

Women's development: *a big challenge*



A training institute for women, and run by women, has been set up in the Border area. SPEAK talked to some of the women involved

The women who run the Malibongwe National Development Institute ... from left to right: Mamebele Hobana, Sigrid Pickering, Nonyameko Mabuya, Kholeka Luzi, Mpho Malaoa

"I am very excited. For a long time, even in UDF days, we have said that women must be developed without doing anything practical about it. Now it is coming true," says the Border president of the ANC Women's League (ANCWL), Sisisi Tolashe.

The Malibongwe National Development Institute (Mandi) is the first national women's training institute in the country. It was started by the ANCWL last year. Tolashe stresses it is not only for ANC women, but aims to work for the "development of all women".

Basic funding for the institute has come through the Malibongwe Trust. The trust was set up through the ANCWL after a women's conference in Holland in 1990.

Mandi is based in an old three-storey building with fields spread in front of it. The place used to be a convent.

The institute has a staff of 25 people. Only three of them are men.

The staff say Mandi is still in the planning stages. But there is already a lot to show: rows of healthy vegetables, a colourful display of traditional dress made at the institute, an educare creche for children and comfortable conference rooms.

There are three projects - agriculture, sewing and educare. Women are trained in skills, both at the institute and out in the field. It is also hoped that these projects will make some money for Mandi.

Women heading the institute include Nonyameko Mabuya, who is project co-ordinator; Mpho Malaoa, in charge of agriculture; Kholeka Luzi, head of sewing; and Mambele Hobana, the housekeeper.

The Malibongwe Children's Centre, organised by Mabuya, provides child-care facilities for women who come to Mandi for training. The centre also acts as a teaching model for pre-school training.

Malaoa has her hands full with an area the size of several soccer fields. She and eight other women have taken just two months to clear the ground and plant many different vegetables. They have made a compost heap and hope to start on the orchard next, planting new trees to replace the old ones.

"We are trying to use more organic (natural) methods of farming and less pesticides (chemicals used to protect crops against insects)," says Malaoa. She is a qualified agriculturalist with a certificate from Arizona Agricultural College in the USA. She says the soil for farming is rich.

Luzi is excited about the development of the sewing project. She coordinates a group of five women who sew "traditional clothing" to bring in money. Their bags, skirts, shirts and other garments are being sold across the country and they have many orders from other countries.

But the projects are only one side of the institute.



A member of the sewing group



Mpho Malaoa is in charge of agriculture. Rows of healthy vegetables show the work being done in this department

Mandi also holds courses for the development of women in subjects like financial management and adult literacy. Administrative secretary Sigrid Pickering says it is "aimed at giving women opportunities".

Mabuya says the institute tries to build on women's skills and encourages working together, but sometimes there are problems.

For example, some women did not want to sew clothes in a certain colour if that colour, according to traditional custom, was for married women only.

"We sit down immediately if there is something wrong to discuss it before it gets complicated," Mabuya says.

One of the problems they came across was the three men employed at the institute: a night watchman and two groundsmen.

"The problem was they did not want to be supervised by women, but we talked about how it was a place for all of us and now we work together peacefully," Mabuya says.

Nuns from the old convent (now being used by Mandi) have donated many curtains, wardrobes and other household items.

"They said they were happy to hear about women in action," Mabuya explains.

Mandi is clearly already living up to its name.

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