

Tracing women's roles in the fishing industry

By Maila Nghidinwa

The culture of fishing which in the past involved women as great fishers has almost died among women. In former times, women did deep sea-fishing as recorded by anthropologist Sheila Lewenhak in her book *Women and Work* (MacMillan Press, 1980).

During the great stone age women of Terra del Fuego built their own canoes. They went out naked in all weather in the terrible waters off Cape Horn, and at certain seasons provided the whole of their peoples diet.

In Namibia women still catch fish using the traditional method of trapping fish into baskets. This traditional method is no longer widely used because the Cunene river does not always flow inland and the water trapped in oMadiva is not enough to enable fishing.

Today women are the majority in the fishing factories in Lüderitz Bay, but they are doing cleaner's jobs and packaging. Few are supervisors and some do quality control of fish and the fish vessels. None of the factories visited however had women working on the fish vessels. Very few hold middle management positions and there are none in top management posts.

What makes their situation worse is that most are not employed full time, but as casual workers. Casual workers do not qualify for the benefits full time employees have.

Some have been working for more than 5 years and still did not qualify to be employed full time, the workers told us.

Work conditions in the factories are hard. Workers stand for long hours in the cold. They suffer from varicose veins and have problems with menstruation. Because of the cold, the blood clots and causes severe pain.

The women complained bitterly about the taxing of casual workers. They asked whether it was not possible for a person who gets payed less than N\$ 300 to be untaxed.

The income tax policy makes no exemption for casual workers who earn less than N\$800 a month which is the case when you are a full time worker. Part time workers who earn more than N\$3 000 during the period of casual employment pay 14% tax on their earnings, no matter

whether they earn more than N\$3 000 over say an eight month period, which means they get much less than N\$800 a month.

It's high time fish companies in Lüderitz pay women a wage they can live on, was the opinion of most.

The owners of the Lüderitz fish factories should keep in mind that it's because these women work long hours in their factories that they are successful.

When women leave early in the morning to work, they leave their children with the neighbours to be looked after. Creches are expensive, they may cost the same as what a woman gets payed. Women will never work happily if they have problems with paying for child care.

WORD TO LEARN

oMadiva - pool or vlei, deeper than oShanas.

Women workers in a fish factory in Lüderitz

