

Women Farm Workers Growing and Reaping Hope In South Africa

Monday 16 July 2012, by [FORTUIN Celeste](#) (Date first published: 2009).

In South Africa, rural women's economic position or disposition is closely linked to their relationship with land. Most rural women do not own land, an effect of a dominant patriarchal culture that favours men as landowners, as well as that of apartheid, where the majority of rural people experienced land dispossession. The combined effects of patriarchy, slavery, colonialism and apartheid-capitalism have resulted in widespread landlessness for the majority of black people, and current land ownership still lies predominantly in the hands of white male farmers. Women make up more than 64% of the rural population, but yet, according to statistics, they are only about 1% of landowners.

The Western Cape Province, internationally renowned for its prestigious wine farms and deciduous fruit, has the biggest concentration of farm workers in South Africa. When a closer look is taken regarding gender, race and class dynamics on these farms, the struggle of rural farm women for gender and economic justice is revealed.

A woman who works on a farm is most likely to have been born on that farm. She is most likely black, with little or no access to formal education. The agricultural labour force in South Africa is characterised by a distinct gender division of labour: farming is still perceived as predominantly 'men's work', with women's labour considered supplementary. As such, the permanent workforce within agriculture is predominantly male, with women forming the largest percentage of casual and seasonal labour.

In a research study conducted on farm worker wages in the Western Cape, we found that women seasonal workers receive a minimum wage of between R48 and R60 per day. A seasonal worker's maximum monthly wage is R1 200, without any incentives, bonus or benefits guaranteed. Our study also found that women farm workers spend their wages mostly on their family's needs, such as food and healthcare. One seasonal worker who participated in this research said that the hardest time for her is when the season ends. The worry she experiences at this time was evident in her voice as she explained her situation. As a single mother with two school-going children, she feels distressed when she is not able to put food on the table or pay her children's school fees. Another farm worker said that even though television has been available for years, she has never in her life been able to afford a television set because she earns too little as a seasonal worker.

Economic and political changes in the post-apartheid economy affected agricultural workers in important ways. As the ANC government propelled the South African economy into the global market and removed protective tariffs for agriculture, farm production had to become more competitive in an international market. To reduce productive costs, farmers began moving away from permanent labour towards employing more casual, seasonal labour.

At the same time, new labour legislation, such as the Labour Relations Act (1995), Extension of Security of Tenure Act (1997), and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997) extended the rights of farm workers, and introduced a legal framework to the relationship between farmer and farm worker. Although farm workers now have recourse to unfair labour practices, the backlash

from farmers has been severe; this backlash, combined with the impact of globalisation on the South African agricultural sector, has resulted in increased work and personal insecurity for farm workers within our current democratic context.

Casualisation and feminisation of the agricultural workforce appear to go hand in hand, as women begin to make up the bulk of the agricultural workforce. The increased feminisation of agricultural labour has not resulted in substantive gains for women workers: women farmworkers still form less than 50% of the permanent workforce. As seasonal and casual workers, women's access to benefits such as sick and maternity leave, as well as to minimum wages, is limited. Within a global competitive economy, women, as the bulk of the agricultural workforce, are often found at the bottom end of the global value chain as farmers shed jobs first in their aim to reduce production costs. In a recent study on Decent Work, farm worker Saartjie Claasen remarked: 'I am very unhappy, because I work very hard to make my boss wealthy, contribute to make the country rich, but I still receive low wages.'

At a personal level, women farm workers are still subjected to gender-based violence and economic dependency on their intimate male counterparts. With the rise in HIV-infection in rural areas, seasonal workers have limited access to health benefits, and as they become too ill to work, they face the threat of losing both their work and their homes on the farms. This is due to the fact that labour and tenure rights are intimately connected on farms, and although separated legally, these evictions are still practised collectively by farmers. Housing contracts with farm workers are most likely to be in the name of the male worker, and should men lose their jobs on farms, or become too ill to work, they and their family are likely to face eviction.

Organisations and campaigns have been formed for and by women and men living on farms to respond to this insecurity. Women farm workers' experiences of personal and political injustice take place in the geographic isolation of a farm. They have limited or no access to government-provided social services mostly centred in neighbouring towns. Building farm women's activism and organisation has been identified as a strategy to address this isolation, where women can come together to share similar experiences and initiate joint campaigns as a collective.

Although many NGOs and alliances exist within the agricultural and land sector of South Africa, there is not a clearly pronounced gender or feminist perspective in their service delivery and campaigns. As such, farm women's needs run the risk of being marginalised or not identified within broader development agendas. In the Western Cape, a few civil society organisations are playing a leading role in fostering a specific feminist approach and, through their work and campaigns, highlighting the situation of women farm workers at both a personal and political level. The Women on Farms Project (WFP), an NGO based in Stellenbosch in the Western Cape, has been providing capacity building, awareness and empowerment training to thousands of women farm workers in and around the Western Cape since 1996. As part of their objective to address the landlessness and unemployment of rural women, WFP is supporting women farm workers to organise themselves and form agricultural cooperatives. The women are given skills-building opportunities at both a personal and technical level to equip them to work land in a sustainable and income-generating manner.

The Western Cape has also seen the formation of the first women-led agricultural trade union, Sikhula Sonke (SS). The union has over 3 800 members, of which the majority is women. Its constitution contains provisions to ensure a majority of women farm workers in the union's leadership. In a predominantly male trade union sector, SS is a concrete example of women's ability to lead and organise on their own behalf. SS is formulated in the context of social movement unionism, and as such the trade union seeks to address both the social and labour issues confronting women who live and work on farms.

Various campaigns around farm worker rights have been launched by organisations such as SS and WFP and alliances such as the Alliance for Land and Agrarian Reform (ALARM). These campaigns focus on issues such as the right to a living wage, protests against farm evictions, the rights of seasonal workers and campaigning for safer working conditions on farms. WFP and SS as well as the Centre for Rural Legal Studies and Lawyers for Human Rights are some of the main providers of education, training and legal assistance to women farm workers around labour rights in particular as well as other human rights.

Working with women farm workers to bring about fundamental change in the quality of their life is a tough but inspiring process. You become touched and inspired by their courage in the midst of unimaginable suffering. Today, 14 years since the birth of democracy, farm women in South Africa remain marginalised, and their struggle for social and economic justice continues.

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P.S.

* From Amandla! website.

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/special-features/sa-national-womens-day/594-women-farm-workers-growing-and-reaping-hope>