

The long road to freedom

The end of apartheid has signalled a new beginning for women in South Africa's fisheries but real equality is still a far-off dream

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Women in fishing communities are increasingly moving from traditional, community based occupations to seeking employment in the labour market. While this is an opportunity for women, their employment is also largely in the male dominated fishing industry, where job segregation into 'less skilled and low paid' jobs for women define employment opportunities. However, engagement as members in local non-government networks help women to challenge these stereotypes. In South Africa, for instance, the recent legislation promoting opportunity for women in male dominated sectors of employment is an opportunity for women to earn wages equal to those of men.

The following is an example from fishing villages located in Saldanha Bay, 140 km outside Cape Town. It shows how life for women has changed since the time of apartheid, with formal independence slowly opening up opportunities to challenge oppression of patriarchy, race and class.

A fish processing factory was established in Saldanha Bay in 1964. Even today, the factory is the hub of economic activity in the region. Many women in the region find employment in the factory and, in addition, assist their men in pre- and post-harvest activities linked to the employment contracts of the men. A recent study in the region indicated that more than half the families earned

75 per cent of their income from fishing and related activities.

The situation was very different at the time of the establishment of the factory during apartheid years. African women could not enter urban areas without a residential permit, and were thus confined to the Bantustans where they cared for children and their aged relatives. Women with the requisite work permits were employed as housemaids, housekeepers or nannies in the homes of urban and rural white families. The migrant labour system, in addition to restricting job opportunities for women, reinforced patriarchal traditional practices by extending the authority of the traditional chiefs and their control over women living in the Bantustans. The multiple burdens of gender, race and class discrimination consigned black women to the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder.

The personal experience of living under apartheid is described by Nololo, a mother of four children and a women entrepreneur today in Saldanha Bay. Nololo's father was born in Lesotho, and walked to the gold mines in Johannesburg, where he stayed on, got a work permit, and managed to send money home. As a migrant, he was confined to living in a hostel in the goldmines as a single person for 11 months of the year. He was finally able to get a job on a trawler owned by a white fisherman in Saldanha Bay. After three years of separation, Nololo's mother decided to also move to Saldanha Bay to be near him. However, not having a residential permit, Nololo's mother could be arrested and jailed by the police if found living with her husband. Her life therefore revolved around avoiding arrest and

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View of fish processing factory at Saldanha Bay, South Africa. Many women in the region find employment in the factory and, in addition, assist their men in pre- and post-harvest activities linked to the employment contracts of the men

imprisonment. She was only home over weekends because that was the only time she could avoid the police searches for illegal residents. Thus Nololo, as an African child living in a coloured residential area, had little economic or social stability. "The instability of my family life forced me to go to high school in Cape Town and stay with a coloured family," she says. She completed her schooling at the age of 16. There were no other job opportunities but to work in the fish production factory because the only resource was the sea.

Today, Nololo is a small entrepreneur in Saldanha Bay. As she says, "I took advantage of affirmative action policies (in post-apartheid South Africa) by starting my own business at home. My son who was still a university student at the time assisted me to start my own business. I bought myself a caravan and changed it to a mobile from which to sell food. I sell seafood over weekends to the community." While Nololo's eldest daughter became a teenage mother, her other children took advantage of government policies of free education to break out of the cycle of impoverishment and social disadvantage. Her eldest son went to university to complete a law degree. One daughter has a Bachelor's degree in tourism and hospitality, and is seeking employment. Freedom of movement and affirmative action by the government provide a setting where women can aspire for good education and jobs.

However, for many women, available jobs are at the lower end of global supply chains. Even when they are able to obtain training and skills, they are denied employment in what are considered 'male' jobs.

Elsie lives in White City, a coloured township in Saldanha Bay. She had been trained to fish from a boat. However, Elsie has not worked as a fisher but takes on day jobs as a domestic worker in local white suburban homes. This income feeds her family and children. She is unable to find employment as a fisher because of the constraints on fishing quotas.

Lulu, who works on a sewing project, is a trained fisher who cannot find employment in Saldanha Bay. She trained as a line fisher and believed that the local fish processing factory would employ her after she had completed her training. However, she was denied employment on the grounds that she had no experience of the sector, yet men could get employment even without work experience.

The feminization of labour at the bottom of the supply chain, and the forced informality of work allows employers to flout all responsibility. Employers renege on

responsibility for meeting workers' needs of healthcare, pensions, maternity, leave time, compensation for on-the-job accidents, and workforce training. The removal of limits on working hours has particularly burdened women, since they continue to bear most of the responsibility to raise children and care for the sick and elderly, though they have entered the workforce in large numbers.

Many women, despite having employment, are unable to shift the power relations within the home because they are not economically independent. The temporary nature of their work prevents them from influencing decisions on behalf of their family. Josie described how her work kept her away from home for long hours during the day. However her husband, who was at home after the fishing quota was reached, refused to help with housework or child care. Instead he spent the time as a volunteer at a local NGO.

Women in the village spoke of high levels of delinquency amongst children because they were left to fend for themselves while their mothers worked long hours. There were high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, with the concomitant levels of gender based violence.

However, new legislations like the one promoting women in male dominated employment in South Africa are an opportunity for women to break the traditional barriers to entry into so-called male employment, and earn wages equal to those of their male counterparts.

Bonnie is employed as a cadet engineer on a fishing trawler. "I like adventure and being in a male workplace. At school I chose subjects like mathematics, physics and motor mechanic service because I thought I was going to work shifts with sailing guards. I chose the subjects because I enjoy fixing mechanical things. I am eligible for an engineering career because I have a school leaving certificate with a university entrance and can train to be a chief engineer on the trawler."

Bonnie's work entails going to sea for long periods. She does shift work, including going on trips for up to 47 days with men on the trawlers. On her last trip, she was one of two women with four men. Her tasks include mainly maintenance work, drilling holes, working with the grinder and fixing, packing and loosening the pumps. She is one of five girls in her family, and her father encourages her even though it is tough being a woman employed in a male world. As a young engineering cadet, Bonnie is aware of male jealousy and the capacity of verbal abuse to break her self-confidence. She is also more self-assured of her workplace rights than her parents because she is the first generation

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of youth to benefit from government affirmative action policies.

Not all young women share this perspective on gender equality. According to Nololo, only a minority of young women are training as engineers today because young women tend to undermine themselves. They lack the confidence of learning the skills required for what is considered men's work.

In contemporary post-apartheid South Africa, women now have formal equality and are protected by progressive workplace legislation. However, the intersection of race, class and gender as categories of identity appear more evident today than ever before. Twenty-one years of formal democracy have not enhanced the substantive rights of the majority of black South African women. This becomes evident when the stories of opportunities for older women intersect with those of the younger women.

The right to equality, as stipulated in the South African Constitution, offers the possibility of alternative versions of gender roles and expectations. The new opportunities allow children to have better educational, and consequently, better career opportunities than were available during the apartheid era. Women's participation in the economy increases women's economic contribution via both paid and unpaid labour, which makes them more visible. Therefore, formal equality does provide a measure of emancipation.

Furthermore, government legislation, which promotes preferential treatment for women in the workplace, benefits both black and white women with education. However, this formal equality has still not resulted in substantive equality for the large majority of women. This is the challenge facing women's organisations in the country. ❏