

Mozambique: With the

Maputo—It is the second year of insufficient rains. Even the fertile Limpopo Valley, in Gaza province, is showing signs of the drought. Once a broad, flowing river, the Limpopo has shrunk away from its banks, baring large stretches of sand, dry earth, stagnant pools, and occasional marsh.

Residents of the area's communal villages are better equipped than most of the peasants to weather the drought because of some collective farming and the consumer cooperatives which supplement the rice they produce. But even here people are beginning to worry and hunger is becoming a reality (for more information on the drought see *Southern Africa*, November/December 1980).

Among those anxiously awaiting the November rains are the people of "3 de Fevereiro"—the Third of February—one of the first and largest communal villages in the area.

Divided into five bairros (neighborhoods), the village, like many such villages—provides free schools, literacy classes, electric water pumps, and a health post. The village has its own government through the local People's Assembly, a local People's Tribunal, as well as such structures as a party cell, the Organization of Women (OMM), and the Organization of Youth (OJM). It is also one of the few to boast electricity and a telephone.

Communal villages, like this one are also envisioned as building a new social order that will embody the country's socialist principles—stressing equality between people, curtailing oppressive practices (e.g. polygamy), and providing a basis for collective production. One of the most challenging problems they confront is the realization of the commitment to equality between the sexes, and changing the division of labor accordingly. The few days I spent in the village with the OMM secretary and women she works with, made clear that progress, while it occurs, is slow and difficult.

A Woman's Work?

The women of 3 de Fevereiro rise early. By 4:30 a.m. they are already around the fire preparing a breakfast of ground corn porridge. By shortly after five, when the sun is rising well above the horizon, the children are dressed and the women have set off for the 45 minute brisk walk to the valley, many with babies secured on their backs by a wide length of cloth.

The village is named in memory of the day in 1969 when Eduardo Mondlane, president and founder of FRELIMO, was assassinated. On that date seven years later future villagers and volunteers first came together to clear the dense bush and undergrowth, to cut down trees, to rid the area of its snakes and wild animals, and make way for the open land that now sup-

ports a thriving, if poor, community.

In principle—but not yet totally in practice—every family is entitled to an individual machamba in the fertile valley, to grow rice and vegetables, as well as one in the village itself. There rows of manioc, peanuts and corn are grown in sandy, unyielding earth.

Each bairro is responsible for providing a day's labor for collective work, in the OMM cooperative machamba, in restoring the large banana groves previously owned by a Portuguese settler, or in breaking ground for the planned agricultural cooperative. For this work, both men and women set off with hoes and machetes and generally share the task equally. Although the women I spoke with insisted that there is no division of labor based on sex, the claim did not hold true under observation.

The individual machambas stretched out across the open land on the edge of the bairros, by a narrow path, a particular tree, or a stake. From early hours until the sun becomes unbearable, a solitary female figure could be seen bending over, legs straight, to hoe the earth, to plant, to weed, to harvest. Here and there a baby tied to its mother's back would swing rhythmically with the movements of her work. A three-year old boy, surrounded by corn plants reaching above his head, watched his mother with a bored expression. An older woman, her face wizened and creviced by years of work under the sun, worked almost as quickly as the younger women. I saw no

men.

In fact, men were absent from any tasks integral to village life: the long lines for the water pump were made up almost solely of women, the male sex represented for the most part by young boys—except the two men in charge. The lines waiting to buy rice one day, sugar the next, from the consumer cooperative were filled mainly with patient though weary women. And women faced alone the basic and time-consuming domestic chores which waited when agricultural work was over.

The reason is not only women's versus men's work, although this is the determining factor. The fact is that the majority of the population of the province are women. Gaza, and the neighboring provinces of Maputo and Inhambane supply the South African mines with their economically active Mozambican men. Others seek work in Maputo, or find limited jobs in the nearby towns and few industries, and the rest work in the village. Jobs in the mines are most coveted for the pay is better. The few brick houses that stand out among the mud and reed huts were built by miners. And women spoke with respect of the goods the men brought home with them on their yearly or half-yearly leaves—the primus stoves, the thick South African blankets, the clothes, and other consumer items. Many men proudly sported the orange or blue hardhats they had brought home from their stint in the mines.

But women's roles are not static. Chang-

Pounding maize (left), women often still shoulder most of the household chores. Hands that for many years have wielded only hoes (center) are now being taught to hold pencils.



Women of "3 de Fevereiro"

ing most perceptibly is the range of tasks that women are taking on. Both party and government are making conscious moves, supported by the work of OMM, to encourage women to realize they can do any work men can do.

In 3 de Fevereiro, for instance, women help build their families' houses. Besides changing work roles, this entrenches a wife's claim to her share of the house should the marriage dissolve. Previously, the house was considered the man's property, and the woman had to leave. Women now help rethatch roofs and, alongside men, engage in the heavy work of clearing land for housing and cultivation.

But most important, and most noticeable, is the prominent role that women play in village political life. The higher percentage of women in 3 de Fevereiro is reflected in the composition of the local People's Assembly: Twelve out of a total of twenty members are women (although the president and vice-president are men). Of the 54 party members in the village, 32 are women, and half the members of the People's Tribunal are women.

Women take this work seriously and are losing their hesitancy about exercising their authority over men: I saw these interactions often, as on a visit to the OMM machamba.

Eager to show me the work of this cooperative, the OMM secretary, Leah Manhique woke me so early one morning that the sun had barely risen. We reached the fields before five, a good 45 minutes

before the first worker. Soon about 20 women were turning up the earth with their hoes, preparing to plant corn. But only when the male "responsible" for the storeroom appeared an hour later were they able to get the seeds. He was greeted by an irate Leah Manhique.

"You are lying," she accused him, "when you stand up in meetings and tell us that the reason why the work in the machamba is going slowly is because the women don't come to work. It is you who doesn't come to work. The women have been here for a long time."

He took the offensive. "But there is corn ready for harvesting. The women should be there, not planting new corn and allowing the old to die."

The secretary stood her ground. "But then it is *your* responsibility to call a meeting the night before to organize the work for the following day." Defeated, the responsible left in a huff.

In the banana groves, the day's male volunteers were clearing grass and weeds from the clogged irrigation canals, releasing the foul-smelling stagnant water. I was assured that this work was usually shared by men and women, but since the corn had to be sowed the work had been divided. Divided, I noted, along sexual lines. Clearing the stagnant water was men's work, and women now helped with that. Sowing seeds was generally women's work, and remained so—at least in the OMM machamba.

What *had* changed were the once tight

lines between those who had the right to make decisions, and those who carried them out.

More Than Technology Is Needed

Also helping to change women's roles are technological improvements, which help alleviate some of their time-consuming tasks. The need to travel long distances to pump water by hand is something of the past: each bairro has its own electric pump and generator.

But technology is only fine as long as it does not break down. At the time of my visit three or four pumps had been out of order for two to three months, and the lack of trained personnel meant that it might be more months before a repair technician could get to the village. So once more women were spending time collecting water, this time waiting in line.

Much more is needed. Watching women work from the first sign of light to late in the evening was to begin to appreciate how oppressive their work load is, and to have renewed awe for their stamina. And to the child care, food preparation, including hours of pounding and grinding, work in the machambas, washing clothes, and endless other domestic tasks now is added the call to build a new life. Women working with men in new forms of production, taking literacy classes, engaging in decision-making as leaders. Where do they find enough hours in the day?

Men That Help Are the Exceptions

And what of the men? Women in the People's Assembly told me that when women had to be away from home for political work, their husbands helped prepare food. But any visions of men pounding, collecting firewood, and then cooking were soon dispelled. "Many men have brought primus stoves from South Africa," I was told. "They are able to cook simple food." Thus they help out, but only once the husking of rice or the grinding of corn has been done.

This is a step, enabling women to travel and attend to political tasks, but absent is the conscious mobilization of *men* for these tasks. Women are exhorted to take on men's work. The reverse is not true. Those men that help are the exceptions.

While these contradictions persist, talking with the women of 3 de Fevereiro leaves one little doubt of the fundamental changes when compared with their lives under Portuguese colonialism.

"How could we dream," one woman said to me, her face showing the passion she felt, "that what is happening to us today could have ever been possible?" S.U.□

Stephanie Urdang is a member of the Southern Africa Collective and is currently based in Mozambique.



Stephanie Urdang



Stephanie Urdang

Leah Manhique at right (in picture on right), OMM Secretary for 3 de Fevereiro. Challenging old roles.