm. She was chosen by her parents to be the manager as she is their only child who had completed school and can do whatever is needed, even sign a cheque. However, she cannot sign the cheque without her father and her father cannot sign the cheque without her. That is why the money is controlled by Stella and her father.

An important difference between male and female farmers appears to be the locus of control. Male farmers decide what to do with the farm income, with or without consulting their wives, whereas the incomes of women farmers go to the family and are controlled by the men of the family. While it is difficult to define the position of women farmers, the position of farmers' wives is clearer.

6.5.2 Farmers' wives

Even though Nkomazi women are in many ways structurally excluded from the main NIEP development, many were the driving force behind their husbands' selection as sugar cane farmers. Some encouraged their husbands to become project members.

> Susan was excited about the project ever since Kain from the Mawewe Tribal Authority told her about it. She told her husband that he should join, but he was reluctant as he was afraid he might lose his cattle if he could not repay his debt. Susan says she would have registered herself, but a married women was denied registration. Eventually she and Kain convinced her husband to join.

Other wives were instrumental in more concrete ways.

> Salita's husband was registered as a member of the farmers' association but could not pay the joining fee. When they came to collect the money, she quickly ran to their neighbours to borrow the required R100.

Some farmers owe their membership of sugar cane projects in more than one way to women.

> As her husband was unemployed, Maria was more than eager that her husband should become a project member. They discussed the matter and as they had no money, she encouraged him to ask his pensioned mother for R100 to pay the registration fee.

Many wives remain enthusiastic and involved.

> Jim discussed what he had heard about the sugar cane development with both his wives. They encouraged him to join and long before the sugar cane was planted. They kept on showing their interest by asking him about the meetings.

There were also women who distrusted the situation and who were afraid that they would lose their fields in the process.

> A sugar cane farmer said that both his wives had warned him. 'They did not want me to sell the land of Mawewe to the Bantu Investment Company [an early predecessor of the DBSA]. I told them I had already paid an affiliation fee to be included in the project.'

People were also afraid that they would become the victims of witchcraft once they had 'more money'.

> A Langeloop farmer who wanted to join but who feared the risk, tried to convince his wife to register. When she refused, he registered himself and today both are happy that he is one of the sugar cane farmers.

Once projects are implemented, the role of farmers' wives is more structured and they are involved in various ways and to different degrees. A study of 36 of the 55 Mabondweni sugar cane farmers of Langeloop analysed the roles of their wives in the sugar cane project. The results are set out in Table 6. The table suggests that a significant number of the sugar cane farms are in the hands of women who manage and supervise them for absentee or working husbands.

Table 6: Participation of Mabondweni farmers' wives in the Langeloop sugar cane project, 1996

Role	Number of women	Percentage of total
Manage/supervise	10	28
Provide labour	8	22
Not involved	18	50

- **Supervision**

These women attended planning meetings and training sessions in the initial phase of the projects. Once projects were implemented, they took care of the day-to-day running of farms. They discuss farming matters with their husbands when they are at home once or twice a month, or phone them at work if there is something that needs to be discussed urgently.

Even though they supervise the day-to-day activities and are therefore responsible for important management functions, wives who manage or supervise their husbands' farms are actually seen as representatives of their husbands and not as managers. They are seen to act on their husbands' behalf, in the absence of their husbands.

> 'There are women in this association, but they are subpartners of their husbands. I'm saying this because most of the time we meet with women, as their husbands are working and so they fail to come and manage their farms.'

The wives also see themselves as their husbands' representatives who undertake the responsibilities of the farm in the interest of their families. The decision that a woman would supervise the farming activities is taken by both husband and wife, but the outcome (or the profit) is not hers, it is for the family.

The couple's decision that the wife should manage the farm is often a means of ensuring two incomes for the family. Husbands can continue to work while their wives take care of the farm. Some found their first cane crop so encouraging that men who were working away from home have actually resigned from their jobs in order to run the farms themselves.

▪ Labour

Some wives see their husbands' farms as an opportunity to help their families. Wives who work on their husbands' farms (see Table 6) regard their labour on the cane fields, and that of other family members, as contributions to the welfare of their family.

> 'Even we at home go to the farm in order to help, especially the children, because I'm always there, so the outcome is going to the family.'

Although some receive wages, most work on their husbands' farms to save the money they would otherwise have had to pay for labour. They don't regard themselves as labourers but work on the farms to help their husbands and their families.

> Maggie says her husband wanted to give her some money like the other labourers, but she refused. She says she just helps when there is weeding to be done.

Although many may sacrifice a wage to help, a wife's contribution in the form of labour is not always a sacrifice. Sometimes it is a deliberately adopted economic strategy.

> Beauty and her husband discussed the matter when it became time for weeding. They decided that instead of employing three people they would only employ two labourers, and that she would also weed, with the aim of protecting the money from the farm.

But just as there are men who cannot take care of their farms as they have other work, there are farmers' wives who do not have time to spare for farmwork.

▪ Uninvolved

Table 6 indicated that 50 per cent of Langeloop farmers' wives are not involved on their husbands' sugar cane farms. The reasons are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: Reasons why Mabondweni farmers' wives are not involved in the Langeloop sugar cane project, 1996

Reason	Number	Percentage
Old age and ill health	4	22
Hawker	5	28
Employed	4	22
Domestic responsibilities	3	17
Not interested	2	11
Total	18	100

The majority of these wives contribute in other ways to the economic well-being of their households, and they continue with these activities for sound economic reasons. Among these women are teachers and successful hawkers, and it would not make sense to leave a teaching post or an informal business that pays even as little as R300 per month, to save R250 on wages for hired labour.

Time is another reason why wives are not involved on their husbands' farms. A hawker explained that

> ... they have to get up early to follow the pension pay-points. There is no time left to work on the farm when they come home.

A teacher said that

> ... she has to travel every day and is tired when she gets home. Her husband has no other commitments and he also employs people to work on the farm.

A housewife claimed that

> ... she does not have time to be involved in the development project. She is always busy at home, as housework is something that has to be done every day. Her husband has the time to go to the farm and do some management, and to employ people to do the work.

Wives who do not work or help in their husbands' fields are, however, not all occupied with other duties. Some are just indifferent. A farmer complained that

> ... his wives don't work on the farm, but they forget the money will be spent by the whole household, including themselves. Even if he told them to go to the farm, they keep asking why is it necessary as there are people to work there.

Hawkers have to get up early and work long hours, and teachers must be more than tired after a day in the classroom. But wives who do not help on their husbands' farms point out that there are labourers to do the work, and this may indicate an emerging class awareness among rural women.

6.6 Social impact

The social impact of the NIEP on Nkomazi women can only be properly assessed over time. There have been some dramatic changes in some households, but as only 620 farming households are direct beneficiaries of the NIEP in Nkomazi, the general social impact has been limited. Some poor households who were accustomed to annual incomes of anything between R8 000 and R15 000 suddenly found themselves with incomes of R20 000 to R35 000. This had an immediate social and economic impact on women. The first projects that were implemented suggest certain patterns and trends in this respect.

Most farmers who had good yields bought bakkies (small pick-up trucks) and, to please their wives, extended and electrified their houses and bought stoves, freezers and television sets.

> Amos said they had a hard life before. As he and his wife both worked, the R480 per month they received from the FAF to cover labour costs before their cane could be harvested was already heaven-sent. They had a good cane crop and received R35 000. He put a deposit on a Nissan bakkie, electrified and fixed the house and bought fertiliser for the farm.

Even though very few women have the cash in hand, many decide jointly with their husbands how the sugar cane money should be spent.

> Maria remembers before the sugar cane was harvested they dreamt about having a television set, a water tank and being able to send their children to college. They harvested 25 truckloads of sugar cane, for which they received R21 000. With this money they installed electricity in their house, bought the TV, the water tank, as well as more sprinklers for the farm. Her husband, who is suffering from poor eyesight, could consult an eye specialist in Pretoria.

Although husband and wife may decide together, men seem to have the last word.

> Susan, who had encouraged her husband to join the project, asked him to buy a car after the first harvest. He wisely refused but they extended their house, installed electricity, bought a TV, a stove and a freezer, as well as furniture. She now says she is glad they did not buy a car.

Even when the household head makes all the decisions, these usually benefit the whole household.

> Josephina, who helped and worked together with her husband on the field, does not control or even 'see' the sugar cane money, but appreciates that it benefits her family. For her, the main point is that hunger has been 'combated' and the project has made it possible for their three matriculated children to further their studies instead of sitting around at home.

The majority of the women who are registered as farmers are widows whose families had to survive on their pensions and irregular contributions from other family members. The income from the sugar cane has eased their burden.

> Linah and her family suffered after her husband passed away and they survived on her pension. They had a good harvest and received R33 000. Her son bought a Toyota bakkie and electrified the house. The money also helped her daughter to go back to school to complete Form V. There is now enough money for food at home and she can use some of her pension money to buy things for herself.

The benefits of the sugar cane development generally seem to be directed at families. Where men are the farmers the benefits for the family ultimately depend on the husbands' discretion, even though wives are consulted. When women are the registered farmers, family members claim a share of the benefits of the farm, even if the farms are usually under male control.

While women share with their families in the greater prosperity of a good harvest, income from commercial sugar cane farming has also changed social relations within families.

> Micheal, who had an exceptionally good harvest, married a third wife. He also built a large house, bought furniture and a television set. Each wife now receives R500 per month for household expenses and they work as managers on the farm instead of as labourers.

Not all farmers' wives were so lucky.

> Susan hardly received any money. Her husband married a second wife, for whom he built a mud house which he filled with furniture. It is rumoured, however, that he has only R200 left in his account, four months before the next harvest.

Having no share in controlling the profits from the sugar cane means that women are exposed to men's whims. It sometimes happens that women who had shared all the hardships and anxieties before the development project are cast aside once the husband becomes prosperous. One such case is that of Boy and his wife:

> Boy was known as the beggar of Madadeni, as he was always cadging 20 cents in the shebeens to buy some *umcomboti*. He and his wife collected and sold firewood for a living. He inherited his late father's land rights, but it was only with great difficulty that he managed to collect the money needed to join the project. Decisions were taken together with his wife and they both worked as labourers on their own farm. Once they received the monthly labour loan of R480, he could stop asking neighbours for 'food and salt'. As their cane was sold as seed cane, he received more than R100 000. He went on a spending spree and bought a brand new Toyota Hi-Lux, fixed and electrified the house, bought a stove and a television set. But he also married a second wife and built her a hut which he filled with furniture. He then tried to get rid of his first wife and told her to leave the house. Fortunately for her the farmers' association interceded. Boy had gone too far, even for this group of mainly conservative men. The association decided that if he left his wife he would have to leave his farm.

Relatively few people benefited as much from development in the area as the cane farmers did, and the benefits are obvious to all. As someone said:

> 'I saw some Mabondweni farmers had developed, they had new cars.'

Yet many people state that their situations have improved. Many women who used to travel to work on commercial farms in the area found work closer to home as labourers during the construction of the projects. Most cane farmers employ labourers, especially after the first harvest. A full-time worker usually earns R250 per month and when there is weeding to be done, one or two more people, usually women, can earn R150 per month weeding from 8 am to noon. Little as it may seem, especially compared to the sugar cane farmer's income, this money is much needed by poor families. One of Langeloop's residents says that even the roads that were upgraded for Transvaal Sugar's lorries have made life easier for them.

While development in Nkomazi favoured men, it did not bypass women. Variations exist, but on the whole the sugar cane development is under male jurisdiction. Given that male dominance is a prominent feature of this society, men will control farm income but generally more people than just the men in charge stand to benefit.

7. CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC AND PRACTICAL GENDER INTERESTS

Nkomazi women associate subordination with 'culture'. They are not only subordinate to men, but in certain social contexts are also subordinate to other women. When women reject 'culture', they are therefore expressing the strategic need for overcoming the subordination they experience in each particular social context.

Young girls develop their own strategies to overcome domination and subordination. Those who experience male domination in their homes and who fear forced marriages, are to marry the 'boy they love' and to attain a better (tertiary) education. These goals are pursued to improve their chances in life and opportunities for the future, and to escape male domination within marriage and a life dominated by poverty.

Dominated by their mothers-in-law, the strategic interests of *makoti* are residential independence and having their own homes. When the domestic cycle has developed to the point where a wife demands residential independence, the couple will move to their own stand if the husband recognises his wife's need, or the wife will leave and return to her father's home if the husband decides to remain with his parents.

The main strategic interest of the many single women who seem to treasure the freedom divorce brings from male domination is to maintain their residential independence. Although many do establish lasting relationships with men, few subject themselves to the kind of male domination which is possible when a woman sacrifices her residential independence.

Women who remain married seem to live with male domination as long as their husbands support their homes, and the only solution to male domination for the many divorced women who enter into a succession of monogamous unions with different men seems to be yet another divorce. These women will not change the structure and nature of the relationships between men and women in Nkomazi society, but neither will single women who treasure their residential independence or *makoti* who struggle for residential independence from in-laws. The strategic interests they pursue do not address the needs of Nkomazi society.

The young women who reject male domination on political and religious grounds, or the outspoken young girls who hate culture, therefore seem to be Nkomazi women's only hope of identifying their subordination to men as a strategic need, and a more equal organisation of society as a strategic gender interest. Only time will show whether these outspoken young girls and women who reject culture will indeed be the liberated women of tomorrow and the vanguard of change, or whether they are just representatives of youthful rebellion and exuberance, who will in time be pressed into the mould chosen by men.

Practical gender needs that arise from the concrete conditions of Nkomazi women and their families have forced them into productive activities outside the domestic sphere. Meeting these practical gender interests (within the gender-based division of labour), approximately 55 per cent of Nkomazi women contribute an income or cash to their families' survival. However, as a result of the division of work in the workplace and women's domestic responsibilities, women's aggregate cash contribution is only about 25 per cent of that of

their husbands. In Nkomazi this preserves the gender-based division of labour and the view that men are the main providers.

Poverty and the inadequate provision of basic services force many Nkomazi women into community management work. Because they are poor, they organise themselves into support groups that take care of collective needs, which are often the extension of their domestic consumption needs. Women have to protect their organisational capacity so as to advance their interests. Despite their apparent silence in meetings, they have taken incisive action when protecting their own interests or those of the community. Although it has become politically correct to allow women to participate in meetings, thus allowing women to expose their community management skills and eventually even attain public office in local government, they sometimes do so with a seeming lack of confidence in the male-dominated forum. They appear to revert to submissiveness to men, but this may be largely tactical. In general, Nkomazi women have succeeded in taking up community leadership roles despite their cultural constraints.

In the context of the NIEP, the gender-based division of labour and the view that men are the main providers have largely determined access to scarce development resources and, at least among the beneficiaries, legitimise the unequal representation and participation of the sexes in the programme.