

# ‘Empowered’ Women

Learning from Women in Keiskammahoek,  
Ivory Park, and Mgababa

Andrew Bennie and Michelle Williams



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Ivory Park, and Mgababa**

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*Photographs by Andrew Bennie, Yolisa Nyoka, Ursula Skomolo*

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## Introduction

Women face many challenges in South Africa. The country has one of the highest rates of rape and domestic violence in the world, and women suffer from the structural violence of poverty—women are the largest category of people living in poverty—and have multiple burdens placed on them in their daily lives. The crises of poverty and violence impacts women particularly hard—women are said to be the ‘shock absorbers’ of poverty and suffering in the household. It is women who have to ensure that the family has food on the table and children and the elderly are looked after despite the lack of income and employment. And it is women who often suffer from domestic violence. These facts are often cited in news reports and therefore are well-known. What is less known, however, is that despite these enormous challenges, women continue to perform extraordinary acts in their everyday lives and in the process both access and create forms of individual and collective power. Women are not only victims, but many of them form the backbone of communities and are acting to change their communities in positive ways. It is in these everyday acts of kindness, courage, and perseverance that we see the strength of women coming to the fore. In this booklet we showcase seventeen women from three different communities all of whom are actively trying to improve their lives and the lives of people in their communities in various ways. In the routines of daily life, these women are challenging the slow violence of poverty by working together with others.

In the profiles of the women’s lives that we highlight here, we see different forms of power that act upon women, and that women invoke and use: structural power, movement power, symbolic power, and direct power. While power has very real effects, it is constituted through social relations and diffused throughout society, and therefore can also be changed and reconstituted. Understanding the different forms of power, then, is vital for transforming our communities. This guide hopes to offer tools with which women can further understand the ways in which they can build power for social transformation.

The biographies profiled here show women in their struggles to become agentic actors in their local spaces. They show the different ways in which and degrees to which women are empowered and the deeply intertwined nature of individual empowerment and larger social goals. The profiles focus on individual histories, goals and aspirations as well as their commitments to social change. We chose the women based on their effective agency in which their activities and empowerment have consequences for both their own lives and their communities. The women showcased here see their own personal development, women’s emancipation, and social transformation integrally interconnected.

The basis for this volume is that many women in South Africa, despite the tough conditions that they face, are working to build new forms of production, engaging in political structures, and helping their communities to deal with the myriad problems they face. These efforts are integral to building an alternative society, based on humanist values, economic solidarity, and democratic participation in the economy and polity. Building a new solidarity society is vital to overcoming the crises that our people face, of unemployment, poverty, hunger, inequality, crime, violence (including sexual and gender violence), the closing down of democracy, and of environmental destruction. There are therefore three important reasons for the development of this volume on building women’s power.

First, under capitalism we experience many different forms of oppression based primarily on class, race, and gender. As we build alternatives we need to be thinking about how we overcome these forms of

### Thinking about power

What do you think is the meaning of 'power'? Do women have power in our society? Can women build their power? What kinds of power can women build? Here are some ways of thinking about the kinds of power that women can build in society:

**Structural Power** – The power of social structures such as networks, ownership and control of value chains, and economic activities. Part of the structural power of capitalism is its capacity to shape and control lives through the economic and political sphere. To build counter-power requires building alternative economic relations and new political logics. Changing structural power is therefore about alternative production, consumption, financing and living patterns being developed. When communities meet their needs, such as food, through new, community-based structures rather than from dominant channels such as supermarkets, this builds structural power in communities. Or, if a community gets most of its food from a cooperative that is owned and run by women, this builds the structural power of women in the cooperative. We also build structural power through networking to connect the alternatives that women are building at the grassroots.

**Movement power** – Power of people and organisations coming together in civil society to act collectively to pursue the same goal, and organise collective capacities of their institutions, membership, and national and international links. Movement power is crucial to put pressure on the state and economic corporations.

**Symbolic power** – The power of the alternative. By creating alternative ways of producing, consuming, and living we demonstrate that another world is possible. Values and principles are crucial for symbolic power. Getting other people to believe in these alternatives is symbolic power. We build this power when we win the support of the public for our initiatives, based largely on moral and ethical values.

**Direct Power** – We build our direct power by using different methods to influence the public. This can involve mass campaigns, mass marches and other types of mass awareness raising through, for example, distributing flyers and pamphlets, going on radio, holding public events about the solidarity economy and food sovereignty, newsletters etc.

How do you think women can build the above kinds of power and what impacts can it make on society?

oppression and build power to achieve an equal and fair society. An important component is to focus on how we overcome inequality between men and women and ensure that women play a leading and equal role in society. That is, we need to be alive to and actively pursue building the power of women. Second, to build alternatives we need to constantly learn from experience, practice and theory to help guide us as we build power and an alternative society in South Africa. That is, we want to be learning, thinking, and feeling activists in our daily lives. Third, in order to build this pluralist and learning culture and increase our capacities, learning tools play a crucial role. Hence this volume on women building power in South Africa is aimed at sharing the experiences of some amazing women that we—both women and men—can learn from. The very real experiences, stories, and lessons of these women help us in building the power of women to play a leading role in transforming society and achieving a solidarity society!

The aim of this volume is therefore to tell these stories and uncover the ways in which women in poorer and marginalised communities in rural and urban South Africa are not simply sitting back and tolerating the conditions in which they find themselves. They are highly active in working to transform not only the conditions of their own lives, but that of their communities as well. This volume therefore also aims to be a learning tool that activists, men and women and all others who read it, can learn from how women are organising at the grassroots in different places.

A few key things that we can learn from the women's stories in this volume include:

- The importance of aiming not just for personal wellbeing, but community wellbeing and social transformation as well (i.e. Ubuntu—I am because you are);
- The importance of having a vision of the changes that we hope to bring about;
- The vital role of leadership by women. Many of the women in this volume have not waited for others to take action, but have taken the initiative to start projects, to mobilise others, and to build their initiatives;
- The key role of networking and building linkages in providing women with the space to advance their aims and visions;
- The importance of working together, on a collective basis, to overcome challenges; and,
- The need to find ways to put pressure on the state to support and make it easier for women to organise and access the means by which to advance their interests and aims.

The women in this volume come from three different communities: the rural areas of Keiskammahoek in Amahlati Local Municipality and Mgababa in Ngqushwa Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape and the urban township of Ivory Park in Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality in Gauteng. We have clustered the women's biographies by the area in which they live—Keiskammahoek, Ivory Park and Mgababa—and begin each section with a brief socio-economic description of the area in order to give the reader a sense of the conditions under which the women live.

## Poem about the power of women

Before getting started on reading the stories about the amazing women in this book, you may want to enjoy a poem about the power and strength of women. It was written by June Jordan in 1980 in honour of the women and children who marched in their thousands to the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956 to protest against having to carry passes in urban areas:

### **We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For**

*June Jordan*

Our own shadows disappear as the feet of thousands  
by the tens of thousands pound the fallow land  
into new dust that  
rising like a marvellous pollen will be  
fertile  
even as the first woman whispering  
imagination to the trees around her made  
for righteous fruit  
from such deliberate defence of life  
as no other still  
will claim inferior to any other safety  
in the world

The whispers too they  
intimate to the inmost ear of every spirit  
now aroused they  
carousing in ferocious affirmation  
of all peaceable and loving amplitude  
sound a certainly unbounded heat  
from a baptismal smoke where yes  
there will be fire

And the babies cease alarm as mothers  
raising arms  
and heart high as the stars so far unseen  
nevertheless hurl into the universe  
a moving force  
irreversible as light years  
traveling to the open  
eye

And who will join this standing up  
and the ones who stood without sweet company  
will sing and sing  
back into the mountains and  
if necessary  
even under the sea

we are the ones we have been waiting for



## The Women of Keiskammahoek

### Introducing Keiskammahoek

Keiskammahoek is located in the former Bantustan of the Ciskei in the Eastern Cape, about 100km inland from the coastal port city of East London. It lies in the foothills of the Amathole Mountains in the Amahlati Local Municipality, which covers the areas of Keiskammahoek, Cathcart, Kei Road and Stutterheim, and in turn falls under the Amathole District Municipality. The Keiskammahoek area also has a small town called Keiskammahoek, or QoboQobo, which was established in the 1800s as a British military outpost during the frontier wars with the Xhosa. The area has a rich history dating to before the arrival of colonial settlers and missionaries, as well as a proud history of Xhosa resistance to colonial rule.

Keiskammahoek is situated in what was known as the ‘frontier’ region of the Cape. Starting from the original Cape settlement of Cape Town, settlers began moving inland towards the North-east and encountered the Xhosa. In the British quest to expand the Cape colony, ‘Frontier wars’ broke out in the 1800s with the Xhosa, who were resisting this colonial expansion. The Xhosa were eventually overcome by the British and the Keiskammahoek area came to fall under the Cape Colony. Through this process Keiskammahoek and much of the ex-Ciskei region developed a heavy Christian missionary presence, who established mission stations, churches and schools throughout the region, evidence of which is still very much present today.

The town of Keiskammahoek was inhabited largely by a white population into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rural lands surrounding the town were occupied by white-owned farms, as well as native trust lands which were resided on by black populations. These black Africans lived on ‘trust’ land that was owned and administered by the South African Native Trust (SANT), which was established in 1936. However, from the 1960s (when the apartheid policies of separate development and their eventual culmination in semi-independent homeland governments came into force) the South African Native Trust decided to turn the whole of the Keiskammahoek district into one inhabited exclusively by Africans. It began buying up the white farms around Keiskammahoek as well as the white-owned properties in Keiskammahoek village. By the mid-1970s all whites had sold their properties to the trust and had departed the district.

Today, Keiskammahoek is a rural area with nucleated villages across the countryside. Instead of individual dwellings, homesteads and farmyards scattered over the landscape, these concentrated villages are a result of the deeply consequential historical policy of ‘betterment’ planning in the former reserves and homelands, under the former white governments. The apartheid ‘betterment’ policy was one of the cornerstones of the government’s social engineering practices, and essentially involved

the removal of people from their scattered residences and farming fields and consolidated them into concentrated residential areas. The now-vacant land was then strictly demarcated into irrigation fields and commonage land, and further division of the land forbidden. These demarcated arable lands were then often far away from the residential areas, and many people lost their access to land in the process of betterment.<sup>1</sup> This was part of a broader process whereby between 1960 and the early 1980s, about 3.5 million people were forcibly removed from one part of the country to be relocated to another.<sup>2</sup> However, the land tenure system in Keiskammahoek is a varied one, consisting of a combination of free hold and communal land. For example, Rabula village consists mostly of freehold land, and so was differently affected by betterment, and hence many of the houses are freestanding on individual plots of land. This had allowed for the development of some degree of class differentiation in areas such as Keiskammahoek where a small middle class began to develop off the ownership of land.<sup>3</sup> A key part of the history of Keiskammahoek in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was therefore the dynamics created by changing land policies that restructured and altered the way in which residents related to the land, and therefore how relationships among people were changed.

Today land allocation and administration is largely overseen by the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) structures at village level. Instead of going to the village headman to request land, as was the procedure during apartheid, one now approaches the SANCO chairperson, who then calls a meeting with his or her committee and the community to discuss the issue with them. This relates mostly to residential requests for land, and fields for farming are seldom allocated.



During apartheid, Keiskammahoek was an important labour sending area, with most households becoming dependent on the wages earned by migrant workers, often leaving women behind in the rural area. However, job losses after 1994, and therefore less migration from these areas, have led to the collapse of the rural economy. Unemployment in Keiskammahoek now stands at 78%.<sup>4</sup> As such, one of the main forms of household income is state grants. In terms of income, the 2011 National Census found that in the study area 26% of the population had an income of R400 (\$50) per month or less, and 53% of the population had income of R1600 (\$200) per month or less.<sup>5</sup>

Debbie Budlender and other researchers<sup>6</sup> conducted a survey on the situation of women's access to land in South Africa in three research sites, one of which was Keiskammahoek and over 400 women were surveyed,



in addition to focus group interviews. The survey confirmed high levels of unemployment and low incomes. Only 5% of the women surveyed were employed in a permanent job, 2% were employed in temporary or contract jobs, 15% sometimes engaged in casual work, 14% engaged in farming activities on their homestead's land, 29% were unemployed and looking for work, and 31% were unemployed but not looking for work. If one adds together those who are employed in temporary or contract jobs, casual jobs and unemployed and looking for a job, one arrives at a figure of 46% who are not employed in a stable job. This situation is further reflected in the fact that 75% of the women's main source of income was from government grants, while only 9% reported that their main source of income was from the wages of a household member.

It is in this context of high unemployment and poverty that the dynamism of the women we profile takes on special significance. For a variety of reasons, the women demonstrate their remarkable tenacity and continued commitment to trying to improve their lives and those around them.





## LUMKA MASO

**Chairperson of Seven Stars Dairy Trust, and member of Seven Stars Dairy Cooperative, Keiskammahoek, Eastern Cape**

### Personal Background and History

Lumka Maso lives in the town of Keiskammahoek in the Eastern Cape, where she is the Chairperson of the Seven Stars Dairy Trust, which is linked to the Seven Stars Dairy Cooperative. Seven Stars is a secondary cooperative, which has six primary cooperatives involved in dairy farming affiliated to it. The Seven Stars Dairy Trust is responsible for financial interactions of the cooperative, fund-raising, and developing relationships with other partners (e.g. government departments, the local municipality, and support organisations) that can assist the cooperative.

Lumka was born in the rural area of Whittlesea near Queenstown in the Eastern Cape, where most people relied on their own farming activities. Lumka was one of six children and because her father worked in Port Elizabeth and her mother worked as a full time domestic worker, she lived with her grandmother in one of the rural villages near Whittlesea. Her grandmother farmed wheat, mealies and sheep, which is where Lumka first learned how to farm and to be self-reliant from an early age.

Although Lumka loved education, she only completed Standard 6 because the high school was too far away from where she lived. But she never let this hold her back and she was always determined that she would not allow such disadvantages to prevent her from improving herself and her community. As she says, 'I grew up as a child who had vision. One of my visions was that I could create my own livelihood. I never had a vision that I would work somewhere, the visions that I had was that I would become a person who will work for herself.' She therefore felt that she did not need to be dependent, but that as a woman she was capable of overcoming barriers and realising her visions.

After Lumka married her husband, he went to Cape Town in search of work, which was very difficult for her as they had three children together. She originally went to Cape Town with her husband but suffered difficulties because of the apartheid-era pass laws at the time, which meant that they could only live in a shack on the outskirts of Cape Town. But even this shack was demolished by the city. Eventually she and her husband went back to Whittlesea in 1977, where they read in the newspaper that a new irrigation scheme was being established in Keiskammahoek, which was located 65 kilometers away from Whittlesea in the homeland of Ciskei. The scheme was looking for farmers to settle on it, and Lumka and her husband decided to make a go of it and become farmers. It was difficult for them to leave their family in Whittlesea, but they made the move to Keiskammahoek, where they became 'settlers' on the scheme. After a period of three years of being trained and showing that they had the ability to farm successfully, Lumka and her husband received a title deed to their house and the land on which they farmed. They faced many challenges, but Lumka believes that what helped them through the difficult

times was that ‘I am a person who likes working with her hands’ so she would do as much as she could to help with the income of the household. She also joined hands with other women who came together to produce items needed by local households based on the skills that they had, such as soap-making and knitting, and would also teach each other skills. It was both her individual drive to improve her life and the collective solidarity with other women that helped Lumka through the difficult period.

In 2003, many of the dairy farmers were struggling because they were milking their cows individually and therefore had to find outlets to sell the milk themselves. With the help of the Department of Agriculture, Lumka played a leading role in establishing the Seven Stars Dairy Cooperative as a way of bringing the farmers together, especially for the distribution and selling of the milk. She also realised that working together through a formal structure increases their power both in the market and in dealing with government. Lumka’s dream of ‘working for myself’, instead of a boss, was therefore made a reality. What’s more, because she had now become involved in a cooperative, it meant she also worked collectively with others. Lumka became the chairperson of the Seven Stars Dairy Trust when it was formed in 2010 and has therefore played a key role in developing the cooperative and working for its success, as an enterprise that produces healthy milk, provides employment to a number of people and contributes to the development of the Keiskammahoek area.

### **Community and Political Involvement**

Lumka Maso loves doing work that she thinks will help and develop her community. In this sense, she sees the work that she does at Seven Stars Dairy as not just about a livelihood for herself, but about ensuring that the community benefits through employment, cheap and high quality milk, and free harvesting of surplus maize. She is concerned about maintaining good relations through regular communication with the communities that surround the cooperative, who she says are happy with the cooperative.

As part of her commitment to bring about change in her community, Lumka has also been involved in a number of community organisations. She helped to establish and was once the chairperson of the Amahlati Crafters Association, but has since withdrawn because she was too busy with her trust work. The Crafters Association in Keiskammahoek, now run by another woman, brought together mainly women working on sewing, beadwork and other crafts. Lumka sits on the board of the government-funded Siyakolwa Community Works Programme, which aims at creating work in Keiskammahoek by employing people to undertake tasks identified by communities as necessary in their villages. Lumka is also chairperson of the Hawkers Association and helps other women in Keiskammahoek in that she has organised 20 women to buy milk cheaply from the cooperative and then sell it in town.

Furthermore, Lumka sees one of the primary aims of Seven Stars Dairy Cooperative to benefit the community of Keiskammahoek, through providing employment, youth development, healthy, nutritious food to the community and assisting small scale dairy farmers and vegetable producers. Part of her vision for the cooperative is for it to engage in different types of farming rather than only dairy. In doing this, she wants to ensure that the community is involved and benefits from such expansion. For example, she wants the cooperative to begin vegetables and fruit processing so that community members and small farmers can be supported by growing vegetables and fruit to sell to the cooperative, which the cooperative would then process into soups and so on. She also wants youth to start breeding calves that can then be sold to the cooperative for meat. Therefore, key to Lumka’s vision is not just a vision for the cooperative, but also for the direct role it can play in transforming the communities of Keiskammahoek.



### **Inspiration and Influence**

An important influence on Lumka's life was her experience growing up in poor conditions with her grandmother. Instead of only fighting for her own survival, she learned the importance of working together with and helping others to overcome hardships and improve each other's lives. As she says, 'When we were growing up we'd eat pap and sour milk in one big bowl and we'd have one spoon. So you'd take one spoonful and pass the spoon to the next person.' This is a key philosophy that has continued to guide Lumka through her life and everything that she does, which is illustrated by her involvement in community activities and in her understandings of the impact of her work at the dairy cooperative. Her grandmother also introduced Lumka to the church, which has had a strong and inspiring influence for Lumka in her life, teaching her the importance of caring for others and providing her with the self-discipline to achieve her visions. She also receives support from her husband, who is proud of her activities and strength.

As was mentioned earlier, key to Lumka Maso's inspiration is that she has clear visions for the activities that she is engaged in. Referring to the dairy cooperative, she says, 'I love it and I have visions about it and how it will progress. I have visions about what this thing is and what it can become.' Lumka has a vision for the cooperative to expand into other activities, such as processing of milk into yoghurt, processing and packaging of vegetables and fruit, and so on. She has always been inspired by visions of what she wants for herself, her family and her community, and takes action, often together with others, to achieve her dreams.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Lumka has faced a number of challenges in the process of becoming the woman she is and playing the important role that she does in her cooperative and community. These include both poverty and the challenges that she has faced as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Central to her and her husband's decision to move to Keiskammahoek was that they wanted to be independent. A key challenge for them was the conditions that they had to live under in Cape Town, where their shack was destroyed by the city authorities. They therefore saw moving to Keiskammahoek as a way to overcome challenges and build a new life independent of repressive apartheid state authorities.

Lumka also faced challenges as a woman leader in the Seven Stars Cooperative. Twice she was kicked out by male members of the board of directors of the cooperative, for reasons that were not made clear to her, but she feels it was because they could not handle having a strong woman leader in the cooperative. But twice they also begged her to come back! This is because once she was gone the men and the cooperative struggled and so they realised how essential she was to its success. Even when Lumka had been kicked out of the cooperative, she continued doing work that she believed benefitted the community and remained a member of the cooperative. It was then that she played a role in establishing the hawkers' and crafters' associations. So even though the experience of being kicked out of the cooperative was an extremely painful one, Lumka never let such challenges discourage her from working on activities that she hoped would benefit the people of her community and bring about social and economic change. Her attitude is summed up by her: 'I am growing with challenges; you'll never grow without challenges. I am not perfect, I do make mistakes but I learn from them. I don't have any problem and it is not that I am powerful and strong. I was telling my husband this morning that no matter what they say I am not going anywhere.' Lumka is an inspirational role model for both women and men in her community.

## NTOMBOLUNDI ZITHA

Fieldworker, Ntinga Ntaba Ka Ndoda Heritage and Development Organisation, Upper Ngqumeya in Keiskammahoek, Eastern Cape



### Personal Background and History

Ntombolundi Zitha was born and grew up in Upper Ngqumeya Village in Keiskammahoek, Eastern Cape and is a single parent of four children.

She dropped out of school in Standard 7 due to the fact that her parents could not afford to keep her in school and in 1989 she moved to Cape Town to find work, but returned to Upper Ngqumeya in 1997. In 2002 she then started getting involved in community activities and was elected to the ward committee in the same year. Ntombolundi then did an Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) course and completed matric in 2004.

In 2002 Ntombolundi also worked to establish Ntaba ka Ndoda, a community heritage and development organisation that works in 10 villages in Keiskammahoek South. It aims to use the historic mountain and monument, Ntaba ka Ndoda (Mountain of the Father), as a symbol around which to mobilise for community-based celebration and evolution of heritage, the promotion of human rights (in particular women's rights to land), and community-driven development. Since its inception, the organisation has been running an annual Ntaba ka Ndoda Festival to celebrate local culture and heritage and uses these as a basis upon which to mobilise and work for local development. The organisation recently modified its name to Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda (Ntinga meaning 'to soar') and has been undertaking the training of 18 fieldworkers to facilitate participatory development in the villages, has undertaken research on childhood development in the area, household and enterprise indicators, and small farmers, and is engaging with, and doing research around, the solidarity economy and food sovereignty. Ntombolundi Zitha is one of the fieldworkers of Ntinga and also sits on its executive. This means that she is now at the forefront of driving participatory and community-driven development and transformation in Keiskammahoek. Like Lumka, Ntombolundi's story is a deeply intertwined process of individual and community development.

### Community and Political Involvement

Unemployment is very high in the Keiskammahoek area. Ntombolundi believes it is mostly women who are trying to do things in their communities to make life better. This is similar to the experience of many of the women in rural areas we spoke to: they feel that men do very little in their communities, while it is women who are trying to take action. Ntombolundi feels that women have been mistreated by men in their personal lives, especially when an unequal power relation develops. Ntombolundi explains, 'When you are dependent on him, he will start treating you differently. I told myself I wouldn't be able to be

dependent on anyone.' She therefore prefers to spend her time working for the good of the community with other women who are similarly active. This has led her to be involved as a ward committee member, and she is currently a member of the village development committee. This committee was elected to oversee a grant that the village of Upper Ngqumeya has received for restitution from land that was taken from them during apartheid-era betterment planning. Fifty percent of these funds are going directly to households that were impacted by land dispossession in the 1970s and the other 50% is being used for community development and investment. The committee that she sits on is responsible for overseeing the use of these funds and the implementation of the projects that she hopes will contribute to transforming the conditions of her community, such as a community hall, early childhood development centres, irrigation for agriculture, fencing for fields to protect crops from animals and so stimulate agricultural production.

Ntombolundi has a very dynamic perspective on the potential of these funds, which she believes are crucial for the community to drive and implement projects that satisfy their collective needs, rather than waiting for government to deliver a better life. As she says, 'the government is not quick to do things for the people.' This does not mean that she believes that the government does not have an important role to play in meeting communities' needs, but that in the absence of such, communities should organise themselves to actively pursue the transformation of the conditions of their communities, and be clear where and what role they want government to play.

Ntombolundi Zitha also played a role in starting a community crèche where young children have a safe place to play and be cared for during the day, and she is now leading the creation of an organic farming cooperative with 10 other women. The aim of the cooperative is to supply the local villages of Keiskammahoek South with fresh and nutritious produce at low prices. This will help to address food insecurity and to build the power and ability of the communities to feed themselves instead of relying on the power of retail shops and large producers far away.

As part of building this community power to control their food economy, the cooperative also plans to purchase a maize milling machine. This will have major positive benefits for both the local communities and for local small-scale farmers. The small-scale farmers will have somewhere to mill and/or sell their maize produce, to be milled into mealie meal, and the community will have a local place to buy their mealie meal at much cheaper prices than what they currently pay at supermarkets. To achieve this requires building links between farmers, the cooperative and the community. Such a cooperative will be part of building the solidarity economy and food sovereignty in her village and Keiskammahoek South by creating new structures through which the villages meet their food needs (food sovereignty), and so Ntombolundi may therefore, together with her role in Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda, play an important role in building structural power to bring about social transformation in her surrounding communities. Once this cooperative is operating, and if it is successful, it will serve as a powerful example to the village and other communities of how communities can build ways to meet their food needs themselves.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Ntombolundi started getting involved in community activities in 2002. A key motivation for this was that she began attending feminist workshops, which began awakening her consciousness about why women suffer in our society and why women often occupy an unfair position in relation to men and the economy. The understanding and reflection that she undertook about the broader world around her,

and her and others' position and role in it, motivated her to act to change both her and other women's position in it, as well as the community itself. So she began working in the community by becoming active on community structures such as the ward committee to ensure that women are represented, and to work with women in her community in projects to build the power and independence of women.

Very important in Ntombolundi's personal growth and development as a community activist has been her experience of working in Ntinga. While being unemployed she used to tend to a vegetable garden on her land to help bring in fresh food for her family, rather than relying on a social grant alone. She therefore undertook important individual activity in order to look after herself and her family. But after working with Ntinga she has come to realise the value of organising and working *collectively* to overcome *collective* problems: 'Here in Ntaba ka Ndoda I learned a lot of things I didn't know about, such as networking with other people. Now I am able to help my children with their homework because now I am a person who is always reading books, so Ntaba ka Ndoda made me better.' This has also led her to want to start a feminist movement in her area, because she feels that women are suffering under the weight of patriarchy and poverty, and that it is taking its toll on women in her village physically, mentally and socially. She therefore wants to organise women to build their power in society, which she has already started to do through the first stages of establishing the cooperative with 10 other women mentioned above.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Ntombolundi's inspiration to do what she does has also arisen as a result of the challenges she has faced. Key has been the personal challenges she has faced in terms of personal relationships with men, which motivated her to want to build her own independence and that of other women as well. However, she also continues to face challenges in relation to men's perceptions and prejudices in her organisational work. She feels that many times she is challenged by a few men in Ntinga and in community structures because they are not used to working with women on an equal basis. As Ntombolundi complains, 'It is not that nice leading in a NGO with men because they can never accept that a woman can lead.' The transformation of men, however, is also part of the process of gender equality and women's empowerment. Ntombolundi says that she will not let this challenge hold her back from playing a leading role in activities aimed at transforming and building her community: 'I am a kind of a person who if I am involved in something I won't leave it until it succeeds.'

## What is 'food sovereignty'?



Food sovereignty is when people, communities and countries control their own food systems, rather than when markets and corporations control food systems. Those who produce our food are placed at the centre of food sovereignty and valued highly. Food sovereignty is also about local production for local consumption. Cooperatives can play an important part in building food sovereignty because they are ways to make sure that people, working together, control the production of food. They therefore build the independence of communities in producing and controlling their own food.

What role do you think women have to play in building food sovereignty and ending hunger in their communities?



## THABISA MHLAHLO

Fieldworker at Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda, Burnshill, Keiskammahoek, Eastern Cape

### Personal Background and History

Thabisa Mhalahlo was born in the small rural village of Burnshill near Keiskammahoek in the Eastern Cape, but moved to Katlehong in Gauteng when she was three months old to live with her aunt, because her mother was too young to raise her and needed to finish school. She grew up and went to primary and high school in Katlehong and then studied at the Johannesburg College of Education, but dropped out to work as a temporary teacher at a number of different schools from 2001 to 2005. After her contract ended she found work as a caregiver through a sister of a teacher that she had worked with who had started a care centre and hospice. She received training and worked at this hospice as a caregiver and counsellor to HIV/AIDS patients from 2006 until 2010, when she returned home because her aunt who had raised her suffered a stroke and needed someone to care for her. To earn some income she worked for the government's Community Works Programme, filling potholes in the roads, until her village elected her to be one of two fieldworkers from Burnshill (also known as Mkhubiso) for the local community organisation, Ntinga Ntaba Ka Ndoda, in 2011. Much of her time is now spent working for this organisation, and therefore her community, in local participatory development, heritage, human rights, education, and the solidarity economy. At the same time she is also a single mother who balances her community activism with caring for her children without the direct assistance of their father.

At the same time she is also a single mother who balances her community activism with caring for her children without the direct assistance of their father.



### Community and Political Involvement

Thabisa is a member of the ANC and secretary of her village's SANCO. She joined these organisations in 1994 because 'I liked the ANC through the things Nelson Mandela stood for, and I saw that he was doing the right thing to fight for us and I followed him.' She was even the chairperson of the ANC Youth League branch in Katlehong when she lived there, and she continues to be active in these organisations today. She is now the secretary of her village's SANCO branch as well. Her work as a fulltime fieldworker focuses on community work, engaging with the community to build capacity and to organise them to collectively transform the Keiskammahoek area. She works specifically on one of Ntinga's key programmes, the Integrated Community Development Plan (ICDP). This process is different to the government's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) process run by municipalities, in that with the ICDP *communities develop the plan themselves*. As Thabisa explains it, 'ICDP you [communities] do things on your own, you don't just wait for the government to come with a spoon in your mouth and say "Ok, open your mouth, here is the food", then you just chew, you don't care whether they put potato or pumpkin in your mouth, you have to chew it.' The ICDP involves communities building their power to participate in developing their development plans themselves, which describe what they want to see happening in their communities.

She is also the chairperson of the Youth Group at her church. In addition to this, Thabisa is very active physically, and even started and coaches local rugby and netball teams in her village. She started this when her daughter came to her and said that she wanted to start a rugby team so that she could play rugby. Thabisa told her to go ahead and find other girls to play and that she would coach them. This started her village's girls rugby team, which she still coaches and which travels to different parts of the province to play matches.

In addition to rugby, Thabisa also coaches the girls' soccer team in Burnshill as well as playing soccer herself. She started playing soccer when at school and her brother's soccer team was missing a player, so he asked her to fill in, which she did. She excelled at it and enjoyed it so much that she has continued to play soccer since then. In fact, she currently plays in her village's soccer team, which is a men's team! Through this, she is extending the personal fulfilment that she gets through playing sports that she enjoys to the community so that they can also engage in this sort of activity and reap similar personal benefits. Thabisa sees that sports that she promotes and supports as important in the social development of her community: 'I like sports because it keeps the kids busy... When they have something that keeps them busy they know that Saturday they'll be playing sports and Sunday they'll be going to church and when they come back from church they'll go watch a match somewhere. It keeps them busy and in a routine so that they won't find the chance for boys and get pregnant at an early age, and keep the boys from drinking alcohol, you see.'

Furthermore, she has even started a youth discussion and support group, which is aimed at facilitating discussion between young people on matters relating to sexual health and activity, and HIV issues. She holds this discussion group every Saturday afternoon at her home.

### Inspiration and Influence

Thabisa is thus actively involved in her community on many different levels. The reason for her being so involved is that 'I love being involved with the community, especially things that will build the community. [...] I want to see my community developed.' A key inspiration for her came from the church when she was young. She would spend a lot of time at the church after school to avoid going

home where her father was often abusive to her mother. She spent a lot of time talking with other women who were suffering domestic abuse, and this gave her strength and courage to know that she was not alone, and even to eventually talk to her mother about her abusive relationship with her father. She managed to persuade her mother to divorce her father. This sort of strength has carried on into her current community-oriented work, where she does not let bias and discrimination against women hold her back, but pursues her work without thinking about the fact that she is a woman, thus breaking free of the mould imposed by social and cultural norms of patriarchy.

Thabisa has also been inspired by her aunt who she sees as her ‘mother’ and who brought her up in a safe and secure environment. A further important influence on her life has been her involvement in the organisation Ntinga, because she says that although it aims at transforming the community, it also focuses strongly on ‘building ourselves first’. That is, it is important as a person who wants to organise for change in their communities to be open to changing one’s self – self-transformation – and to reflect on one’s own behaviour and perspectives, and wanting to build one’s own perspectives, understandings and capacities, thus building a person who is better equipped to be a part of effecting positive transformation in the world.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Thabisa feels that she has not faced too many personal challenges as a woman, but is actively conscious of the need for gender equality and to not let stereotypes and inequalities hold her back from participating fully in her organisation to bring about transformation in her community. For example, she points out that in Ntinga Ntaba Ka Ndoda, they specifically work in ways that do not reproduce inequality between the men and women in the organisation. As she humorously points out, ‘When we eat lunch we sometimes select men to prepare it!’ Furthermore, she does also feel that in organisations and in the community it is often the case that even though it is mostly women who carry the burdens of poverty and of trying to develop livelihoods in the villages, they are often not listened to when they speak. But together with other community members, they have actively addressed the issue in community meetings and she now feels that things have improved in this regard.

Thabisa has, however, suffered from domestic abuse in her marriage. Since she had seen her mother go through the same thing she knew that she would not let it happen to her, so she quickly divorced the man who was abusing her. She felt that as a woman she did not have to tolerate such treatment, that women do not have to just endure such things because a man should be able to do what he wants. This sort of strength translates into her steadfast independence and determination to work in her community for collective improvement and benefit, to overcome both the personal challenges that women face at home and to change the social conditions that women experience in their communities, linked to poverty and unemployment.

A key challenge that Thabisa also faces is the lack of a stable income. As a fieldworker she gets paid a stipend that also depends on the organisation having funds available. She faces pressure from family and friends, some of whom cannot understand why she works so passionately if she is not earning a good income. But according to Thabisa, she does it because she loves it and knows that it will pay off in the long term when real transformation happens in the area. As she confirms, ‘Each and every thing I do for the community, I don’t do it for my own purposes, but for the community to benefit.’ Furthermore, she feels that her involvement in Ntinga Ntaba Ka Ndoda has also increased her capacities and helped her to personally grow and transform herself, which is a crucial factor in women being able to play a role in their communities to achieve personal and social transformation.

## THOBEKA FINCA

**Fieldworker, Ntinga Ntaba Ka Ndoda Heritage and Development Organisation, Upper Rabula, Keiskammahoek, Eastern Cape**

### Personal Background and History

Thobeka Finca was born into a family headed by a single mother in Keiskammahoek in the rural village of Upper Rabula. She lived with seven other children with her unemployed mother until she reached Grade 7 and then moved to Cape Town to attend high school and live with her sister-in-law to help relieve the pressure on her mother. In Grade 8 Thobeka's sister-in-law introduced her to the Children's Resource Centre (CRC) in Khayelitsha township, where she remained active for five years. She was part of the children's group and was responsible for organising activities for children so that they had something to keep them occupied after school, and keep them away from drugs, crime, gangster activities and so on and to instead channel them into programmes that assist in their empowerment and personal development.



After finishing high school Thobeka moved back to Keiskammahoek in 2003. She did some of her subjects that she did not do well in during Matric in Dimbaza, and then moved back to Cape Town in 2007 where she received training at an institute in computer skills. She remained in Cape Town to volunteer to train others, in both computer and life skills, which she did because of her own experience of poverty and therefore she wanted to help others that had been through many of the same struggles as her. She did this work for three years but also needed to find a job to support herself and her child. However, she could not find a job and so moved back to her village in Keiskammahoek, where she met a member of the local community heritage and development organisation, Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda, and began to work with the organisation, helping to organise its annual heritage festival. Now, in addition to being a single mother of two children, she is also one of 14 fieldworkers and plays a leading coordination and facilitation role in the organisation, which is aimed at developing and transforming the area of Keiskammahoek South, through the participation and activity of the communities themselves. That is, it aims to build community power to change the circumstances of the communities and villages of Keiskammahoek South, through programmes like education and research, an Integrated Community Development Plan formulated by the communities themselves, and solidarity economy and food sovereignty work.

### Community and Political Involvement

Thobeka used to be a member of the ANC and was responsible for organising and coordinating meetings, and would mediate in meetings between the leaders and community members. When she joined she felt that 'joining the ANC was in remembrance of the great efforts of our past leaders. For me it meant



joining a rich legacy and they earned and deserved the support of any black person.’ But she became disillusioned with the party and so is no longer a member. She feels that it no longer embodies the values and principles of what people fought for during apartheid, and leaders today instead work for personal benefit rather than broader collective benefit.

As a result, through the organisation Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda, Thobeka is working with the communities quite differently. She has realised that the communities of Keiskammahoek, where there is poverty and high unemployment, can no longer wait for promises from government to be fulfilled, but that instead communities can be mobilised to undertake their own development and formulate clear demands as to what role they need government to play in a process that is driven from the grassroots by the community, rather than waiting for the government to drive things. She is adamant that ‘the solutions must come from the community and the execution and implementation must involve the community.’ For her, this is about building power in communities through building capacities for communities to ‘run the show ourselves.’ As she explains, ‘We shouldn’t depend on people to do everything for us. If we learn to do things ourselves we could combat many of our societal problems like crime, limited education, and unemployment.’

Her commitment to realising transformation in her community is illustrated by the fact that in addition to her work as a fieldworker and coordinator in Ntinga she is also involved in the Community Policing Forum (CPF), where she was elected by her community to work on youth issues and to engage with youth involved in crime. This election came about because her community had become familiar with her community work through Ntinga and so trusted her ability and commitment in undertaking the role.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Many factors have influenced the person Thobeka has become and the work that she has chosen to do, beginning with her upbringing in a household of sisters and a single mother, all strong and independent women. But an important period in Thobeka’s life was her time spent at high school in Khayelitsha in Cape Town, where she was involved with the Children’s Resource Centre and where she and the other children that were members were taught self-discipline, to look after one’s self, and about the importance of caring for others and getting actively involved in working for the wellbeing of those around you. The Children’s Resource Centre was established in 1983 with the aim of building a children’s movement in South Africa that can help to build a better world for children. To achieve this the Children’s Resource Centre runs a number of programmes and campaigns that are aimed at empowering, socialising and assisting the personal development of children to be healthy and constructive members of society so that they can help build a better world. Thobeka’s involvement in this organisation has thus impacted significantly on the role she now plays in building power in her community. Thobeka was also influenced by her Guidance teacher at high school, who gave her a lot of advice and encouragement, and helped her to open up to and communicate with others.

All these influences have come together in her current role in Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda, which requires self-confidence, an ability to engage with individuals and communities, an ability to mobilise people around their needs and relate to them, and strong interpersonal skills. Thobeka says that it was through this organisation that she ‘gained consciousness and became more aware of my position in my community. I began to think of ways in which I could influence and better my community. [...] Our



situation shouldn't define and confine us. The ideas that we advocate in Ntaba ka Ndoda, that we could change our situations and create jobs on our own for ourselves, motivated me and enticed me to join the organisation.' Thought and practice have therefore both impacted on Thobeka's self-awareness, with her consciousness developing through the learning process in Ntinga but also through her practical work, in which her thought shapes her practice and her practice shapes her thought, thus further motivating her to work for transformation based on people's needs.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Thobeka faces challenges in working in Ntinga Ntaba ka Ndoda that arise out of working in an organisation with other people, such as unequal workload and responsibility, and the dynamics and skills required for working collectively with others. She also faces challenges that the organisation faces when working with communities, and with trying to achieve cooperation from the state and local ward councillors. But she also faces challenges specifically as a woman in an organisation that also has men working in it who have traditional attitudes towards the expected roles of women in relation to their roles in the organisation and the lack of respect shown towards women's views and perspectives. However, Thobeka feels that this shouldn't hold women back, that the best way to challenge it is to show that women are equally capable as men. She finds such attitudes a big problem because 'I don't think of myself as a woman, I think of myself as a human being first. So I generally don't go well with sexism and male chauvinists.' However, Thobeka also believes that it is crucial to address such issues directly. For example, after an incident in which she felt severely discriminated against by a male fieldworker, she deliberately raised it as an issue that the organisation should confront. The result was that the organisation held a workshop with all the fieldworkers on gender equality, and she feels that the same male fieldworker – as well as all the fieldworkers – now has a different perspective on gender issues.

Thobeka feels that the issue of gender equality needs to be constantly dealt with and mobilised around at the community *and* household level. The first level is for women to take a stand and not submit to patriarchy in their private and public lives. In this way, women can collectively build the power of women. The second is to directly deal with the creation of patriarchy: 'the message on gender equality needs to be stressed more, because how they [men] act is a result of their upbringing. They grew up in a patriarchal environment, from their homes things were done this way and it has always been that way for them. So it will take some hard work for them to readjust to this idea of women and men being treated as equals.' In other words, gender inequality is a relational issue and to overcome it must involve both women and men. She therefore believes that the problem of power between men and women requires the involvement of both to overcome: women need to actively build their confidence and power in relation to men and in society as a whole, but men also need to be worked with to change their attitudes and practices. That is, both men and women need to be built up as full and equal human beings.

## HAPPINESS NGCUPE

Lower Rabula Village, Keiskammahoek,  
Eastern Cape

### Personal Background and History

Happiness Ngcupe was born in Lower Rabula village in Keiskammahoek and attended school in the nearby town of Alice. She did not complete matric because her parents could not afford to keep her in school. In 1998 she went to work on a farm near Cape Town. She initially worked as a labour recruiter, finding people to work on the farms for the farmers. However, while working there she engaged in labour issues and realised that workers on farms were actually being exploited. Because the employment was seasonal, she decided to look for a more stable job and found one at a legal advice office in 2001, where mainly workers would come for advice and legal assistance for unfair dismissals, unfair treatment at work and so on. While she had previously been



recruiting labour for farm owners, she now found herself fighting for the rights of workers, against the farmers. However, it soon became clear that the man she was working for at the advice office was defrauding workers who came to him for help, by charging them a lot of money but not doing any work on their case. The office was eventually shut down in 2005, and then after a few months without a job she went to the shops to buy groceries and the manager of the shop tried to take her trolley and give it to a white woman. She refused to give the trolley and reprimanded the manager. A local union office bearer witnessed this and after talking to her, let her know that there was a position open in the union's local office. She was hired as an organiser in 2005, which also involved community organising, and worked there until 2010. In this role she organised a number of protests with community members in Cape Town over service delivery issues. Some of these protests became very intense, with the state responding with repression and arrests of volunteer workers fighting for better work conditions from the municipality. Happiness was at the forefront of these struggles with the police and the state.

In 2010 she was tired of living in an urban township and yearned to return home to the rural area of Rabula in Keiskammahoek. She was also pulled back to her home because 'I wanted to work in the rural areas because I know that people from the rural areas are suffering and they don't know where to go when they need assistance. There is a lot of pressure here in the rural areas and I told myself I will go to the rural areas because there are a lot of things I want to change there.' When she returned she was struck by the poverty and unemployment in the area, and the sense of people that government is not helping with anything and therefore there is nothing they can do. She suggested to a group of women that people need fresh, healthy bread in the area and that they should therefore establish a bakery. However, a key challenge was that they didn't have the training nor the equipment and infrastructure to establish

it. Happiness therefore contacted a woman at the Eastern Cape legislature who put her in contact with the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) who helped them register as a cooperative. Once registered they went to the local Department of Social Development office to ask for assistance with training and funding. She was told that the cooperative needed to show that the community supported the cooperative with a letter. The community initially showed support for the bakery cooperative and wrote the letter, but when a meeting was held with the community and the Department of Social Development they all opposed it, saying the reason being that Happiness was a member of the DA (Democratic Alliance). The Department of Social Development then said that if the community does not want the bakery then they cannot support it. Happiness feels that it was the local ANC councillor who organised the community to oppose the bakery, because he was from a different political party and did not want someone from the DA gaining any kind of foothold in the community.

### **Community and Political Involvement**

Happiness is a member of the DA because she believes that the ANC is not doing anything to transform the lives of the majority of people. Although she knows that there are criticisms of the DA, Happiness works hard to campaign for the DA in her community because she believes that it can provide an alternative for people. She even campaigned to become a councillor in her area in 2011. Happiness is driven by her desire to see transformation in her community rather than push the line of a political party. Happiness is also involved with the women's group at her church and works with the church youth group on doing traditional dance. Happiness has shown the youth dance group how to do dances like the traditional Zulu dance 'Iphitombi', and the group has also done a play called Sarafina, which they have performed for the church.

### **Influences and Inspiration**

Like many of the women in this book, Happiness's mother has played a strong role in influencing the type of woman that Happiness is and the types of things that she has done. Her mother's strength has been a model for Happiness. For example, Happiness relates a particular story that left a great impression on her. In the 1970s there was violence in Keiskammahoek between local male youth and a number were killed. When the then Ciskeian parliament wanted to investigate the issue, Happiness's mother was one of the witnesses called to give information to the parliament in Bisho. Seeing her mother from a small village in rural Keiskammahoek able to stand up in a parliament and explain to parliamentarians the events that took place had a lasting impact for Happiness and provided a role model for her. This has helped to inspire her to work to overcome challenges and achieve her goals, and to have a positive influence in her community.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

The example of the attempt to start a bakery illustrates a key challenge that Happiness has faced in trying to work for change in her community – the power of the state and the divisive and destructive impacts of local power party politics. In this case, the local party politics was able to mediate support from the state. What is interesting is that the bakery was stopped despite the fact that many of the members of the cooperative were not DA members – the cooperative was not about political allegiances, but about collective benefit irrespective of political affiliation. Nonetheless, Happiness has not let this get her down, and continues to work in her community, campaigns for her political party, and keeps pressurising the councillor on the lack of services and jobs in her community.

## THOBEKA NCIZA

**Ward Committee Member and Supervisor in Community Works Programme, Mkhubiso Village, Keiskammahoek, Eastern Cape**

### Personal Background and History

Thobeka Nciza was born in the village of Mkhubiso (also known as Burnshill, named after the Christian mission station established by missionaries in the 1800s). She attended school in Mkhubiso until Grade 10, when her mother could no longer afford to keep her in school. She then found a job working in a shop in the town of Keiskammahoek (QoboQobo), where she worked for 9 years until it closed down in 2003. She therefore returned home to Mkhubiso and gave birth to her first child. She then became involved in community activities and has since remained very involved in various activities. She also became involved in the ANC because she believed that many people that had been elected to leadership positions were lazy and did not represent communities once they had been elected. She therefore wanted to get into a leadership position so that she could genuinely serve the community that had elected her, and in the process also improve the leadership in the area.



### Community and Political Involvement

In 2006 Thobeka was elected onto the local ward committee, as a result of the role she played in two important developments in her village. The first was that at the time transport for residents of the villages in the Keiskammahoek area was a major challenge, as there was simply no public transport in the area. A number of villages nearby elected a committee to work to solve the transport issue, which included Thobeka. They eventually managed to persuade a transport company to start operating in the area, and a bus now passes through all the villages twice a day. The second important process that she was involved in was helping to bring 50 kilowatts of free electricity to the village by the municipality, which the community was very happy to receive.

In her role as a ward committee member Thobeka was responsible for engaging with the community and the councillor on local development issues, and had to go to local municipality meetings on the Integrated Development Plan where she represented her ward on their desires for improvements in their ward.

Thobeka has since been elected as a traditional councillor in the Ngqika Tribal Authority. She also works as a supervisor in Siyakholwa, the government-funded Community Works Programme (CWP), which employs community members for eight days per month to undertake work that is needed in

the villages, such as clearing alien vegetation, building bus stops and so on. As a supervisor she is responsible for coordinating the programme in her area and overseeing the work that is done. Although some people are critical of the programme because of the dependence it creates and the low wages it pays, Thobeka believes that she and the programme play an important role, because it also provides those who participate in it training in a wide range of activities, thus equipping people for work beyond the programme.

In addition to all of these activities, Thobeka is also involved in a small poultry project with other community members, in which they raise chicks from a young age and then sell them to the community at a reasonable price. Like all the women profiled here, Thobeka feels strongly in actively changing the conditions in which she lives. This is illustrated in the reasons she and the other members chose to start the poultry project because 'we wanted to start a project for the community and we didn't want to sit around and not do anything.'

### **Inspiration and Influences**

Thobeka's main inspiration is the desire to see change in her community and the quality of life of its residents improve: 'I am not lazy and I am willing and eager to see people helped in the community.' She also feels that the work that she does further inspires her because she gains experience, skills and training that make her a better leader. Thus for her, personal transformation and growth and social transformation in her community are closely linked. Furthermore, she believes in the central role that women have to play in building communities. As she says, 'A woman can stand for a nation.'

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Thobeka is truly committed to realising improvements in the lives of the community in which she lives. However, in her role as a ward committee member she sometimes found herself frustrated. For example, she would engage with the local municipality on important community issues and needs, but most of the time there would be little action from the municipality in addressing them. This therefore illustrates the challenge of how women who are working for change in their communities can build their power to make the state more responsive. Thobeka also faces challenges from within the community, such as men's attitude towards the role of women and jealousy and struggles for resources, but she still believes that 'as a leader you should focus on what you want for the village and know that you're doing what you're doing because you love it.'



## The Women of Ivory Park

### Introducing Ivory Park

Ivory Park is a peri-urban township situated 30 kilometres northeast of South Africa's largest city, Johannesburg, and 30 kilometres south of the Capital city, Pretoria. Until 2011, it was comprised of three wards (wards 77, 78 and 79), but due to population growth two wards were added, wards 110 and 111.

### Understanding the ward system in South Africa

The system of wards in South Africa was developed as a mechanism of building participatory democracy, in theory. The whole of South Africa is divided into wards (the criteria for the size of each ward based on the number of people, hence geographically wards differ in size), each with a ward councilor and a ward committee. The ward councilor and the ward committee are then responsible for acting as the link between the citizenry and local government.





Ivory Park was established in 1990 out of people's need for urban housing, and has continued to experience significant growth since its beginnings and is now an established township with all the related economic, political and social dynamics. Ivory Park was the first legal township in South Africa's northern province of Transvaal to be planned and sanctioned by the state and is situated next to Midrand municipality in what is now Gauteng Province. Facing increased homelessness in the cities, the then Transvaal Provincial Authority (TPA) identified land on which people who were living illegally on farms South of Johannesburg, and those who could no longer find space to live in other townships, could be resettled. The site of Ivory Park was chosen when the TPA expropriated a farm called Kaalfontein on which to create a transit camp for 'squatters' who were to be re-located eventually to a new township site. However, after new legislation was passed in 1991 allowing for the legal establishment of informal settlements, Ivory Park became a 'laboratory' for the new policy which allowed the authorities to create legal informal settlements by providing minimally serviced sites to residents on which they could build their own houses, or in most cases, shacks.

Thus, Ivory Park formed out of people choosing to move there and hence adopting a process of collective struggle to access land for housing. Ivory Park's beginnings are, therefore, characterised by positive experiences of home and citizen-making, as opposed to 'forced removals' and relocations that were a prevalent experience under apartheid (and that continued to occur in the post-apartheid period). Some researchers found that all of the people that moved from Tembisa to Ivory Park had in common the fact that 'they were seeking a place they could call their own'.<sup>7</sup>

Ivory Park was originally established to relocate homeless residents, but after its establishment its

population mushroomed with an influx of job seekers from rural areas in South Africa as well as from other countries. As has been mentioned, Midrand was a high-growth area and hence attracted a large number of job seekers. Thus while Ivory Park was established in 1990 with 500 sites provided with temporary services, by 1995 there were 16 623 sites, as well as an additional 10 000 illegal informal dwellings. The current population of Ivory Park stands at over 140 000. With its burgeoning population, by the mid-1990s Ivory Park still had severely inadequate services such as proper sewage and sanitation, piped water and so on. In one protest action, a group of women dumped buckets of excrement on the doorsteps of the TPA's offices in protest at the poor toilet systems that remained in place.

According to the 2011 census, 49% of households are formal brick and mortar structures, with most amenities of sanitation, water and electricity, while 39% of the population live in informal shack dwellings without formal electricity, water or sanitation.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, many formal households rent out backyard shacks to families, such that in Ward 77 of Ivory Park, there is an average density of 3.36 households per stand.<sup>9</sup> (In terms of government services, Ivory Park is relatively well-served. Most households have access to piped water, whether within the home or on the street, as well as to electricity (although 'illegal' electricity connections also exist). Furthermore, most households have access to a flush toilet within the home. There are also growing shack settlements within Ivory Park that have to use communal portable chemical toilets due to the lack of fixed flush toilets.

The township has an unemployment rate of around 50%. In a COPAC socio-economic survey of 400 households and 120 enterprises in Ivory Park,<sup>10</sup> 26% of households reported that no one living in their house was employed, 27% reported that only one person works and only 22% reported that more than



one person is employed. Of the households where someone works, only 20% have formal jobs, while another 20% have informal jobs. Many of these informal jobs are located within Ivory Park, where there are visibly large numbers of informal street traders selling fruit, vegetables, chickens, snacks and appliances, small *spaza* shops, butcheries, carpentry and so on.

Incomes are also relatively low in Ivory Park, with 60% of households reporting that they have a monthly income of less than R1000 (\$102), and only 16% had an income of R1000-R3000 (\$102-\$306) per month. As a point of comparison, the average minimum wage in South Africa is R1500 per month. Only 6% stated that they had an income of more than R3000 per month. Many of those who are employed work in the nearby economic and industrial hubs of Midrand and Kempton Park, but the availability of jobs, as across South Africa, are insufficient, and hence there is a relatively high unemployment and poverty rate in Ivory Park. One of the key dimensions in which this expresses itself is in the realm of food consumption. The *Johannesburg Poverty and Livelihoods Study* found that only 28% of households were food secure, that 23% were 'moderately food insecure' and that 45% were 'severely food insecure'.<sup>11</sup> Given other important studies uncovering the crisis of hunger in South Africa, it is embedded in a broader crisis of social reproduction in the country. A key cause of hunger and malnutrition in locations like Ivory Park is of course the unemployment and cash poverty described above, but it also illustrates the de-linking of community and social control over food systems in South Africa and the world.

This brief overview of Ivory Park provides a context for the women's profiles that follow. It's an overcrowded, peri-urban space that was borne out of struggle in which many of the women included here participated. The people who settled in Ivory Park came there seeking a home of their own. Given the poverty and unemployment existing in the township, and the many associated social issues that arise out of this, there are a number of projects, initiatives and cooperatives that have arisen that aim to deal with a broad spectrum of issues, including the creation of employment, child care, elderly care, drug abuse, HIV-AIDS and health care, and so on.



## JANE NKOSI

**Manager, Thuthukani Care Centre,  
Ivory Park, Gauteng**

### Personal Background and History

Jane Nkosi established and continues to manage the Thuthukani Care Centre in Ivory Park, which looks after orphans and children of parents who suffer from illnesses such as HIV and therefore are unable to properly care for their children. Jane was born in Mbombela in Mpumalanga and in 1983, after high school, moved to Tembisa, North of Johannesburg. In 1991 she moved to the adjacent Ivory Park township where she managed to obtain a house stand, during the period when Ivory Park was being established as the first legal informal settlement. In 1992 she started working at Thuthukani Clinic as a counsellor for people who were having their blood tested for HIV. It



was from there that she then began a support group for the ill people that she was engaging with at the clinic and started a food garden to help them access nutritious food. During this experience, she also realised that it was very difficult for ill parents to look after their children.

In 2003 she established a crèche where the children of these parents could be looked after during the day, and thus easing their burden. She spoke to the local councillor who supported her vision. The councillor allocated her a piece of land on which to build the crèche. She started the crèche, to look after children between the ages of two and eighteen years, only with a few donations. But she then managed to secure the support of a number of donors, such as the Department of Social Development, the African Bank and other companies, and she was then able to construct proper buildings. These donors also helped with providing food, blankets, clothing and so on for the children being looked after at the crèche. She continues to receive support from a number of important donors and because of the support she has secured to keep the centre running, none of the parents of the 312 children that she looks after have to pay any fees. All the children are looked after during the day, participate in educational activities, and receive nutritious meals at the centre.

### Community and Political Involvement

Although Jane's work at Thuthukani Centre is already playing an important role in the community by caring for its children, she also tries to engage directly in the community in other ways. For example, she keeps an eye out for households and children in the community that are in need, and connects them with local social workers to provide support to them. To facilitate this process Thuthukani Centre

provides office space for two local social workers. She is also involved in the Ivory Park Women's Forum, which aims to help women that are engaged in community projects and cooperatives to address their challenges, access support and so on. For example, she noticed that a local school had sewing machines that were not being used. She negotiated with the principal to take the machines on loan in order to start a sewing project at Thuthukani Centre, as a place for the guardians of the children at the centre to work and earn an income.

The sewing project sews graduation gowns for the local schools, and again Jane was crucial in securing the orders. She has also approached Food and Trees for Africa, which has provided training, seedlings and compost so that the households of the children at the centre can grow food at home, and at the centre, to help with the nutrition of their households. The children who come from the extremely poor households receive food parcels (often from the Center's garden) to take home with them on the weekends in order to ensure the children have some food over the weekend. Importantly, Jane and the Thuthukani Centre have also worked to establish links with other institutions in the community. For example, they engaged with local high schools and asked for students to volunteer to come to the Centre after school and help the younger children with their homework, thus brining capacities into the centre and sharing them.

Jane is an active member of the local ANC branch and has very supportive and good relations with the ward counsellor. She recognises that the support she receives from the ward counsellor might be linked to the active role she plays in the ANC. To her the main goal is assisting the Center and trying to improve the lives of children in the community. In addition to the ward counsellor and local ANC branch, she also has important relations with the local church and shares the piece of land that the Center is on with the church. An example of Jane's tenacity is the way in which she secured support from a sponsor. Jane sent over 100 letters to companies requesting assistance for the Centre. She looked for the companies on the internet that claimed to have social responsibility programmes. From the 100 letters she sent, she received one response. After a couple meetings, the company agreed to support the cost of 100 children at the Centre. This allowed Jane to scale-up the Centre's work and accept more children.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

A key inspiration for Jane to undertake this work, caring for orphans and children with sick parents, is that she lost her mother when she was two years old, and after this her father married another women and left her behind. Jane was essentially orphaned at a very early age and survived through a great deal of struggle. So when she began working at Thuthukani Clinic she came into contact with orphans and other vulnerable children, 'and I thought to myself, I don't want to see these kids to be like me, at least I can give something to them.' Jane was inspired by her own experience of suffering to ensure that other children did not have to experience the same, and could at least grow up in a supportive and caring environment. She also continues to be inspired by the work she does, seeing that children are being looked after and many have gone on to successful jobs and further education: 'Now they are working and they are alright, at least I have made a difference with these children.'

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Jane found it a challenge when she was establishing Thuthukani Centre to both look after her own children and establish the centre. To add to this, she had separated from her husband and he gave little support in looking after the children. Jane thus faced a double burden as a woman. However, this didn't

stop Jane from working hard and taking initiative to develop and grow the Centre. Crucial was her role in securing various forms of support for the Centre. Interestingly, whereas many women have struggled in their relationship to the state, often feeling that it fails to provide adequate support to communities, Jane feels that to overcome these challenges it is crucial to actively pursue state support and make clear to the state what you are looking for: ‘You have to stand up and approach them,’ she says. While Jane is an extraordinary person who is able to achieve great things, it does not negate the importance of collective struggle and the need for the local state to be more responsive to community needs. Much of what Jane has achieved is also related to her networks and relations with other women and organisations.

Jane hasn’t only approached the state on her own. She has also networked with other organisations and state departments to overcome challenges. This includes participating in a forum of NGOs, which also includes the local councillor, the police and Department of Social Development to engage on social issues and allocate roles, and coordinate their work. The forum also serves as a space for NGOs to work together to collectively access government support such as through accessing land, water and so on. Jane does not let the challenges she faces hold her back, and even has plans to increase the size of Thuthukani Centre and introduce new activities, such as a computer centre, so that the children that are cared for at the Centre can also receive computer training, such a vital skill in today’s world.

## VIRGINIA NGOBENI

Chairperson, Twanano Paper Making Cooperative, Ivory Park, Gauteng

### Personal Background and History

Virginia Ngobeni is currently a member and the chairperson of Twanano Paper Making Cooperative in Ivory Park, which produces sculptures from recycled paper, fresh garden produce, and sewing products. She grew up in Mpumalanga with her siblings, who were looked after by their mother while their father was away working in Pretoria. Because they lived on a piece of land of two hectares, they were able to grow a lot of their own food, which helped them to stay out of poverty. Her mother also worked to help them survive by baking and selling *phuteni* bread. In fact, her mother would also brew what Virginia calls 'African gin', which Virginia, her mother and a friend would carry over the mountains in 20 litre buckets to sell to workers in the factories at the town of Graskop. Because it was a long walk, they would have to sleep overnight in the open-air on the pine needles under the pine trees in the mountains.



Virginia had to leave high school at a young age because she fell pregnant, and after her second child was born she moved to Randfontein, west of Johannesburg, where she found a job as a domestic worker. She worked there for a few years but then lost the job, and so moved back to Mpumalanga for a year. After that, she found a job in a supermarket in Pretoria, where she worked from 1983-85. She then worked at a restaurant near her home in Mpumalanga for three years, but resigned in 1989 and moved to Duduza to stay with her grandmother. Soon after this she moved to Tembisa where she stayed in a rented shack in Oakmoore. When Ivory Park was established as a place to relocate people living in Tembisa who could not find a place to live, Virginia applied for a stand in Ivory Park, which she received in 1991 and on which she built a shack that she lived in until she received a RDP house in 2006. Once she had arrived in Ivory Park, she heard about sewing training that was happening in nearby Rabie Ridge, and so she would walk the five kilometres from her home in Ivory Park to attend this training. After she learned to sew, she bought a sewing machine and began working from home, making curtains



and aprons. This is how she earned an income for the rest of the 1990s, until the year 2000 when she joined the recycling cooperative.

### **Community and Political Involvement**

Virginia joined the ANC Women's League in 1992 and became an active member, even doing door-to-door campaigning for the ANC in the 1994 elections. She was also active in her street committee, representing the ANC Women's League. However, she left the ANC in 2007 after the infamous Polokwane conference, where Thabo Mbeki was deposed as ANC president. She left at this time because she was unhappy with the direction that the party was taking and the sorts of processes that were developing, which was perhaps best illustrated by the way in which Mbeki was deposed. However, it was through her community work in the Women's League that she became involved in Iteke Waste Recycling Cooperative, which was established as part of the process around the development of the Ivory Park Ecovillage.

The Ecovillage began after the community of Ivory Park had fought two environmental battles in the late 1990s: First, an explosion occurred at a chemicals manufacturing company and the resulting fumes that were released negatively affected Ivory Park residents. Second, a British company tried to establish a toxic waste dump near Ivory Park at Chloorkop, and so Ivory Park residents, together with environmental organisations and activists, mobilised to successfully prevent the dump from being constructed. Thus some of the environmental activists and organisations that had worked in the struggles hoped to continue the momentum around environmental activism and to build ecological forms through which Ivory Park residents could meet their needs, such as in housing, manufacturing, energy and food production. The central project for doing this was the construction of the Ecovillage, which was essentially aimed at being a centre of demonstration for how residents could live in environmentally-friendly ways. Linked to the Ecovillage were cooperatives such as Iteke, which recycled paper to then make products out of, as well as organic farming cooperatives to develop means through which Ivory Park residents could access nutritious, organic fresh food. So it was Iteke, the paper recycling cooperative, that Virginia was part of establishing in the year 2000. However, due to a range of reasons, Iteke Cooperative collapsed in 2003. But Virginia did not leave and look for work elsewhere. Instead, together with a few other women, she reconstituted the cooperative, and Twanano Paper Making Cooperative was born and registered in 2003.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Virginia made a big shift in her life, from being an employed worker dependent on looking for jobs where people would employ her to survive, to becoming a member of a cooperative in which women worked together to manage the enterprise for themselves. Virginia says it was her involvement in the Women's League that made her want to become involved in establishing Iteke Waste Recycling Cooperative: 'The reason why I wanted to start this was because of the influence I got from other women in the Women's League. So I wanted to work with people and work for ourselves.' Her commitment to this ideal meant that when Iteke collapsed in 2003, she remained and revived it as Twanano Paper Making Cooperative. With training from an artist from Wits University, the women began making craft products, such as moulded rhinos and hippos, out of used paper. Twanano Cooperative continues to operate with seven women members and now also sews bed spreads, bags and clothing, and it runs an organic garden from which the members feed themselves and sell cheap, organic fresh produce to the community.

However, her original inspiration to become a woman who works to transform her own conditions and that of her community came from her mother, who taught her to never sit back as long as she had hands with which to work. As Virginia says, 'The first thing she will tell you is that you can't cry when you have hands, you can't sleep on an empty stomach when you have hands.' She continues, 'I don't want to be beaten down by something, I'll only be beaten down by something that is bought in factories with money that can beat me. But learning to do things with my hands won't beat me down.'

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

An important initial challenge that Virginia faced was that of having to look after and support two children as a single parent. As a woman, it was expected that she must look after the children, without the father even having to worry about providing support. This led Virginia to leave Mpumalanga to work in Randfontein, so that she could earn an income to support her children. She never re-married, which, she explains, some women say would have made her life more difficult, because she could not rely on the income of a husband. Virginia also believes this has been better for her and her children, as she has not had to rely on a man for money to meet her and her children's needs. Rather, she has been able to rely on herself and the women she works with in the cooperative to earn a living and support her family.

A further challenge she experienced as a woman was in working in Twanano Cooperative, which had five male members when it started. But they soon left as they were not happy with the amount of money they were earning in the early days of the cooperative, and were not willing to be patient to work to build the cooperative in the longer term into a successful enterprise. She has also found it difficult to work with men, because of their lack of willingness to work hard together with all the women members. She has had similar challenges in trying to work with the youth, who she feels are often not interested in promoting the cooperative that the members are trying to build, but are only interested in earning money at the end of the month. For Virginia and the other women in the Twanano, the cooperative is an alternative way of producing and this is what they want to promote. This seems to be similar to the challenges faced by many women who are actively engaged in important initiatives at the grassroots in South Africa, but it has not seemed to stop them from believing in what they are doing, and with further organising and education, may one day overcome this challenge as communities buy into the alternatives and initiatives being built in the context of the enduring social crisis in South Africa.

## NKWE SEMENYA (also known as Ma Semenya)

Chairperson, Tswelelane Bakery Cooperative,  
Ivory Park, Gauteng

### Personal Background and History

Ma Semenya is was one of the founders and is currently the chairperson of Tswelelane Bakery Cooperative in Ivory Park township. She grew up in a village called My Darling in Limpopo and moved to Tembisa in 1983, where she lived until she moved to Ivory Park in 1992. She is still married and has six children, all of whom are either working or studying. She founded the bakery cooperative in 2007, which produces bread, bread rolls, vetkoek, scones, muffins community. For example, whereas main brands of bread sells its bread for R6 per loaf. The cooperative thus ha provides employment to its members and provides the c other products.

The cooperative started in 2007 with five members and cooperative had failed. Ma Semenya originally began by to-door, when a social worker met her and suggested she as a bakery but which had failed. She began baking from the container and the social worker then also suggested that she start a cooperative bakery. So the social worker and Ma Semenya met other women who were also baking at home and selling door-to-door and asked them if they would like to form a cooperative. Many of these other members she had known from helping them through her community work and she knew that they would be committed members in the bakery. A proper building was built with the support of the African Bank, and the cooperative has been operating successfully now since 2007. Ma Semenya, as chairperson of the bakery cooperative, works in it but also is responsible for playing a coordinating role, marketing, and sourcing funding.

### Community and Political Involvement

In her role as chairperson of Tswelelane Bakery Cooperative, Ma Semenya is also deeply involved in broader community work. She works with destitute households where there are mentally ill people, elderly people, orphans, and victims of fires (an all too common occurrence in shacks), and helps them to obtain basic necessities to improve their lives at home. She does this by linking with a charity organisation in Taiwan, from whom she obtains fresh food and household goods to provide to households in need. The social workers from the Department of Social Development even send many people who need help to her! Ma Semenya also sees a strong link between the role of Tswelelane Bakery and her



community work, in that most of the members of the bakery cooperative were people that were destitute at home and that she was assisting, and brought them in to work in the bakery as a longer term solution to improving their lives. The bakery has a positive impact on the community because it is a place that they can rely on to buy their bread and other products at low prices, and it also plays an important role in grounding local production and control of food in Ivory Park. That is, a key type of food that households rely on is produced in Ivory Park by local community members through the democratic structure of a cooperative, rather than a far-away factory that creates employment outside of Ivory Park and takes resources out of the community when people buy their bread rather than buying it locally.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Ma Semenya is not directly involved in political activity as she believes that there are no political parties that are actually doing anything to improve the lives of people in Ivory Park and South Africa. She says that she is not sure where her inspiration to work with and help others comes from, but that it is just 'something that is inside me'. She is therefore inspired by working with people directly to improve their lives, and is further inspired when she sees the difference that it makes. In this regard she prefers working in and with organisations where she does not have to negotiate politically but where the focus is on the work that needs to be done.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Ma Semenya's challenges echo those faced by many other women in this booklet. One of them is the context that women pursuing the wellbeing and transformation of their communities have to operate in, especially with regard to the role of the state. For example, a key challenge for Ma Semenya and Tswelelane Bakery is how the state operates in its support for operations like Tswelelane. Ma Semenya feels that it is often corrupt. She gives as an example that when consultants are hired by the state to help cooperatives, the consultants are only interested in getting the money and then they leave the cooperative in the same situation as before. However, these challenges do not seem to hold Ma Semenya back, and at the end of 2013, the bakery had managed to access funds to improve their equipment and infrastructure and so intensify the important role it is playing in providing low-cost and high quality bread and other products to the community.



## SARAH MARCH

Member, Tswelelane Bakery Cooperative, Ivory Park, Gauteng

### Personal Background and History

Sarah has been a member of Tswelelane Bakery Cooperative since it was established in 2007 and played a key role in making it a successful enterprise. She grew up and did her schooling in Soweto and moved to Alexandra when she got married. She spent most of her working life working on the factory floor of a company that produced cosmetics, but was retrenched in 2005. Between the time she was retrenched and 2006, she spent the time mostly at home as she suffered from health problems, but in 2006 she regained her strength and began selling scones that she baked at home door-to-door. She did this because she felt that there was no point in sitting at home when she had the ability to do something. One day as she was going from house to house selling her scones she bumped into a local social worker, who suggested that she go and see if she would like to continue baking but with a group that was starting a new bakery cooperative in an old container – Tswelelane Bakery. She joined up with Ma Semenya (see above) and has worked at the cooperative ever since, and played a key role in building it up to the established bakery cooperative that it now is. As she mentions, ‘Never did I think or imagine that I’d grow this far with the business. I had anticipated that I’d work for a short while and then leave. But because I had a passion for baking, I stayed here.’ When they began, all they had was a small domestic stove in the container, but they worked hard, with a strong vision for where they wanted to go, and in 2009 African Bank was brought in by the social worker and built them a proper building with all the equipment that they needed to run a successful bakery operation.

### Community and Political Involvement

In addition to her work in the bakery which makes an important impact in the community and which consciously aims to help the destitute, Sarah was politically involved from the time she settled in Rabie



Ridge (just next to Ivory Park) in 1986. Rabie Ridge and Ivory Park came about through the resettlement of people who could not find space to build their homes in Tembisa and Alexandra townships in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In response to community protests and activism, the then Transvaal provincial government began work on establishing a new township, Ivory Park (as well as Rabie Ridge next to it) as a place to resettle people that were demanding somewhere that they could make their home. Sarah was involved in these activities of pressuring the government, and describes how she would be on the streets until late at night and then still have get up early the next morning to go to work, inspired by the motto of 'Siyaya!', meaning 'Forward we go, backward never'. As she recalls, 'We really fought for these spaces that we now easily occupy... we had one goal in mind, that our people should have their own places to stay because the boers [white farmers but can also be derogatory for white people in general] had places to stay, big places where even their pets had much better places to stay than black people. Why could they not afford our people the same opportunity?'

Sarah is also active in her Catholic church where she serves as a board member. She is highly active in leading this church and together with other women is working to ensure it is a more gender equal church that does not discriminate against women members of the congregation (see more below).

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Sarah is inspired by seeing the impact that struggles have produced, including those she has been involved in: 'I really get happy when I see other people living alright... All of that which we went through was so that we can secure our children a better future.' Sarah therefore views her work in terms of the impact it has on others around her, in the present and in the lives of those in the future, and this inspires her to keep doing the work that she does.

Sarah is also not scared of challenging what she sees as unjust or inappropriate. For example, she used to wear a prescribed uniform to church when she attended every Sunday, but after she started to attend church in Rabie Ridge once she had moved there in the 1980s, she saw that other white women that attended the church did not wear uniforms, they just wore their own clothes. This made her wonder why as a woman she should do something just because she has been told to (only woman had to wear the uniform), and from then on she refused to wear it. Her motivation for this was that her faith is also a personal choice and connection, and that she should not be required to illustrate her faith by blind obedience to what is expected of her as a woman. In her words, 'We were breaking down those structures that were imposed on women.'

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Sarah feels that women in general face many challenges and that women are still oppressed in society, but that women today deal with these challenges differently to how they did when she was younger. She feels that women today should not just submit to expectations of having a fancy office job and desiring to wear smart clothes and shoes, but should instead focus on the opportunities for developing many different skills that go beyond the material that young people today learn in books, and which they narrowly aim at rather than a broader set of skills that can come together and work to change society. In this sense she sees a need for women to work together to overcome the challenges that women face in society. This means first developing pride as a woman and then working to realise the dignity that this pride can be based on. This includes the opportunities for women in structures aimed at meeting their and their communities' needs, such as cooperatives to produce the things that are needed by households and provide jobs to members.

## NELLY MPHAHLELE

Member, Twanano Paper Making Cooperative, Ivory Park, Gauteng

### Personal Background and History

Nelly Mphahlele was born and grew up in Gamphahlele near Pietersburg (now Polokwane). Like many children who grew up in rural areas, her father worked in Johannesburg, and so her mother looked after her and her siblings. Her mother used to sew to earn an income for the household, but she could not afford to send her children to school after Standard 6, so Nelly dropped out of school at this point, and had to find piece jobs to help earn an income for her household. Her mother then passed away when she was still young and so her and her siblings went to live with her grandmother. Life was very hard, as her grandmother's only income was a pension grant, with which she had to support Nelly and her siblings as well as her own children who were unemployed.

In 1979 Nelly moved to Tembisa to live with her father. But soon after this he became sick and passed away in hospital. Nelly then had to look after her siblings as well, and so was forced into selling beer to do so. But in 1983 Nelly managed to find a job at a company that manufactured pies and beef burger patties, mostly for supplying to restaurants across the country. She continued to stay in her father's house in Tembisa together with her siblings, but in 1991 applied for and received a stand in Ivory Park. But because the stands did not include a house, and people had to build their own homes, or mostly shacks, she stayed in the house in Tembisa until 1993 so that her siblings would have a proper house to live in. She even used part of her salary to keep paying the bond on her father's house. After she lost her job in 1993, Nelly sold fruit and vegetables in the community and undertook various piece jobs, mostly in domestic work, to survive. She joined Twanano in 2004 after the chairperson of Twanano, who was also her neighbour, asked her if she would like to join. Virginia



asked her because she knew that Nelly enjoyed working with her hands and creating things. As Nelly says, 'I am that kind of a person who doesn't want to be taught, I'd rather have you give me an end product and I will inspect it and find out how it was made and then do it myself.'

### **Community and Political Involvement**

Through her struggles as a worker in the 1980s for better pay and working conditions, Nelly became politically involved with the ANC and COSATU. During a key strike, she and the other workers refused to leave the company premises and stayed there for eight nights. Family members would bring them food, as well as her baby to breastfeed and visit her. The workers would hold meetings at night with the union organisers, and they eventually achieved their demands. This created in Nelly an admiration for and loyalty to the ANC, but she is now no longer involved with the party because 'the ANC is corrupt... they fight, you can see for yourself they fight, they do unimaginable things.' She does, however, still attend community meetings to discuss issues directly affecting her and her community. The cooperative she works in, Twanano, is also linked to the Solidarity Economy Education and Communication Cooperative (SEEC), which is based in Ivory Park and is working to build the solidarity economy to transform the township and build self-management and collective ownership through solidarity economy enterprises like Twanano Cooperative. Through Twanano she is also active in the SEEC.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Key to Nelly's involvement and commitment to a transformative alternative like Twanano Cooperative is that she simply loves what she does: 'What we're doing here I love it so much. Even tomorrow I will be able to help my grandchildren through this work that I am doing.' But Nelly also points out that part of what makes her a strong woman is the hardships that she experienced, especially the tough working conditions and low pay at the food processing factory she worked at in the 1980s. She feels that her life has been better since working at Twanano where women work collectively for their own good, and feels that this has made a difference for her children and grandchildren not having to experience the same hardships as her. As she says, 'Now I am able to do something for the household. My kids don't sleep on an empty stomach, including my grandchildren. I am able to maintain them even though their fathers are not working. I am able to do things for them.'

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

A key challenge for Nelly was experiencing poverty as a woman. This is something that is common to many women's stories in this collection – that as women they were expected to take responsibility for their children while the father had left and evaded this responsibility. She also had to find jobs and other ways and means of supporting first her siblings and then her children, alone. This is partly what drives her sense of independence, especially from men, and thus also inspires her involvement in Twanano, which is an all-women member cooperative made up of women working together to support themselves and their families.



**DOLLY MDAMANE****Chairperson of Women's Forum and of NGO Thlokomela Sechaba, Ivory Park, Gauteng****Personal Background and History**

Dolly Mdamane is currently the chairperson of the Women's Forum in Ivory Park, which was formed as a space for women involved in cooperatives and projects to work together in order to problem solve, access funding, and provide training. She is also the Chairperson of Thlokomela Sechaba, which is a local organisation that goes door to door to households to assist orphans and people infected with HIV and AIDS.

Dolly was born in 1956 and grew up in Orlando East in Soweto and left high school after completing Grade 9. She then found a job as a florist in Maraisburg, Southwest of Johannesburg. After she became pregnant, she left her job as a florist to get married and settled in Tembisa in 1978. She found a job at SAPPI (the paper making company) in 1981 but was retrenched in 1986. In 1998 she moved to Ivory Park, where she started becoming politically involved in organisations such as the ANC Women's League and the South African Communist Party (SACP). At this time she was also volunteering at a local clinic where she learned about TB and HIV-AIDS and, seeing how many people in her community were struggling with these diseases, her and 17 other women decided to start an NGO to assist them, called Thlokomela Sechaba. By this time she had also joined SANCO. In 2005 the City of Johannesburg started iJozi Hlomile, as a programme to provide care to households with people living with HIV and AIDS. Dolly works for them as a project manager. In 2007 she was then approached by the ward councillor to join the Women's Forum, which was in the process of being established at the time.

**Community and Political Involvement**

Dolly's work is very much oriented towards the community, especially her role as a councillor for those living with HIV. She is also a member of the ANC, SACP and SANCO and is active in all of them. For her, becoming politically involved has been a benefit to her, as she has gained much experience and knowledge: 'When in the ANC, I began to have a better understanding of the things that are happening, whereas when I am idle, I remain uninformed about my life and so when I am in an organisation I understand the things that are happening.' Her decision to join the ANC was influenced by the fact that her mother was very politically active and even participated in the women's march to the union buildings in 1956 when she was seven months pregnant with Dolly. She is now even the deputy chairperson of the ANC branch in Ivory Park. However, at one point she stopped being active in the ANC because 'things have changed within the ANC.' She feels that there is not as much respect shown to one another as there used to be, and that there are too many fights in the party rather than focusing on issues that need to be dealt with. She also had many commitments with her church at the time. However, despite these challenges, Dolly has now resumed her involvement and is active again with the party.

She is also very active in her church, where she is a deacon and chairperson of the women's group. Furthermore, as part of her community commitment, she is also a foster parent to two children, a girl and a boy.

### **Influence and inspiration**

A key influence on Dolly's life and her commitment to community involvement was her mother, who was very active in the anti-apartheid struggle together with other women. She was so committed that, as was mentioned above, she even marched to the Union Buildings in the famous women's march of 1956 while she was seven months pregnant with Dolly. Dolly's mother's commitment to justice and upliftment has been a key inspiration for Dolly.

Dolly also feels inspired by her church activities, and the strength that being religious gives her in continuing to work for her community and other women in the context of the poverty and suffering experienced in Ivory Park.

### **Challenges Faced as a Women**

A key space in which Dolly operates is the Ivory Park Women's Forum, which was in fact started by the local office of the Department of Social Development, and is aimed at bringing women and cooperatives and projects together to solve their problems, access funding, marketing and so on. But she says that while the forum does provide support to households with counselling, food assistance when a breadwinner dies and so on, it faces many challenges in trying to achieve its more developmental objectives. That is, they have found it very difficult to access support and so the forum is struggling to grow as a result of not being able to meet its objectives. She also feels that the councillor is uninterested in the women's forum—which is a complaint raised by nearly every woman interviewed in this collection—and hence does not play a developmental role in the community. This is a challenge that many women face who are trying to build alternatives at the grassroots: insufficient and inappropriate support from the state and other actors. Many women in this book have struggled through these challenges and are managing to build structures and processes despite this, but it remains a key challenge for women who are working to improve their communities at the grassroots.



## MARIA SEBHOTOMA

Member and Secretary, Mathomo Mayo Agricultural Cooperative, Ivory Park, Gauteng

### Personal Background and History

Maria Sebhotomoa is one of the founding members of Mathomo Mayo Agricultural Cooperative, which is situated in Ivory Park and produces organic food for sale directly to the community and local shops. Maria was born in Mabopane near Pretoria, but when she was eight years old she moved with her mother to Mpumalanga where she was going to get married. She finished her schooling career until matric in Mpumalanga, but it was difficult for her because her mother was not around as she was working, her sister was ill and needed looking after, and it was difficult to get her father to give her money to buy the textbooks that she needed to study successfully. After school she moved back to Mabopane and had her first child there, and in 1994 moved with her husband to Ivory Park. She remained unemployed until 2004 when a woman introduced her to a group who wanted to start a nursery on a piece of ground next to the Ecovillage in Ivory Park. They worked on the nursery, but then realised that the larger part of the ground was not being used so they decided to start a garden on it, and so Mathomo Mayo was established in 2005. It started with 20 people, but this number was too big for the size of land being worked on and it was difficult to manage conflict with so many people. Eventually most of the people left, and Mathomo Mayo now has five members, which is the ideal number for the size of the ground and the income earned. The five members worked hard to build Mathomo Mayo and in 2008 the African Bank assisted them by supplying them with a fence, shade netting to protect the crops, and a borehole and irrigation system. In 2009 Mathomo Mayo entered a competition for women farmers and they won the cash prize. They entered the competition again in 2010 and won it for a second time!

With her earnings from the cooperative she has managed to put her three children through school and feed them. It has also contributed to her strength and independence as a woman because she does not have to rely on a man for income and survival. She also connects with other women in cooperatives. She has also helped build solidarity linkages between cooperatives. For example, on a number of occasions Twanano has helped Mathomo Mayo by supplying it with spinach when they do not have enough spinach to fulfil an order. Mathomo Mayo also works with the Solidarity Economy Education and Communication Cooperative (SEECC) where it benefits from certain forms of support, engages with other cooperatives through it, and attends a community forum where cooperatives, which often are mostly made up of women, can link up with one another to build their strength and overcome their challenges.

### Inspiration and Influence

Maria developed a passion for farming because her father worked on a farm in Limpopo and during school holidays she would go with him and help him to keep herself busy. This is where she learned the basics of farming and why it is what she wants to do for the rest of her life. Maria loves the work that she does in the garden, as it produces healthy food for the community, for her family, and helps with buying the essentials that she needs at home. 'The work that I like is this one.' Unfortunately she is leaving the cooperative soon to move back to Pretoria for personal reasons, but says that when she gets there she is going to start a farming cooperative, because it is the work that she loves and believes that it is good



for her personally even though it is hard physical work: '[M]any people say that I look fresh and not tired and I say "Yes, when the body is used to working hard it will continue wanting to work and when you sit and do nothing you become tired."' She is adamant that she will never work for another person, because she prefers the independence and power that one has when working in a cooperative rather than for an employer, where one has to constantly obey commands and desires of others. In the cooperative she can extend work with others and decide how to run things. 'You can spend the whole month and not find a job. When you are here you know that a sun won't set without getting something. Even if it sets I can take spinach from the garden and I will cook pap at home and we'll eat at home. I don't have to go to my neighbours and ask for mealie meal or anything, they will see me continue with life.'

### Challenges Faced as a Woman

As a woman Maria has found it difficult to work with men because they demand more money for their work than women do, even if they have not worked hard. Therefore all they are interested in is money rather than seeing the cooperative grow and provide healthy food to the community and the members. Furthermore, she feels that men always expect women to be submissive to them and that as women they already have to be submissive in the household and so are not interested in also having to be submissive in their workplace. Hence there are only women members in the cooperative and it is a place in which women are empowered to work equally and contribute to their homes and community as women rather than having to be subordinate to men. But Maria feels that the cooperative has also helped her to overcome challenges and to grow personally: 'It [Mathomo Mayo] has changed me a lot because I think I would be aged by now if I didn't work here... Here I am trained and in my training here I've picked up skills here and there. Like when a problem arises I can now solve it... I am also now able to train others in farming, we once even trained 30 people here.'





## The Role of Women in Addressing Hunger



Women are crucial agents in ensuring that households and communities are fed. It is most often women who are responsible for caring for children and family members in a household, which includes feeding them. As such, especially in poor households, the burden of finding ways to feed households in the midst of poverty often falls on the shoulders of women. Furthermore, because of gender inequality in society, and the fact that it is often men who have better access to resources like money and land than women, it is women and children who are often at greater risk of hunger.

But at another level, did you know that women are responsible for over half of the world's food production? If we look specifically at developing countries, women produce 60-80 percent of food and produce most of these countries' staple crops. Women are therefore crucial to feeding the world's population, and ensuring that women experience an environment that assists them in this regard, such as secure access to land, is an important part of addressing hunger. Women are central to building food sovereignty – the capacity of communities and countries to feed themselves and end hunger!

## CONSTANCE NGOBENI

Secretary, Twanano Paper Making Cooperative, Ivory Park, Gauteng



### Personal Background and History

Constance (known as Connie) is in fact the daughter of Virginia Ngobeni, the chairperson of Twanano Cooperative, who we read about above. Connie grew up mostly in her grandmother's house in Bushbuck Ridge in Mpumalanga, looked after by her uncle and aunt, while her mother was working in Johannesburg. This was a very challenging time for Connie, where she did not have a mother in whom she could confide things and speak to when things had upset her. Also, because she was the oldest child she was responsible for looking after her siblings while also trying to focus on her school studies. She attended primary and high school in Bushbuck Ridge and then moved to Tembisa for her tertiary education where she studied to be a Manager Assistant, but had to drop out in 1997 after falling pregnant.

When she came to Johannesburg she moved in with her mother, Virginia, in Ivory Park. She got involved in the ANC Youth League and then in 2004 Connie joined Twanano as a member. At the time, Twanano was being supported by a programme called Phumani Paper, which assisted cooperatives like Twanano in manufacturing products from recycled paper, with training as well as marketing the products and purchasing the products for markets. Because of her background in management studies, Connie was appointed as the manager to coordinate the relations between Twanano and Phumani, as well as ensure all the administration around production, recording and reporting took place. She found this very challenging due to her lack of experience, but she had a lot of support from the chairperson of Twanano at the time, who helped her to understand how to do the job. She is now the Secretary of Twanano, and sews comforters, clothes, bags and curtains, as well as is active in gardening and paper making.

### **Community and Political Involvement**

Between the time that Connie dropped out of her management studies and joining Twanano, she got involved with the ANC Youth League. She was elected as secretary of the section, and spent a lot of time in the community trying to recruit young people into the ANCYL and get them involved in politics. However, she eventually got tired of being in the ANCYL, as she felt that it was failing to do anything, was corrupt and was more about giving jobs to some members.

Connie was also involved in building a community crèche from scratch. Mothers needed somewhere for their children to be looked after while they were at work, but lacked such a place. So a group of them, including Connie, went around picking up materials and managed to build some basic structures to shelter the children, as well as a fence to keep them from the street. While helping with this crèche, she was also helped in a drama group, which involved young people in drama and cultural activities to keep them busy after school. With these young people, they put on a number of plays every year and competed with other sections of Ivory Park for trophies. Connie also helped with guidance and homework activities with these youth.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Connie feels that she learned a lot from her grandmother, who she lived with for some of her younger life. One of the things she learned was the skill of sewing, which she taught herself to do. When her grandmother's sewing machine was broken, she would have to fix it, and so was taught problem-solving skills from a young age. When her grandmother was not using the machine, she would practice on it by herself, which is how she learned to sew. As she says, 'I know how to sew a comforter. Even if you were to wake me up from my sleep I will tell you how it is done!'

Connie's mother, Virginia, has also had an important influence on her. Virginia is a very strong woman who Connie looks up to because she was able to look after her family without a man in her life. So Connie learned that, given the difficulties she has experienced with men, it was possible for her not to be dependent on a man and to have the strength to look after her family without his help. This has also posed a challenge to Connie, as discussed below, which she has had to think a lot about how to deal with.

Connie feels that being a member of Twanano Cooperative has helped her to grow as a person. She is a shy person, and although she remains shy, 'since being involved in Twanano they are able to send me anywhere and I am able to hold my own.' She has therefore experienced personal growth as well.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Connie found it very challenging growing up without her mother and having to look after her siblings even though she was young and in school, because she was the oldest girl. She felt that at times it was very difficult for her not to have a mother to support her emotionally and whom she could share her challenges with. Without this, Connie had to deal with her challenges and problems on her own rather than being able to deal with them together with her mother.

She also experiences challenges domestically in relation to child care and the father of her children. It

has been a challenge for her to get her children's father to assist in the costs of raising the children, but so far he has not done so. Hence Connie has decided to stop pursuing him and raise the children herself. But this does also introduce challenges, of having to work while also looking after her children, as well as the financial pressures.

In addition to her personal challenges, Connie feels that it is always a challenge when working with a group of people, as she does in Twanano, and managing the various dynamics. For example, she feels that sometimes she would like to innovate, try new things, and dynamise the cooperative, there is sometimes resistance to change by others who have been members for a long time.

A further challenge that Connie identifies in relation to her community involvement is that in Ivory Park many of the structures through which people can get involved in the community, such as the Community Policing Forum, School Governing Bodies, project forums and so on, are dominated by ANC members and access to them is therefore determined by whether one is a member of the ruling party. Connie feels that this restricts the benefits that these structures and initiatives can bring, and stifle people's involvement in the community. But she feels that if criticisms are raised, then one is branded as being anti-ANC. For example, she says that the crèche that was built collectively, and in which she participated, has now been taken over by ANC women who want to own it for themselves and ensure benefit goes to them. Hence local politics poses a key barrier to how far one can get involved in community initiatives. However, the work that Connie does in Twanano, as it is a community-based cooperative enterprise, brings benefits to the community through providing employment to members, a service of sewing, and fresh organic food at low prices direct to community members.



## FLORA SHAWU

Member, Twanano Paper Making Cooperative, Ivory Park, Gauteng

### Personal Background and History

Flora was born in Tembisa in 1983, a township Northeast of Johannesburg. She is the eldest of four children, and her three siblings are all boys. She went to primary school in Tembisa and after moving to Ivory Park in 1991, attended high school in Ivory Park. Her mother earned an income by selling fruit at schools, which she still does, and her father was once a mine worker but now works as a traditional healer.

When she was at school, Flora loved doing athletics, but had to stop because she broke her leg. She also used to do debating at school. After matriculating in 2005, she had wanted to study to follow her dream of becoming a social worker, but her family could not afford to fund her studies and so she instead had to look for a job. She found a job as a waiter at a nearby hotel in 2007, which she enjoyed due to being able to meet many different people as well as learning how to deal with people in general. However, she left there after about a year because she felt overworked while at the same time she could go for up to 3 months without being paid by her labour broker.

She found Ivory Park a difficult place to grow up due to crime and gangs. She says that people even had to be indoors by six in the evening, because gangs were fighting each other, especially political parties



fighting against each other in the early 1990s. Despite this, she managed to have a stable upbringing, largely because she lived with both parents rather than being separated from them, as with many of the women in this volume.

Flora joined Twanano in 2009 when Twanano was looking for more women to work with them because the Department of Agriculture had given them funding to grow milkweed for using in their recycled paper products. The chairperson, Virginia, told her that they were looking for people to work on contract to help with this work, and Flora volunteered. After the contract ended Flora remained as a volunteer, and due to the commitment she demonstrated, was soon accepted as a full member of Twanano. Flora wanted to remain at Twanano because she enjoyed the work that they did, working with her hands, and learning new skills. She has been a member since and, in addition to her daily work in the cooperative, is responsible for stock taking.

### **Community and Political Involvement**

After school Flora joined the ANC Youth League in Ivory Park and was the secretary of the section branch, but after working with them for a while she left because she felt that they were not working in the interests of the youth in general but were only benefitting a few people. She was also a secretary at a community crèche, where her son attended. She was elected by other parents to be secretary, to help with arranging things for the crèche, raising funds etc. However, she stopped after a while because she felt that those involved were not treated fairly, and those who ran the crèche used it to benefit family members, while those such as Flora did the work to help keep the crèche afloat.

A key moment of political and activist involvement for Flora was when she participated in an intense struggle by youth for land in Ivory Park. She says that a piece of open land near where she lived had become a home for gangsters and that many people were mugged, injured or killed in that area, even people simply on their way to work. The land was thus becoming a hotspot of crime in the community. The youth in her area, including Flora, began a campaign to mobilise youth to occupy the land and demand it be granted to them for housing. The mobilisation involved long late night meetings, which were met with hostility and even intimidation by the local police and the taxi association. For example, one evening meeting was raided by the police, and shots fired in the air to disperse those attending it. But the youth continued to organise and one day in 2010 occupied the land. However, the Metro Police responded harshly, and dispersed the youth with guns and rubber bullets and, according to Flora, one young woman who was shot is still in a wheelchair today. After this incident, the struggle died down because many of those involved were successfully intimidated and feared for the safety of their families by harassment from the local taxi association and police.

Flora feels that cooperatives, including her cooperative, have a positive impact on the community. For example, apart from providing employment to community members, if she knows that a household in her street is having trouble in getting enough food, she is free to take food from Twanano's garden to give to the household. Furthermore, Flora feels that Twanano is one of the few places she can work to make a difference in her community, because in other community initiatives there is a high level of corruption, whereby opportunities for people are tightly controlled and where many community initiatives are seen as places for individuals to try and access opportunities, but who actually benefits is controlled by a few.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Flora feels that she has learned a lot and grown as a person through working at Twanano: ‘If I was not in Twanano I would be joining those who are drinking every Friday, doing nothing at home, being a problem.’ When Flora was young she attended church, and would attend youth church camps on weekends. She feels that these helped to teach her ‘respect, life morals, self-discipline and everything.’ Her parents have also been an important source of strength and support for Flora. She says that they were strict but gave her and her siblings a stable upbringing despite the problems in the community around them. Indeed, even Twanano has helped to inspire Flora and she is confident that it will grow, as she believes that ‘we are growing little by little. As we get the little money we get, one day we’ll be a big project.’

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

Flora feels that women in society face many challenges. For example, although some women are married to husbands with jobs, they are still often expected to provide for their families themselves. They have a ‘double burden’ of having to work but also to care for children and take care of the home. Flora has to support a child on her own without the assistance of the father, but she feels that fathers should play a role in caring for children as well. However, this responsibility is falling mainly on women, such as Flora who has to balance the needs for looking after her child with earning an income.

But Flora and the women of Twanano also experience challenges in their work in relation to their cooperative. Key to supporting the role of women in collectively empowering themselves is for the state to play a role that supports the initiatives that women are taking. However, Flora and the women of Twanano have faced a number of obstacles with the government, specifically in relation to the bureaucracy being inflexible in responding to their needs. For example, Twanano applied for funding from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in order to purchase a toilet-paper making machine, the high demand for which would help to increase production at Twanano and so increase incomes and maybe even expand. However, there is only one supplier of this machine in the country, and the DTI said that they had blacklisted them and so Twanano could not purchase their machine from them, and the DTI would not budge on this. Thus, Twanano had no other way of obtaining this machine, which could have made a big difference to their cooperative. This shows one of the key challenges that women face in relation to their activities aimed at personal improvement and community transformation. However, Twanano is now pursuing a new activity of printing t-shirts, signboards and so on, as a new way of expanding the cooperative, and so have not given up.



## The Women of Mgababa

### Introducing Mgababa

Mgababa is a rural Eastern Cape village situated near the town of Peddie and is one of the 118 villages in the Ngqushwa Local Municipality, which falls under Amathole district municipality, the same district municipality as Keiskammahoek. The Ngqushwa Municipality borders the Great Fish River to the West and the Keiskamma River to the East, and the Indian Ocean in the South (which one can see from Mgababa on a clear day). It is a predominantly rural municipality, with only two towns, Hamburg and Peddie.

Mgababa village was formed in 1976 largely with people who were removed from areas outside of the homelands in the processes of consolidating the homeland system and 'betterment' planning. Many of those who settled at Mgababa were farmworkers (and their families) who were evicted from the farms on which they worked. In contrast to Keiskammahoek, many Mgababa residents are relatively new arrivals having arrived in the mid to late 1970s. Mgababa was established on land that was surrounded by white farmers growing pineapples who sold their land to the government so that their land could be incorporated into the Ciskei homeland. The land was then turned into Trust land, which meant that in theory it was owned neither by the people who occupied the land nor by the government, but was held in trust by the government for future generations. The land was administered by the local chief, who allotted plots





of land for building homes as well as fields for farming. The farming that happened in these fields was largely undertaken by individual households, but by the 2000s very little farming was taking place.

Today, Ngqushwa Municipality has a population of about 85 000 people and, as with Keiskammahoek, has a fairly young population, with 38% younger than 19 years of age, and 52% of the population between the ages of 20 and 64 years. Furthermore, 52% of households in the municipality are headed by women.<sup>12</sup> Levels of poverty and unemployment in the Ngqushwas Municipality where Mgababa is located are very high. The municipal area has an unemployment rate of about 78% (20% higher than the average for the Eastern Cape), and it is estimated that 66.8% of households earn less than R1500 (\$153) per month. As such, dependence on state grants is high. Of those who are employed, most work in the public or services sectors, indicating the lack of formal productive sectors.

The village of Mgababa is one of the many villages created through betterment schemes, and is composed of a cluster of homes on individual plots and surrounded by large tracts of mostly uncultivated land. The women that we profile here, however, are part of a project that farms a large piece of land of about 100 hectares.



## MAMA NKOHLA

Chairperson, Siyaphumelela Agricultural Cooperative, Mbababa, Eastern Cape

### Personal Background and History

Ma Nkohla is the chairperson of the Siyaphumelela Agricultural Cooperative, a farming cooperative of 42 women and four men. It is based in the rural village of Mgababa near the town of Peddie, in the old Ciskei area of the Eastern Cape. Ma Nkohla was born on a farm as her parents were farmworkers at a place called Show Park, but she grew up near the town of Bathurst with her two sisters and three brothers. In 1976, when she was 20 years old, Ma Nkohla got married and around the same time she and her husband's family were moved by the government to Mgababa, as part of removing unwanted Africans out of 'white' South Africa and into the homelands. She and her husband have lived in Mgababa ever since. Her husband used to work in the mines and was retrenched in 1986, so to keep earning an income they undertook various activities, such as selling fruit and vegetables in the community, making wooden furniture and they also managed to build a small shop. Ma Nkohla also travels to Durban to buy aprons and dresses and then sells them in her community, to help earn income for her household. She also began to get involved in community and political structures, like the church, the ANC, ANC Women's League, and SANCO. Ma Nkohla, along with many other households, also use to undertake small-scale farming to produce food for the household, but over the years less and less households





were producing their own food. However, Ma Nkohla and 49 other members started the Siyaphumelela Agricultural Cooperative in the collapse of the Massive Food Production Programme (MFPP) farming, introduced by the Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture, that was taking place. However, the project stopped operating in Mgababa after 2010, according to some of the members of Siyaphumelela, because the men involved wanted to spend all of the money instead of saving it and reinvesting it back into the farming project. So, having been inspired by their involvement in the MFPP, 46 women and four men began the Siyaphumelela Cooperative in 2011. This dominance of women in the cooperative was deliberate, as the women felt that men are too problematic and focus on financial rewards rather than patiently building a structure that will benefit the community. The women, including Ma Nkohla who is the chairperson, thus lead the cooperative, and they claim that the four male members are present largely for their strength to help with tasks that the women struggle with, and to drive the tractor.

Together with a project that is based on households growing food in their garden, Siyazondla, Siyaphumelela has made a big impact on the lives of the women that are members of it. In this sense, it seems that it is contributing to building food sovereignty in Mgababa, in that some women say that they never have to buy vegetables from the shops because they get it all from Siyaphumelela, and if there is nothing from Siyaphumelela they will get what they need from the Siyazondla gardens or from neighbours who have extra. Ma Nkohla's work is therefore deeply involved in changing the local food economy of Mgababa.

### **Community and Political Involvement**

Ma Nkohla became a member of the ANC and ANC Women's League in the 1980s and has remained a member since. She is also active in the church, which is active in the community through assisting needy families with health issues, food and so on. She is also active in other community spaces, like the Community Policing Forum, which was established by the local police and the Department of Social Development to involve the community in resolving issues of crime in Mgababa.

Ma Nkohla and her fellow members at Siyaphumelela also try to ensure that their cooperative is seen as something that also belongs to and benefits the community. So, for example, they try and involve ward committee members in their meetings, and also attend community meetings so that issues that affect the cooperative are known by community representatives, and that the cooperative is also involved in community issues.

In general, Ma Nkohla is determined to use her leadership abilities to help others and share her skills to benefit the community: 'The group you are in you encourage them and then you leave them for them to continue. And then you go to that corner and help people from that corner and when they grow you leave. So you mustn't be doing things alone, you must share it with others.' Part of Ma Nkohla's drive and enthusiasm comes, perhaps, from the fact that she and other members of the cooperative position their work within the community, and much of her work is therefore informed by her perceptions and experiences of the needs in the community of Mgababa.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Ma Nkohla's work in the community and development as a local leader began in her early twenties in the church, where she was very active and got into positions of leadership in the church. According to

Ma Nkohla, 'Being at church and working with people made me love people and want to be involved in my community.' She was then elected vice-chairperson, and then chairperson, of the local SANCO branch, where she was responsible for convening the committee and community meetings to deal with issues affecting members of the community.

Ma Nkohla also believes that what has inspired her to be a leader in her community is in fact some of the traditional roles performed by women, such as care work in the household. 'When you are a woman you are a person who gives birth so when you have kids you always want to take that responsibility... You don't want your kids to sleep with empty stomachs. [...] That nurturing moves from your home to others outside the home, you want to work with other people to get the thing right.' It is interesting that for Ma Nkohla, what is usually seen as the traditional role of women, of looking after children and the household, has actually stimulated her to become a leader in the community as well, which is a role that might not usually be considered a traditional role for women. Ma Nkohla has therefore challenged traditional gender roles to work with others for transformation in her community.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

In her extensive involvement in her cooperative and the community, Ma Nkohla has experienced challenges as a woman, especially in relation to how men perceive the role of women. For example, when she was chairperson of the SANCO branch, she felt that she was challenged by men in community meetings and that it was hard as a woman to get men to listen to her. But she feels that as women it is necessary to fight this and not back down on important issues. As she explains, 'Here in the community men are in their own way of not wanting to listen. But you have to stick to what you're talking about and try to explain it that you mean it this and that way, until they understand it.'



## NOPHELELO MTHWALO

Treasurer, Siyaphumelela Agricultural Cooperative, Mgababa, Eastern Cape

### Personal Background and History

Nophelelo Mthwalo was born in Nqushwa in the rural Eastern Cape in 1963 near the Fish River. She and her siblings were brought up by their mother who worked on a chicken farm owned by a white farmer. She found life growing up on the farm pleasant until she reached the age of 12 and the farmer expected her to work for him, cleaning and polishing eggs before they went to market. Only after they had finished were they allowed to go to school. She grew up without a father but with a strict mother who made sure that they worked to help maintain the household through doing important chores. In 1989 Nophelelo and her family were removed from the farm and relocated to an area called Prudo in the then Ciskei homeland. She eventually found work as a shop keeper in nearby Mgababa, but left that job when she got married. After getting married and until she joined Siyaphumelela Agricultural Cooperative, she was a small-scale farmer. She farmed a piece of land where she grew sweet-potatoes, maize, cabbage, green pepper and spinach, which she would sell to the local community for income. The opportunity to join Siyaphumelela offered a chance for her to work more closely with other women, to farm collectively and increase production in Mgababa as part of improving the lives of its residents and build its food sovereignty.



### Community and Political Involvement

Nophelelo has always been involved in her community in various ways, such as in her church where she was the leader of the girls' youth group when she was young, and she is currently the treasurer on the local ward committee. At the time that we met her, she was also the treasurer of Siyaphumelela Agricultural Cooperative and was one of the women that revived it after it collapsed under the Massive Food Production Programme. Under this programme the cooperative managed a strong harvest and they made a good income from selling it, but then many of the members (mostly men according to Nophelelo and other members of the cooperative) wanted to withdraw all the money and do other things on their own. As she says, 'the reason why Massive collapsed was because it was run by men and they wanted to spend the money.' She was thus one of the women who, inspired by their initial success under the Massive Food Production Programme, revived it under the name of Siyaphumelela, together with 45

other members (only 4 of whom are men). The women actively approached various potential supporters, including the MEC for Agriculture in the Eastern Cape, from whom they managed to obtain support, and they had their first harvest of potatoes, beans, maize and other crops in 2012. Nophelelo, like many of the other members of the cooperative, was very proud that they not only produced a harvest which they were able to sell and earn some income from, but they also donate a lot of food to local crèches, care centres and so on. The community now also knows them well because they have somewhere to buy locally produced, fresh, nutritious food at affordable prices at harvest time.

However, since we first met with Ma Mthwalo, she has decided to leave Siyaphumelela and to start a new cooperative, due to personal differences in the project. Thus at the moment she is busy with the groundwork of organising members and building community support for the new cooperative. Having another cooperative like Siyaphumelela in Mgababa will hopefully bring even more benefit and greater food sovereignty to Mgababa.

### **Inspiration and Influence**

Key to the strong leadership role that Nophelelo plays in her community is her motivation to build ways of meeting community needs, and the vision she has that drives this. According to her, being someone that has ideas and vision, and the energy to act on them, means that others in Mgababa are willing to work with her and to entrust her with leadership positions. A key motivation for her is therefore the act of working with her community, where she enjoys the solidarity and sense of common purpose, as well as knowing that the work being done will benefit the community: 'I love people. Working with them opens your mind. I like it when projects under my leadership succeed.'

Importantly, she also has the support of her husband in her community work, which adds motivation to continue her work.

Furthermore, because of the original success of their farming under the Massive Food Production Programme, Nophelelo is also inspired by the potential of their farming activities to meet the food needs of Mgababa and build income for the members of Siyaphumelela. Importantly then, much of her drive comes from practice itself and the understanding that it has brought the potential of women working together to achieve similar objectives.

### **Challenges Faced as a Woman**

As a woman working in a role that has a positive benefit in her community, Nophelelo does also face challenges together with the other women that she works with. These include lack of infrastructure, such as storage facilities, and equipment, such as tractors, that they can own and have access to permanently to further dynamise their project. Although they have worked hard to obtain support from the government, such support is often inconsistent, and so these women face challenges in their environment that hinder the extent to which they could transform their community.

Furthermore, although working with and for her community inspires Ma Mthwalo, she finds that working in a collective way with others can also pose certain challenges. This relates to how to deal with different viewpoints and disagreements. But she feels that this is a normal part of working with people. This said, Nophelelo's work has had significant impact on her community, as mentioned above. Key is the contribution made by her and Siyaphumelela to building the food sovereignty of Mgababa.

## CONCLUSION

The profiles of these extraordinary women demonstrate the importance of different forms of power that women engage in their daily lives. What all the profiles highlight is the importance of collective struggle in building collective, or movement, power to develop alternatives and challenge the state to be more responsive to local needs.

The women all faced important hardships from an early age, most prevalent is the omnipresent poverty that marks these women's lives. Nearly all of the women highlight the importance of other women in their lives—from grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, to other women in the community. This highlights the fact that women's transformation is both a collective and individual project. The women all value community upliftment as much as their own personal transformation.

This volume was aimed at uncovering and telling the stories of women that are taking action and building power in various ways in their communities. What they point to is that there are thousands more women just like these in South Africa that are undertaking similar activities and forms of organising, guided by principles and visions of wanting to transform their communities. Many communities would most likely be in much worse-off positions if it was not for these women, and so it is hoped that this volume helps to inspire further action aimed at placing women as key actors in transforming South Africa. Further networking and movement building is surely required to ensure that the impact that the women like those in this volume and thousands of others have is maximised even further. The women in this volume help to show us where to start.

To conclude this book about great women, here is a poem to honour them and the millions of other women in South Africa, Africa and the world that are struggling for their emancipation, working every day to keep the world going, and fighting for a better world.

### **Still I Rise**

*Maya Angelou*

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
 Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
 Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
 Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
 Don't you take it awful hard  
 'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
 Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
 You may cut me with your eyes,  
 You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
 But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
 Does it come as a surprise  
 That I dance like I've got diamonds  
 At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
 I rise  
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
 I rise  
 I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
 Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
 I rise  
 Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
 I rise  
 Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
 I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise  
 I rise  
 I rise.



## Endnotes

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## NOTES







# ‘Empowered’ Women

