

No decent work for Gauteng farm workers

Living and working conditions for farm workers in Gauteng province are a far cry from what can be described as decent work. Findings of research by **Edward Webster, Mbuso Nkosi, Debbie Budlender, Lelanie Williams and Mark Orkin** paint a bleak picture.

About four in every 10 farm workers (38%) surveyed worked on livestock farms. Close to a third (29%) worked in field crops. Men (43%) were most likely to work on farms that specialised in livestock, whereas women (35%) were most likely to work in field crop farming.

Approximately three in every four workers (75%) were labourers or unskilled workers and a larger proportion of females (81%) than males (72%) were labourers or unskilled workers.

The mean number of years that the farm workers had worked on the farm where they were employed was 5.1. Farm workers involved in mixed farming and horticulture tended to have worked for a longer time on their respective farms than other workers.

Close on half (49%) of the farm workers had worked in another job before deciding to leave, 29% were previously unemployed and looking for work, while close on a fifth (19%) previously had another job that they lost. Workers in mixed farming and horticulture were least likely to have had another job that they decided to leave and were most likely to have been previously unemployed.

The majority of farm workers (83%) who were interviewed classified themselves as black/African, 16% of all respondents said they were non-South African, of whom over two-fifths were Zimbabwean. One-fifth of farm workers employed at farms which practised mixed farming were non-South African, compared to 17% of those who were employed on livestock farms, 15% on field crop farms and 13% on farms that practised horticulture.

Table 1: Population group

	N	%
African	500	83
Coloured	1	0
White	1	0
Not South African	98	16
Total	600	100

The majority of farm workers (71%) interviewed were male. However, 45% of farm workers working at farms that practised horticulture were female.

Eight out of every 10 farm workers were between the ages of 20 and 49 years. Younger workers were most common in livestock farming, while older workers were most common in horticulture and mixed farming.

RELATIONSHIPS

The research shows that similar proportions of respondents were never married (26%) and married (28%). The largest proportions of workers – 41% – were in long-term relationships. Men (at 30%) were more likely to be married than women (20%), but a larger proportion of women (45%) than men (39%) were in long-term relationships.

We asked all farm workers to indicate the number of people with whom they were sharing a dwelling, excluding themselves. They were asked to specify the number of male adults, female adults and children. Approximately one-quarter (25%) said that they were living alone. A similar number lived with one other person in the dwelling. Only 14% of respondents lived with four or more other persons in the same dwelling.

In addition, we asked all farm workers how many of their own children (under 18 years of age) were living with them at the time of the study. Approximately three-fifths (63%) of respondents did not live with their children. A larger proportion of male (68%) than female (49%) farm workers were not living with their children. Women were twice as likely as men to be living with two or more of their children (36% as against 18%).



Preparing vegetables at a farm in Gauteng.

Two-fifths (40%) of farm workers had less than secondary schooling completed, while a further 24% had less than primary school completed. Larger proportions of livestock workers (18%), field crop workers and mixed farming workers (each 14%) than horticulture workers (7%) had no formal education.

Overall, nearly four in every ten (38%) of farm workers lived on the farm where they worked. Almost half of farm workers (46%) working on farms that practised mixed farming lived on the farm, whilst only 26% of horticulture farm workers and 34% of field crop workers lived on the farm where they worked. Among those who did not live on the farm, 43% of the farm workers lived less than 5 km from their workplace. Farm workers who worked on farms that practised horticulture tended to live closer to work than workers on other types of farms. Four respondents indicated that they did not know the distance from home to work.

We asked farm workers to indicate the amount of time they spent travelling to and from work each day. On average, field crop farm workers and horticulture farm workers spent a slightly longer time (0.5 hours) travelling than livestock

and mixed farming workers (0.4 hours). These averages exclude those farm workers who lived on the farm.

LIVING CONDITIONS

As employers are increasingly using casual and temporary/seasonal labour most workers no longer reside on the farms. From our in-depth interviews it emerged that workers often decide to seek accommodation outside the farm because of the living conditions on the farm: no electricity, salty tap water, and four people sharing one room. The following comments from interviews done in 2012 illustrate these feelings from workers who were living in a farm compound.

Mbali: 'The water there was not good, it was very salty. If you get sick and go to the doctor, he says you are sick because you are not drinking water, but you tell them you have been drinking water. There are no toilets, there is no electricity, you share the same room with four people and it is very dirty. Then I felt it is better to move to this side and find a shack ... I live a better life here ... I live a relatively better life here.'

Nombulelo: 'It is better to be in a shack than stay in a packed room. There is no privacy in the farm compounds. Staying here, in this area, is much better.'

Alfred: 'Before we go see my house, there's something I'd like to tell you. You see here, we are crowded there are a lot of us, a lot. The rooms that we stay in, we have to share them sometimes. Two families separated by a curtain in the middle. One stays on this side and the other lives on the other side of the curtain.'

Maweni, during a focus group discussion says: 'The problem is the condition of the houses we are given. We are built houses which are not fit for any human being. The second one is the toilets: they are very dirty here.'

Qenehelo: 'It really does not matter because it is where the boss appointed me to stay. I am not happy with this house but there is nothing I can do, really. There is no water supply; we walk long distances to get water.'

Mamtsekuoa: 'I do not really like it. It is made of asbestos and now that it is winter it gets very cold in there. There is no electricity and it is too small for me and my family.'

We asked farm workers to specify how much money they spent, on average, on transport to and from work on a monthly basis. The majority of farm workers (80%) said they did not spend any money on transport. On average, on a monthly basis, livestock workers and field crop workers who lived off the farm spent more money on transport to and from work than horticulture and mixed farming farm workers. In our in-depth interviews we came across workers who were spending as much as R70 to R280 a week on taxis.

The findings confirm that the living and working conditions of farm workers in Gauteng were far from what can be called decent work. In the next issue the research explores decent work themes and the deficits. The themes that will be explored are employment opportunities, stability and security at work, earnings and training, working hours, and work, family and personal life, equal opportunity and treatment, health and safety, social protection and social dialogue. ¹⁸

This article is based on a report titled: 'You entered through that gate and you will leave through that gate: The decent work deficit amongst farm workers in Gauteng,' by Edward Webster, Mbuso Nkosi, Debbie Budlender, Lelanie Williams and Mark Orkin. The researchers acknowledge support of the Gauteng Department of Economic Development.