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PERSONAL VIEW

WATHINT' ABAFAZI

Women put rural village on road to growth, writes

Zarina Maharaj

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Bumbane's women step out on road to uncertain future

"The building of this road has proved that women can do the work that men can do, and better. They found it easy to build this road."

So replied Nolutu of Bumbane village in rural Transkei, when I congratulated her last week on the fact that the building of the Nolutu Road, named in recognition of her role in mobilising the community behind this project, was done largely by women, who in many cases had never before left home for work.

Nolutu is married to King Buyelekaya Dalindyebo, the king of the Tembus and successor of the late King Sabata Dalindyebo, who fought hard for liberation from apartheid oppression. He paid for his views by being

persecuted by the past regimes, including the Transkei "homeland" government, which drove him into exile, where he died in the 1980s. His remains were brought back to Bumbane, the "great place of the king of the Tembus", after 1994.

The Transkei government, together with the South African regime, colluded in neglecting development in this area, including allowing what infrastructure there was to fall into disrepair. In particular, there have been no roads connecting Bumbane to other villages and urban centres, where one can find shops, health facilities and schools.

A modern infrastructure aimed at making available to these rural people essential



ZARINA MAHARAJ

services and goods was a vital delivery issue. Rural villagers' access to such basic services and goods was expensive and arduous, and almost impossible in flood-induced, wet weather. It cost R150 to R200 to reach the nearest clinic, just 10km away.

Nolutu said it could take a week to get the shopping home. Children often carried the shopping on their way home from school, leaving it at households

along the way to be picked up the next day and carried a bit further.

Bumbane is part of the Border-Kei development region. Of the area's population, 27 percent are illiterate or poorly educated. The majority have few skills, including the men; they rely on remittances from kin working elsewhere or on farming or well-fare for subsistence.

So it is hardly surprising the men had strong reservations about women working on this project. The king said the work would be too strenuous. Others felt there would be too much absenteeism, given women's primary role as care-givers, and because the planting season would prevent women from working. Nevertheless, 71 percent of

the people employed on this project were women. Applicants were selected on the basis of how poor they were: only the poorest of the poor would be considered — women largely make up this category. Age was also a factor, given the need to target the youth.

A large number of the women were trained as supervisors or team leaders, and were not used for manual "women's work" such as carrying water — sometimes the sole work done by women in construction projects in Africa.

Training included using simple hand tools like shovels, pick-axes, wheelbarrows, trowels, stampers (for compacting), floats for levelling, testers (to test for compaction) and hammers (to break stones into smaller pieces).

Now that the 14km gravel road is complete, the workers have been awarded certificates attesting to their expertise and skills. But although the department of transport is planning to provide another five such roads to more than 3 000 villages, the women who built Nolutu Road are worried about future work.

One of them has bought equipment for future income generation, but another asked: "Will our families go back to starvation?"

How to sustain their livelihoods is now at issue, and the urgency of this problem has not escaped Nolutu.

Ways must be found to make this small road the beginning and not the end of opportunities for these villagers.