



## “IF YOU STRIKE A WOMAN, YOU STRIKE A ROCK”

***Several women leaders are emerging within the social movement of fisher people in South Africa. Based on interviews by Jackie Sunde of the Masifundise Development Organization, South Africa***

There is an old saying in South Africa that comes from the liberation struggle, “Wathint’ Abafazi! Wa thint Imbokotho!” that is, “if you strike a woman, you strike a rock”. Now, eight years after the election of the first democratic government in South Africa, and despite having one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, the strength and courage of black women living in fishing and coastal villages in this country is again being tested.

Notwithstanding their recently gained rights, very few women living in these areas have access to the sea; they have no representation within the national fisheries management programme and only a minority have gained quotas through the notoriously corrupt Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) system. It is in this context that several women leaders have emerged within the social movement of fisher people, including Solene Smith and Naomi Cloete.

Solene lives in Langebaan, a small coastal village on the West Coast of South Africa. She was born in the nearby district of Hopefield on a farm where her parents worked. On leaving school, Solene went to work at the Langebaanweg Airport Base as a cleaner. For the first twelve years of her working life, Solene worked from five in the morning until seven at night. She was forced to wake up every day at 3 am in order to walk to work and get there on time at 5 am.

Solene worked extremely hard. When asked how she managed, she says, “I just had to be strong...you just had to do what you were told...” Her love for people enabled her to develop good relationships with her colleagues and she soon developed a reputation for being able to identify their strengths and assist her employer in making recommendations regarding their training needs and job descriptions. After twelve years, her hard work and leadership potential were recognized, and she was promoted to the position of supervisor. When she was 21 Solene married Edward Smith, a fisherman from Langebaan and came to live in Langebaan. Edward’s father was also a fisherman and the family had a long history of fishing, as well as of tragedy, at sea. Edward had lost a brother, a brother-in-law, and a nephew in an accident at sea and two other brothers in another accident. Solene has three children of her own, two foster children, and three grandchildren.

In 2000 Solene decided to resign. She says that over the years, especially after the democratic elections in 1994, she had become aware of her rights and she realized that she was being treated badly at work. She took a retrenchment package and turned her attention to her community. She feels that she has always been a community-oriented person. She assisted the local fisher community with their applications for subsistence permits and she began to help them to form the Langebaan Visser's Assosiasie and to apply for limited commercial permits.

In October 2000 she was elected as the Treasurer for the Association, a position that she still holds. The South African fishing policy marginalizes small-scale fishers, allocating them extremely small, unsustainable quotas. The 35 members of the Association were only awarded 7 permits for 420 kg of West Coast Rock Lobster. This has subsequently been increased to 500 kg. This provides an income that is considerably lower than the poverty level.

Despite living on a resource-rich coastline, the Langebaan fishers are unable to access these resources. They have no jetty or slipway and are restricted to a tiny area within the lagoon due to the control that the South African Navy and the Nature Conservation authorities have over the lagoon. The still predominantly white, wealthy tourist industry is given priority over the local fishers. In fact, many of the local fishers were removed from their homes along the beach during the apartheid era and allocated smaller houses some distance from the beach. Strict laws control the cleaning of fish on the beach and hamper their access to the sea. The plots along the beach have been developed by wealthy holiday-makers, many of whom do not stay in these houses for a substantial portion of the year.

Solene has become a leading activist in the struggle for the rights of *bona fide* fisher people in South Africa. She has played a particularly important role in asserting women's rights and the need for gender equality in the industry. Through her lobbying the Association has agreed that there should be one woman involved in each permit and there are now five women within the permit groups. She says that although in the beginning men might not have agreed, now they see this as important. What has also helped is that they know that this is one of the criteria used by the government when awarding quotas and hence they are eager to support this provision. In the long term, they would like to get a much bigger quota and have more women involved.

Solene says women play a very important role in the fishing industry. However, very few women have the safety training that will enable them to go to sea—only one woman wants to go to sea at this stage. The others, however, play a critical role. They are involved in preparing and repairing the nets—a skill they have learnt over the years—and in baiting operations. Solene herself gets up to help the men in her family prepare for sea. Often this is at 1 am in the morning. She worries about the crew. She says it worries her, for example, if someone goes to sea drunk as “you can lose lives if someone goes to sea drunk”.

Substance abuse is a real problem in her community. Several of the permit holders are on drugs. Solene is trying to get a social work community programme going that will try to highlight the dangers and support drug users in giving up their dependence. She notes that it is against the law to go to sea under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Why are drugs and alcohol such a problem? Solene believes that this can be traced directly to the new fishing policy. In the old days the youth could go to sea and earn a living. Now most of them are unemployed, they sit in poverty. “They will do anything to feel happy... there are no grants to assist them outside of the fishing season and the money they get from their current quota is very little...”

Solene believes in women's contribution. She says, “I would like us women to know that we are not less worthy, we don't have to keep quiet. We can uplift ourselves...I want to encourage women to get what we want, to organize and mobilize to help ourselves. We are strong enough in all respects: business, politics, everything...the things we need are there.”

With regard to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Solene says that what she would really like to see is the fisher communities forming a steering committee—involving all areas from all



countries and linked together at the world level. She says it should not just come from the local level. “If we can get this in place, a structure that can talk for everyone, my dream is that in ten years time fisher people themselves will be in Marine and Coastal Management (MCM). This dream is within our reach, it is possible if we stand together. We can achieve this, if we stand and work together.”

Like Solene, Naomi Cloete lives in a small historical fishing village on the coast. Naomi was born in Paternoster where her family has been involved in the fishing industry for generations. Her family lived on a farm adjacent to the beach, in small cottages built by her grandfather. During the apartheid era this farm was registered in the name of a white

farmer and Naomi’s family lost control of the farm. They were forced to move from the farm and those members of the family who refused to move were finally evicted from the farm in 1999.

In accordance with the constitutional provisions of the country, Naomi’s relatives lodged land claims through the Land Restitution process but to date their claim has not been settled. On the contrary, their claim has been ‘misaid’ by the department. They have faced a great deal of harassment from the white farmer who has subsequently sub-divided the farm and sold off the land to developers for tourist accommodation.

Naomi is the Chairperson of the local Paternoster Visser’s Association. The association comprises 69 local fishers who have a small, unsustainable quota that they have been allocated for four years. The management and administration of this quota is very challenging and causes a great deal of conflict amongst the members. Naomi has had to learn many skills and plays a central role, not just in the on-going administration of the organization, but also in the emotional and psychological support and maintenance of the crew. She describes days when she has scanned the stormy horizons, fearing that one of her crew members was lost at sea.

The local small-scale fishers have no breakwater or slipway, few of them have had training in safety at sea, and their boats are small wooden *bakkis*. Naomi, and nine other women from the area, have applied for quotas on four occasions, spending a great deal of money on each application but to no avail. These women do not know why they have not succeeded in obtaining access to the sea. They are determined to fight for their access to marine resources. Naomi recalls the hope that the *bona fide* fishers had after the general election in 1994, their belief that they would now be able to access the sea in their own right. Although dismayed that the new government has not awarded them priority rights as historical fishers, these women are determined to fight for this right and to tackle the unequal transformation of the fishing industry in this country.

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