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*Livelihoods Struggles of Women Farm Workers in South Africa*  
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### **Structure of Farming in South Africa**

The structure of commercial farming in South Africa today can be traced back to the slave plantations under colonialism at the Cape in the 1600's. Today a typical farm is still owned by a white, usually Afrikaner man, managed by the farmer and a male relative (or contracted white manager) and staffed by a pool of black farm worker families. The number of farm workers employed on a given farm will depend on the size of the farming enterprise. Through this system approximately 1 million workers are directly employed in the agricultural sector, with a further 6 million livelihoods estimated to be directly and indirectly dependent on the agricultural sector (CRLS, 2003)

Historically, farm worker families work for the same farmer family for many generations and are "passed on" from father to son. Farm workers often speak about how their parents worked for the father of the very farmer they were working for today. As a farming enterprise may develop and expand, farmers move worker families as per their labour needs. So for example, if a farmer had acquired a new farm and needed experienced labour there, there is very little stopping him from uprooting entire families and relocating them to his new business.

Before the South African transition to democracy, there were no laws governing the relationship between farm worker and farmer. In a system bearing all the hallmarks of feudalism, the farmer assumes the role of the ultimate patriarch, ruling every aspect of farm worker lives. Within this framework, physical movement, punishment for "wrong-doings", access to health care, housing, and schooling of children was all privileges awarded at the behest of the farmer.

### **A Women's Place**

Where does this leave women on farms? On farms, the women's position is usually determined by her relationship to a male farm worker. For the most part, women are engaged in farm labour as the wife or girlfriend of so and so. Women are seen in very literal terms as an extension of the male labourer and represents an auxiliary source of labour to be drawn on as needed during high seasons. This means that there exists a de facto restriction on a women's ability to engage in off-farm employment in order to ensure her availability as per the needs of the farm.

While these feudal labour practices are never formally written into contracts, there is an established pattern of labour engagement where certain, mostly higher paying positions, are reserved for men. Just as is the case for women's reproductive labour, her labour on the farm is valued less than that of men and generally don't hold a high status within the agricultural hierarchy. With her perceived nimble quick fingers, the women worker is restricted to the lower status functions on a farm. Women are thus discriminated against both in the terms of her employment, as well as the type of work she will be able to do.

Even in an era of dramatically changing management practices which increasingly sees black farm workers being trained as foremen and even managers, women remain largely excluded from this development. Because her work is seen as low status, unskilled labour, it is valued in monetary terms well below the work of men. The completely circular argument presented by farmers to justify this is the fact that women generally perform what is considered to be “unskilled” work on the farm and is therefore paid less than men. But even in cases where men and women work along side each other fulfilling identical work functions, the patriarchal world view which informs the farmer justifies the payment of women well below the wage accorded to their male counterparts.

### **Tenure Insecurity**

Just as the case for other industries like mining, where the site of work is far away from built-up centres and residential areas, the provision of housing can thus be regarded as a part of production cost (COSATU, 2005). Tenure security has historically been tied to permanent farm labour contracts, which I turn has historically been male. If the male worker loses his job or passes away, it means quite literally that an entire family can be out on the streets. (Umhlaba, 2004). While new laws introduced since 1994 prohibits linking employment contracts with housing, the practise is still widespread today.

In recent study by WFP into the living and working conditions on wine farms in the Western Cape (Behind the Label II, 2005) there was not a single case of a housing contract being in the name of a woman worker. We believe this to be the norm in the sector. Even in cases where women also hold permanent employment contracts, housing contracts were still held in the names of male partners. Access to housing is thus secured through a relationship with a male farm worker.

In a context where the physical and emotional abuse of women by male partners is rife, this systemic discrimination against women further compromises women’s abilities to leave abusive relationships and further undermine the safety of women and their children. In light of the known intersectionality of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS infection rates, this blatant discrimination against women has far reaching consequences. While prevalence of HIV/AIDS<sup>1</sup> on farms is currently estimated to be well below the national average, multiple incubating factors influencing the rate at which HIV will spread in farming communities warrants serious concern.

### **Social Conditions**

The social and living conditions in which farmwomen are located is thus extremely harsh. Sexual harassment and abuse are common experiences for women farm workers; the incidence of single parenting amongst farmwomen is high, with few mothers receiving maintenance from the father of the child. Attributable to low nutritional levels, exposure to pesticides and limited access to health care services, the general health of farm workers is poor. And while women farm workers tend to be responsible for all expenditure in the household, most women are excluded from long-term financial decision-making.

Farmwomen largely do not perceive leisure as being legitimate entitlement in their lives, with alcohol consumption used as the much-needed outlet and form of relaxation, compounding the myriad of social problems on farms. Payment of farm workers with alcohol, the “tot system”, be traced back to the colonial and slavery era of the 1600’s and was still pervasive, especially on wine farms, well into the 1990’s. Alcohol consumption by farm workers is said to be twice that of the urban poor. Since laws have been introduced outlawing the tot system, there is evidence to suggest that the system has gone underground, making it

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<sup>1</sup> There are no studies on rate of infection (incidence) conducted on farms to date (HSRC, 2004).

even harder to fight. A 2001 study found that the Western Cape has the highest incidence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) in the world with 40 to 46 per 1000 first graders showing symptoms<sup>2</sup> of FAS (Dopstop). The legacy of alcoholism and foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) therefore remains pervasive on the farmlands.

### **New Laws to Protect Farm Workers**

Before 1994 there were no real laws governing the working and living conditions of farm workers and dwellers. The post apartheid era has seen a host of laws introduced specifically aimed at protecting the rights of this vulnerable community. However, farmer backlash to the introduction of these laws have been severe. There was an unprecedented spate of farm worker evictions in the run up to the introduction of a law aimed at enhancing tenure security for farm workers. This trend continues alongside the trend towards casual labour. Despite an extensive system of subsidies to farmers towards the social development and labour costs of farm workers, most farmers now see the investment in social development as the exclusive responsibility of the state.

Despite all the new laws that are supposed to govern the employment relationship between farmer and farm worker, it is the historical unwritten rules of slavery that still largely defined the interactions even today. While these laws are unwritten, there is a clear, shared understanding between worker and farmer about what these rules entail. Because of this, the nature of disputes remains highly personalised. In citing reasons for conflict with farm workers, farmers show no hesitation in describing farm workers as lazy, no-good, drunkards, thieving etc (Isaacs, 2003).

On the positive side, from those of us working directly with farm workers there is a sense of increasing surfacing of the problems and a growing tension on the farmlands. Farmers complain that farm workers have become more problematic in recent times. However, the increase of visible conflict between farmer and workers should be seen as an indicator of the growing rights awareness and confidence of workers. Most confrontations do not lead to victories given the range of obstacles faced by workers. However, the mere fact that these fights are happening at all should be read a very slow relocation of farm workers as subjects in the farming universe, to citizens in a constitutional democracy.

Even in the face of a plethora of labour and tenure laws aimed at protecting the rights of farm dwellers, conditions remain much the same and farm life continues to be characterised by an extreme power imbalance between the commercial white farmer, and his work force. Despite all the undoubtedly positive developments in South Africa, women who live and work on farms still suffer precarious livelihoods of profound insecurity and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

### **Liberalisation and Women Farm Workers**

Since South African commercial agriculture is export orientated, the sector and its workers remain extremely vulnerable to the exigencies in the international trade regime. As a sector, commercial agriculture has faced a number of challenges in stemming directly from South Africa's opening up to global markets and the progressive removal of trade barriers and subsidies. By signing on to the WTO Agreement in Agriculture, SA government has seen though a series of reforms in the agricultural sector comprising primarily of deregulation and liberalisation of the sector.

Re-entry into global market has meant exposure to significant competition. One of the biggest challenges stems from the unequal terms of trade South Africa encounters within the export supply chain having to

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<sup>2</sup> FAS phenotype is characterised by a combination of facial dysmorphic features, growth retardation and central nervous system abnormalities.

compete against highly subsidized producers in the North, primarily Europe. The concomitant drought in the region and the strengthening of the Rand are further exacerbating factors. As farmers find themselves in more precarious positions, the efforts by workers for better payment and working conditions becomes progressively harder. The threat of further farm liquidations in both the wine and fruit sectors remains an on-going threat. Bankruptcies and mergers have resulted in the kinds of national monopolies with powers mirroring that of the monopolies in the north, especially in the maize sector.

Besides the threat that this trade regime presents to established commercial white farmers, it presents an effective block to the development of new black and women entrants into agriculture through land reform and black economic empowerment initiatives in agriculture. The new emerging farmers are therefore unable to compete with the economies of scale already attained by most white farmers with extensive assistance from the state. This trade regime therefore poses a real threat to South African attempts at transforming the agricultural sector in a context where almost all commercial enterprises (and its land) are owned by white farmers,

### **Impact on Structure on Agricultural Work Force**

In the face of other inflexible input costs, labour presents a natural cost-cutting area to target in trying to bring input costs down. As a result, many farm workers have lost their jobs, or formerly permanent posts have been converted into casual and seasonal positions with none of the entitlements inscribed within the South African labour law.

Since 1994, there has been a significant decline in numbers of people employed in agriculture: from 1,219,648 in 1988 to 940,820 in 2002 (Statistics SA, 2002). These job-loses have served to undermine efforts to realise the constitutionally enshrined socio-economic rights of black South Africans. While most work on farms has historically performed by a permanent on-farm work force with three quarters of all jobs held by male workers, today as many as 60% of work in agriculture is temporary, with two thirds of temporary jobs held by women. (Umlaba, 2004). As is in the case for other vulnerable sectors, we have seen the concomitant casualisation and feminisation of the agricultural work force. A trend that started off being defined as an “atypical” employment category today represents the normative mode of labour contracting in the agricultural sector.

In absolute terms, women therefore occupy more jobs in commercial agriculture today than at any previous point in South African history. As the group who makes up the bulk of the seasonal labour force, it is women farm workers in South Africa who bear the brunt of this unequal trade regime. Despite their multiple burdens as mothers, care givers to the aged and sick (increasingly those suffering from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses), these women have become the temporary, casual workers with no long term security and weak bargaining positions.

In the context of chronic poverty and structural unemployment, women are now in direct competition with men for jobs. Those who manage to hold on to their jobs, find their contracts restructured making the jobs more insecure and tenuous. It is well known that as casual and seasonal workers, women do not enjoy the same level remuneration and non-wage benefits as their male counterparts. For the women without jobs, existence is narrowly confined to a dependence on tenuous patronage of a male partner, the farmer or the state (through social security grants) So despite an increase in the absolute number of women employed in agriculture, this has not translated into more secure livelihoods for women (WFP, 2005 and NALEDI). A 2005 investigation conducted by Action Aid and WFP into the livelihoods of women farm workers on Tesco’s supplying farms in the Western Cape found that for the families of women workers, food security was pervasive as women struggle to meet the basic nutritional needs of their families.

And even in the face of increasing women's employment, women remain largely dependent on male partners for access to farm housing. Housing remains one of the most important livelihoods needs of both on-farm and off-farm women workers. And since women remain by and large dependent on male partner for tenure security, the current conversation of previous permanent jobs has contributed to a fast-growing rural housing crisis.

It is clear that in this dual process of neo-liberal economic reform and political democratisation has resulted in improvement of labour rights in terms of law, but a concomitant deterioration of working and living conditions of women farm workers and their families in real terms (WFP, 2003).

### **What does this mean for the Mobilisation of Farm Workers?**

Post-apartheid labour laws are progressive by global standards. However, the laws are premised on a corporatist model of labour that assumes a system of "negotiated agreements between big business, big unions and the state" (WFP, 2003: v). This assumes a normative model of employment characterised by permanent secure employment contracts, with true worker representation through effective trade union structures. By all accounts, these assumptions don't hold on South African commercial farms.

In addition to these conceptual weaknesses, there are multiple obstacles to the implementation, monitoring and enforcing of existing laws (WFP, 2003: v). The livelihood assets required realise constitutionally guaranteed entitlements such as equality, non-discrimination and dignity are not abundant in the lives of poor women. The obstacles facing farmwomen in particular in realising their rights in law include:

- Lack of knowledge on the part of farm women about their existing rights in laws
- Lack of necessary socio-economic support systems to enable rights access.
- Weak government monitoring and enforcement capacity

All of these obstacles are exacerbated by the location of farmwomen within a system of paternalism and prevailing patriarchy within the rural farmlands, leading to limited agency in accessing rights accorded in law.

While the right to unionisation in agriculture has been legalised since 1993, farm workers remain the least organised labour sector in South Africa today with the lowest percentage of unionised workers in any sector (Isaacs, 2003). An entire system of disincentives militates against workers joining trade unions, and when they do, it often comes at great costs to the worker and (usually) his entire family. The few trade unions that have started organising workers, have largely failed to develop creative organising models to meet the specific challenges posed by the unique labour structure on farms.

Given the paucity of civil society structures on farms, trade unions need to be willing to step outside of the traditional model and deal with more than just unfair dismissals. Given the complexity of livelihoods on the farm lands, it's impossible to effectively tackle the issue of labour rights without an integrated approach addressing the full range of threats to farm worker livelihoods. Trade unions have to be willing to become true social movements of the marginalised. Within such an approach, the significance of a feminised workforce cannot be ignored, and feminism needs to be a defining approach in organising models. If not, it will fail dismally at addressing the challenges faced by workers who also happen to be women.

Today the biggest farm worker trade union draws the majority of its members from the permanently - employed male workers in the agricultural processing plants in rural areas, leaving the most vulnerable (women seasonal workers) completely unprotected. And in the absence of a targeted strategy aimed at recruiting, building consciousness and driving collective action by women seasonal workers, the fastest growing demographic group within the farm worker community will remain unorganised and unprotected.

Within the context of globalisation, the success or organisations of farm workers will also be directly dependent on its ability to make the linkages between the conditions workers face on farms and developments on the other side of the earth. For a community of people who have historically had little mobility, with some generations spending entire lifetimes on a single farm or district, this task of making local-global linkages poses particular challenge.

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