

how we feel

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Daughters: I am the Heart and the Lungs

In the first chapter of an ongoing series revealing the threads that unite women from all corners of the African continent, we travel to Swaziland to meet five indomitable spirits. Banana farmer, Make Ruth Mamba, accredits her success as a community leader and role model to the support she's received from her husband...

Photographs: Pippa Hetherington | **Words:** Kim Chaloner



'I am what I am because of my husband,' says Swazi banana farmer, Make Ruth Mamba. 'Financially and morally.'

Shaded by the giant canopy of a verdant banana plantation, and inching ever closer to the fine misty spray emanating from the irrigation system on a searingly hot May day, we watch Make Ruth Mamba at work ('Mah-gay' means mama in Siswati, and is a term of great respect). She shows motherly concern for her field workers as they slash the green, unripened fruit off the branches using giant pangas, an air of quiet strength evident in her carriage. Later, we cool down back at the HQ of the Khulumelakwenta Veg Growers Co-Op, grateful for a brief respite from the heat. Here, seated regally amongst a freshly picked harvest, one hand cradled daintily in the other, her gold wedding band gleaming in the dappled sunlight stealing in through a small window, and her jaunty purple toenail polish peeking out from her sandals, Make Ruth lifted her shy smile tentatively towards Pippa's camera. Over the course of a languid, tranquil hour, she traced the history of the co-op she's helped establish in the Swazi Lowveld, becoming not just a well-respected farmer, but an advocate for water-resource management and water conservation. We were left feeling we'd learnt so much from our conversation with a woman who has learnt to simply get on with it...

I was born in Swaziland. I have been married to my husband for a long time. Our firstborn is now 37 years old. We had three children, two girls and a boy. I feel like I gel with other women, I have been motivated by a lot of women in my life.



I don't know anything else. I have a strong willpower in doing things. We African women are the legs of the horse. Our male counterparts are figureheads. We have the energy and give the support, we do everything. We contribute more to bringing up children financially and morally. It is the fathers who stand around happy on graduation day. An African woman will always respect her husband but she also asks, 'Why can't we divide up the jobs in the household? Because I also want to learn how to fish.'

I grew up in a mission station with two young brothers. I was responsible for them, I never went out. The person who really motivated me was my mother, she had high hopes for me. If only she was here now she would see that my husband is very supportive. Not like many other African men who are too proud, and too pushy. They forget you're human, they see you as a machine, as though all you can do is produce children. It has to do with pride and jealousy. I think I was very lucky. I am what I am because of my husband. I think our children have seen that. We work together. The main difference is, when I have done well he gives me praise and encourages me to go on. I ask of him, he answers me.

Before we started our banana-farming business [they grow the Chinese Cavendish cultivar] in 1995 I trained first corporates and later churches in development studies. My role as a development officer was to inspire people to help themselves – the focus was on advocacy. And then the Department gave me the option of early retirement. Babe [Ruth's husband, Babe Oscar Mamba] is a teacher by profession – he was employed by the Swazi Government.

Ruth Mamba

I am the heart and the lungs of the project. It is a family business initially written by me together with my husband. There was a lot of work in its inception, but once we were set up, the routine didn't need many people to maintain it. We had five women and two men in the field, spraying the weeds, watering and cutting.

Initially we were not well financed, we had teething problems that needed to be nursed. We visited farmers in Nelspruit in South Africa as part of an exchange project. We were best friends, we helped each other here and there. It takes time for a project of this kind to mature. The crops might be there but then you find that the market is not good, or there are weather problems. Once, in '98, we had a hail storm that destroyed everything.

We got assistance from the bank but not enough to cover all our expenses. We realised we had to rob Peter to pay Paul, things were not smooth. But we wanted to pursue our vision, we waited, we're doing it now.



Today, the maintenance is done by the people but we are always there to do our checks. The project demands a lot of walking around, we need to give direction, to manage people. Our main obstacles? Not having the financial muscle at times when we'd like to expand. Weather patterns change and affect production, with the result that the bananas are not as plentiful as we'd love them to be. People stealing our crop faster than we can reap it, and selling it across the river. Often the thieves are children who are taken to the police station and fined. They're being mischievous, you cannot prevent that. Sometimes I felt my husband should have done something about it, shown his muscle, we could be much further than we are today...

We invested in bananas because we wanted a crop that we would plant once, and not every season. We also wanted to plant sugarcane, but were told that the soils were not good. SWADE (* Swaziland Water and Agricultural Development Enterprise: see our recent Life-Times post, 'Magic Hands', for more about the association's farming projects in the Swazi Lowveld). have encouraged us through workshops and excursions, in helping us build relationships, and in information-sharing. We had to form an irrigation project. I'm the chairperson of the permit-holders who belong to the water-users association. In the past, people would simply pump water from the river. Now they pay for it by volume, by what gets extracted, it's an estimated cost. The association also spreads water awareness.

I enjoy talking, talking, talking until you see people changing their attitudes. These are my children [pointing to the bananas], my children are not here. We have done all this, and feel in the right position, now we want to share it. Our idea is that it will sustain the community, and help to spread knowledge and expertise. People are sometimes brave to come forward and ask for advice, but many people are scared. They should remember that we, too, started from humble beginnings.

Ruth Mamba

Right now we've reached the standard, we distribute to local markets, to bus ranks, people come from all over the Lowveld. There are many initiatives we'd still like to pursue. We'd like to extend the banana fields, we have so much un-utilised land. When one project is not successful then you end up doing nothing. So there's the pressure to diversify. Livestock breeding gives you a steady income and is not too demanding. This year we achieved our goal – we fenced cattle and cows, local indigenous breeds, next we want to improve the breed.

My work has greatly improved my life. I have learned to be patient with the crop, with the people, with the market. Sometimes it is not easy, but we have to go through it, it is a process. My dream for our Swazi daughters is to see them in charge of all political positions. We wouldn't be wasting so much on arms negotiation, or resort to fighting. We'd listen, we'd stay peaceful.