Gloria Memela’s thriving furniture business grew out of an industry associated with grim scenes and sadness. The 50-year-old single mother of three won this year’s department of trade & industry Technology for Women in Business award for her company Bulwer Trading, which runs a bottle store, woodwork factory and funeral parlour. After going through a divorce in 1993 she earned her teacher’s diploma from Applebosch Training College in 1996 and worked as a teacher for two years before striking out on her own. In 1998 she opened a township bottle store and two years later she opened the Nkwezela Funeral Parlour in Nkwezela location near Donnybrook, KwaZulu Natal. As part of the service, the parlour provided caskets, but the buying and transporting soon proved to be too expensive. “We used to import the caskets from Pietermaritzburg but that was eating into our profits,” she says. “We bought them at R3 000 each but realised that by making our own we would only spend about R900 for the same quality.” In 2005, Bulwer started doing that and was soon making other wood products such as cabinets, headboards and built-in kitchens. The group’s turnover is now around R300 000/month, with a staff of five people. “We are growing well,” Memela says, “but the thing that is now killing us is electricity. Before the electricity price hikes, we paid about R3 000/month for power. Now we are paying around R20 000. We are now considering installing a solar power system.”