

# Legacy of neglect and poverty women farmworkers

Women farmworkers lead desperate lives. **Fatima Shabodien** traces a complexity of reasons for their abuse and urges farmworker trade unions to refocus their energies on these vulnerable workers.

The structure of commercial farming in South Africa can be traced to the slave plantations under colonialism in the Cape in the 1600s. A typical farm is still owned by a white, usually Afrikaner man, managed by the farmer and a male relative, or a contracted white manager, and staffed by a pool of black farmworker families.

The number of farmworkers employed on a farm depends on the size of the farming enterprise. About one million workers are directly employed in agriculture, with a further six million livelihoods directly and indirectly dependent on the sector.

Historically, farmworker families have worked for the same family of farmers for many generations and are 'passed on' from father to son.

Farmworkers often speak about how their parents worked for the

father of their current employer. As a farming enterprise develops and expands, farmers move worker families according to their labour needs.

For example, if a farmer acquires a new farm and needs experienced labour there, little prevents him from uprooting entire families and relocating them to his new business.

Before South Africa's transition to democracy, no laws governed the relationship between farmworkers and farmers. In a system bearing all the hallmarks of feudalism, the farmer assumed the role of the ultimate patriarch, ruling every aspect of the workers' lives. Physical movement, punishment for 'wrongdoing', access to health care, housing and the schooling of children were privileges granted at farmers' discretion.

## WOMEN'S STATUS AS FARMWORKERS

On farms, the position of women is usually determined by their relationship with a male farmworker. Most women are engaged in farm labour as the wife or girlfriend of a man. Women are seen as an extension of male labourers and represent an auxiliary source of labour to be drawn on during high seasons. To ensure their availability for work on the farm, their ability to engage in off-farm employment is restricted.

While such 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. As with women's reproductive labour, their farm work is valued less highly than that of men, and they generally have lower status in the agricultural hierarchy. With their perceived nimble fingers, they tend to be restricted to lower-status functions. They suffer discrimination both in terms of their conditions of employment and the kind of work they can do.

Even in an era of rapidly changing management practice, which increasingly sees black farmworkers being trained as foremen and even managers, women remain largely excluded. Because their work is seen as low status and unskilled, it is valued in monetary terms well below men's work. The circular argument offered by farmers to justify this is that women are paid less because they generally perform 'unskilled' work. But even where men and women work alongside each other, performing identical functions, the farmer's patriarchal world view justifies paying women well below the wage of their male counterparts.

## WOMEN'S TENURE INSECURITY

As in industries such as mining, where the workplace is far from urban centres and residential areas, the farmer sees the provision of housing as a production cost. Tenure security is the product of permanent farm labour contracts, historically for men. If the male



worker loses his job or dies, the farmer can turn his entire family onto the streets. Laws introduced since 1994 ban the linking of employment contracts with housing, but the practice is still widespread.

A recent WFP (World Food Programme) study of living and working conditions on wine farms in the Western Cape, Behind the Label II, found not a single housing contract in a woman worker's name. We believe this is the norm. Even where women also have permanent employment contracts, housing contracts are still in the name of male partners. Access to housing is secured through a relationship with a male worker.

The physical and emotional abuse of women by male partners is widespread, and such systemic discrimination compromises their ability to leave abusive relationships, undermining their safety and that of their children. As there is a link between gender violence and HIV/AIDS infection rates, discrimination has far-reaching consequences. HIV/AIDS prevalence

on farms is thought to be well below the national average, but given numerous contributing factors, could begin to rise.

#### **SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

The social and living conditions of women on farms are extremely harsh. Sexual harassment and abuse are common; many women are single parents; and few receive maintenance from their children's fathers. Because of inadequate nutrition, exposure to pesticides and limited access to health care services, the health of farmworkers is generally poor. And although women tend to be responsible for household spending, most are excluded from long-term financial decision-making.

Most women on farms do not consider leisure a legitimate entitlement, and alcohol consumption, used as a much-needed release, compounds social ills. Payment in alcohol, the 'tot system', can be traced to the slave system of the 1600s and was pervasive, especially on wine farms, well into the 1990s. Alcohol

consumption by farmworkers is said to be twice that of the urban poor.

The tot system has been outlawed, but there is evidence that it has gone underground, making it harder to fight. A 2001 study found that the Western Cape has the highest incidence of foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) in the world, with between 40 and 46 per 1 000 first-graders at school showing symptoms. The legacy of alcoholism and FAS remains pervasive.

#### **CONSEQUENCES OF NEW LAWS**

Before 1994 no laws governed the working and living conditions of farmworkers and dwellers. The post-apartheid government has passed numerous laws to protect the rights of this vulnerable community, but there has been a severe farmer backlash. In the run-up to the introduction of a law aimed at enhancing tenure security farmers evicted farmworkers widely.

Despite extensive state subsidies designed to encourage the social development of workers, most farmers see investment in social development as the state's

responsibility. The historical, unwritten rules of slavery still largely define interactions between farmers and their employees. There is a clear, shared understanding between worker and farmer about what these rules entail. As a result, disputes remain highly personalised. In citing reasons for conflict with workers, farmers have no hesitation in describing them as lazy, drunken and thieving.

On the positive side, those who work with farmworkers find the underlying problems are increasingly coming to the surface, and that tensions in farming areas are growing. Farmers complain that farmworkers have become more difficult. The growth in visible conflict between farmers and workers signals the latter's growing rights awareness and confidence. Given the obstacles, most confrontations do not lead to worker victories. But the mere fact that conflicts are taking place points to workers' evolution into citizens of a constitutional democracy.

Despite labour and tenure laws, conditions remain largely unchanged. Farm life continues to be characterised by an extreme power imbalance between white commercial farmers and their workforce. Despite positive developments in South Africa, the livelihoods of women who live and work on farms are profoundly insecure and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

#### **EFFECTS OF TRADE LIBERALISATION**

South African commercial agriculture is export-orientated, and the sector and its workers remain extremely vulnerable to the international trade regime. Commercial agriculture has confronted numerous challenges stemming from the opening of South Africa to global markets and the progressive removal of trade

barriers and subsidies. After signing the World Trade Organisation's Agreement in Agriculture, the South African government has introduced a series of reforms in agriculture, primarily of deregulation and liberalisation.

Re-entry into global markets has meant exposure to significant competition. South Africa must compete against the highly subsidised producers of the North, primarily Europe. Drought and the strengthening of the rand are further exacerbating factors. As the position of farmers becomes more precarious, workers have found it harder to press for better wages and working conditions. Liquidations in the wine and fruit sectors remain an ongoing threat. Bankruptcies and mergers have spawned national monopolies which mirror those of the North, especially in the maize sector.

The global trade regime also hampers the development of black and women entrants in agriculture through land reform and black economic empowerment. Emerging farmers cannot compete with the economies of scale of most white farmers and need extensive state assistance. The trade regime, therefore, poses a real threat to attempts to transform an industry in which almost all commercial enterprises and land are white-owned.

#### **CHANGES IN AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE**

Faced with inflexible input costs, farmers have targeted labour as a natural cost-cutting area. Many farmworkers have lost their jobs, or farmers have converted formerly permanent posts into casual and seasonal positions, with none of the rights accorded by labour law.

Since 1994, there has been a significant decline in the size of the agricultural workforce, from about

1,2-million in 1988 to about 941 000, according to Statistics SA. Job losses have undermined efforts to give substance to the constitutionally enshrined socio-economic rights of black South Africans. Historically, most farm work was performed by a permanent on-farm workforce, with three quarters of the jobs held by male workers. Now, up to 60% of the work is temporary, with two thirds of temporary jobs held by women. As is in other vulnerable sectors, the agricultural workforce has been causalised and 'feminised'. What was initially defined as an 'atypical' employment category is now the standard form of contract.

In absolute terms, women now occupy more jobs in commercial agriculture than ever before. Comprising the bulk of the seasonal labour force, they bear the brunt of the unequal trade regime. Despite their multiple burdens as mothers, care-givers to the aged and sick, increasingly suffering from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses their position has become more insecure and their bargaining power weaker.

In a context of chronic poverty and unemployment, women now compete directly with men for jobs. Those who remain employed find their contracts restructured, making their jobs more insecure. Casual and seasonal women workers are paid less than men and have inferior non-wage benefits. Unemployed women must depend on the tenuous support of a male partner, the farmer or state social security grants. So while the number of female farmworkers has increased in absolute terms, this has not translated into more secure livelihoods.

A 2005 investigation by Action Aid and the WFP of the livelihoods of women farmworkers on Western Cape farms supplying the British supermarket chain Tesco, found a



pervasive struggle for food security among the workers' families.

And while more women have jobs, they remain largely dependent on male partners for access to farm housing. Housing remains one of the most important needs of on-farm and off-farm women workers. As women generally depend on a male partner for tenure security, the casualisation of formerly permanent jobs has fuelled a fast-growing rural housing crisis.

The dual process of neo-liberal economic reform and political democratisation has resulted in better labour rights, but the working and living conditions of women farmworkers and their families have deteriorated.

#### ORGANISING WOMEN FARMWORKERS

Post-apartheid labour laws are progressive by global standards. But they are based on a corporatist model which assumes a system of negotiated agreements between big business, big unions and the state, and a model of employment marked by permanent, secure employment contracts, with true worker representation through effective trade union structures. These assumptions do not hold true for commercial farms.

In addition, there are many obstacles to the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of the laws. The material means required to realise constitutional rights such as equality, non-discrimination and dignity are not abundant in the lives of poor women. The obstacles facing women who live and work on farms in realising their rights include lack of knowledge about their rights, a lack of socio-economic support systems required for rights access, and weak government monitoring and enforcement capacity.

Exacerbating these are the patriarchal attitudes and practices in farming areas, which discourage women from actively pursuing what they are entitled to in law.

While the right of farmworkers to form unions was legally recognised in 1993, they remain the least organised sector in South Africa, with the lowest percentage of union members. A system of disincentives militates against workers joining unions, and when they do, it often comes at great cost to the worker and his or her family. The few unions organising farmworkers have largely failed to develop creative organising models to meet the challenges posed by the unique labour structure on

farms. Given the lack of civil society structures on farms, unions need to step outside the traditional model and deal with more than just unfair dismissals. It is impossible to tackle the issue of labour rights effectively without an integrated approach which addresses the full range of threats to workers' livelihoods. Unions have to be willing to become true social movements of the marginalised. They cannot ignore the significance of a feminised workforce, and feminism needs to be a defining organisational approach. Otherwise they will fail to meet the special challenges facing women workers.

The largest union for farmworkers, the Cosatu Food & Allied Workers Union (Fawu) draws most of its members from permanently employed men in agricultural processing plants in rural areas, leaving the most vulnerable group, women seasonal workers, unprotected. Without a targeted strategy aimed at recruiting, building consciousness and driving collective action by women seasonal workers, the fastest growing demographic group within the farmworker community will remain unorganised and unprotected.

In the context of globalisation, the successful organisation of farmworkers also depends on the ability to create linkages between workers' conditions and developments elsewhere in the world. For a community which, historically, has had little mobility, with some generations spending their whole lives on a single farm or in one district, the task of making local-global linkages poses a particular challenge.

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