

Women on the farms

Speak out



LINDA WALDMAN spent six months on Nineveh farm in the Western Cape listening to women talk about their lives.



The voices of black women* on white-owned farms are seldom heard. Yet they have strong views about their lives, their men, their education and their prospects.

Men as partners

Women are the household heads of six of the 28 houses occupied by farm workers on Nineveh farm.

Lettie, aged 27, heads one of these households. She does not rely on a man to provide financial, moral or social support for either herself or her family. Lettie has a six-year-old daughter, Letitia, who lives with her. Lettie chose not to marry Letitia's father:

"Then one Saturday evening he decided

we should get married. I said I was too young for that lifestyle and I was already being regularly beaten by him. I could not marry him. One day I chased him away, but he came back and said he would not stay away as I had borne his child. I said he could stay away and I would care for the child myself."

Lettie's neighbour Rosina, aged 41, is also single and has brought up her daughters by herself. About their father she commented:

"I had an old piece of rubbish for a man, rude, you could say an old drunkard. And he was fond of smoking dagga; it was dagga that caused the police to arrest him. While he was in jail I left him. I suffered too greatly under him, he did not give me money. When he walked through the door he wanted to fight with me.

"I realised I was not going to destroy my life. I was going to leave him. I told him to return to his parents and I would return to mine. So I left and I worked for my children. I lived with my mother in the house and I have worked for my children until now."

For these women, living with men is often associated with violence and sexual abuse. Adolescents on Monte Roza farm often commented on the violence they inflicted upon one another, especially when they were drunk. Often when passing landmarks, one of the girls would point out that this was where a boyfriend had beaten her. The adolescents sometimes mimed dances and without fail, each mime would end with the girls being beaten – either by their boyfriends or by gangsters. Gangsters appear to be groups of boys from other farms. They are known to beat both men and women and sometimes to rape women.

Men as fathers

Mottie, Rosina's daughter, is 17 years old and lives with her mother on Nineveh farm. She was 15 when her father died. Mottie hardly knew him:

* The majority of women on the farms have been classified coloured

"My father never lived in the house with us. They (the police) caught him with the *groen twak* (dagga). I do not know how long he was in jail. We did not go and visit him, sometimes we saw him as he passed by here. I liked him. He had a yellow complexion and he was tall, dark haired and slightly built. I hardly ever spoke to him. He was not a bad man. He was a good man, but he was not so good to us. I felt bad when he died. The police let us know he had died. I did not go to his funeral."

Mottie has recently given birth to a son and has left school to work on the farm. Mottie's earnings are given to her mother and are used for household expenditure. Mottie was sorry she had fallen pregnant and had to leave school.

"I did not want to have a baby and I did not know I was pregnant. The school principal came to my mother and asked my mother. She said it looked as if I was pregnant. Mama told me. I did not feel so good. I thought I could still attend school. Did I have to leave school? I told Arend (the father of her child). He felt as I did, strange. He said he did not think it would happen so fast. I don't know if he wants a child.

"I am going to use the *sput* (Depo-Provera injection) so that I don't get pregnant again. At school they (the teachers) never taught us about falling pregnant. They taught us about horses and cattle. I didn't know it was the same."

Adolescent girls who have fallen pregnant while attending school are said to have fallen off the schoolbench [*"hulle het van die skoolbank afgegely"*]. Like Mottie, some of these girls end up working on the farms in order to provide for their children.

The fathers of the children born to adolescent girls are expected to provide for their children, but farm salaries are low and women do not always receive such support. Mottie's cousin, Elizabeth, fell pregnant when she was 15. Elizabeth's mother has taken over the upbringing of her daughter's child, Bollie.

Many people bring up their children's children by themselves, says Elizabeth's mother. She is concerned with the difficulties involved in obtaining support for her grandchild and the inability of the law to deal with this. She also points to the bureaucracy of the legal system and the problems farm residents experience when dealing with legal

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matters.

"It's less trouble and it's less, how shall I say ...? As long as you are strong, as long as you can still work, you take responsibility. You think: 'oh well, let him go', otherwise it's *'die wet in die wet uit'* [working your way through the ins and outs of the legal bureaucracy].

"We bring the child up by ourselves, that is worth a lot you see. And he will still want a say over the child although he has no say over the child. He can't because if they want to go to the law, then you have a voice: Where is that money? Where are those earnings? Where is all the effort that I put into raising the child alone? Now that the child has grown up you want her.

"I say no it's better, as a mother, to raise the child by oneself.

"Leave the father, such a man is not successful anyway. Today he has a few cents and tomorrow none. The day after he has work and the day thereafter none. Then he



walks around looking for work, but he doesn't find any. He doesn't know it is the Lord who is punishing him for his child."

Women and farm life

Elizabeth left the farm to seek work in Cape Town. Elizabeth's mother cares for Bollie, but this has led to friction between Elizabeth's mother and Kleinnooi, the farmer's wife.

"Kleinnooi asked me if Elizabeth gave me money for the child. I replied no, why? 'Yes but she should give'. So I said it's not necessary because when she worked here you (the farmer and his wife) were too false to pay her as much as you paid the others. I said that I chose, together with her (Elizabeth), that she should work for herself so that the money she earned was hers. We will care for the child. If they had handled her well then she would still be on the farm

today ...

"Elizabeth may not come here, she must stay there or she must come and take the child with her. If the mother goes away the children must also go.' I don't know if the law is like that or not. They [the farmer and his wife] say if a child, your daughter, has a baby and your daughter wants to go and work elsewhere then she must take the baby with her. She can't leave the child here to walk around on their soil and she can't leave him with her mother if she goes. They say that is the way the farm rules work."

Elizabeth's mother is referring to new farm rules which the farmer's wife has introduced, which state young girls may not leave their *voorkinders* with their mothers. Life-histories show that prior to the new rule it was common for adolescent girls to leave their children in their mother's care and go to the urban areas in search of work. The girls went to Cape Town where they worked as domestic servants for kin who lived there or for Malay people who would drive out to the farms looking for domestic help.

The babies who remained on the farms would grow up in their grandparent's households, even though many of their mothers returned to the farms and set up their own homes there. Ragel's aunt commented on how Ragel felt about growing up without her biological mother:

"I do not believe she minds not living with her parents, because she accepts my mother as her own mother. She addresses her as mother and she gets on better with her (than with her own mother). She says her mother is not her mother, but my mother is because my mother brought her up."

Women talk of leaving

Meid, aged 25, from Nineveh farm describes her experiences as an adolescent girl growing up on the farms:

"I lived on Oudekraal farm and went to school until Standard One. I was then 15. My mother decided to take me out of school because my father left her and she had to work. He had another woman. Then I began work on Oudekraal. By that time I already

knew about vineyard work. When I was small, in those days there weren't crèches, I was always with my mother and when I got older I always helped her (in the vineyards).

"When I was 16 I was expecting a baby. The father was also young. I was already pregnant when I went to Cape Town, but I did not know then. In those days I drank and it was due to drunkenness that I went to Cape Town. I worked for the Malays and did housework. It was nice. Then I found out that I was pregnant and I came home. I never went back."

Today adolescent girls are restrained from leaving the farms because it is difficult to take their children with them and they may not be left on the farm. Said Emma, a young mother, "I decided I would like to work in the Cape because there was specialised work, like factory work, there. If only my mother wanted me to take my child with."

Emma's mother is arthritic and cannot work. Although she receives a pension, she relies on Emma and her sister to work on the farm.

Emma's mother regards Emma's child as her own child. Whenever Emma goes to Cape Town, her mother insists that Christian remains on the farm. In this way Emma's mother ensures that Emma will always return to the farm. "Now I can't leave him here because if I don't work here then he can't stay here," said Emma.

Young girls who cannot go to Cape Town remain in the valley and find employment on the farms. They all express a desire to work in the urban areas and to live

there. Heather, speaking about her daughter, commented, "She doesn't prefer a farm. She always says she doesn't want to live on a farm". City life offers many attractions. It is an opportunity to escape the control imposed both by the farmer and by kin members. It is also a way of avoiding the long and hard manual labour required on the farms.

Among adult women, however, the unanimous preference is to remain on the farms.

"In the town you actually have to pay everything, like electricity, water, house and for my learning and time, I'll earn too little."

The women recognise there are

advantages to living on the farms, but they also voice many problems and difficulties which they experience with the farmer. Many people move off the farm because they do not have good relations with the farmer.

It seems many moves represent forms of resistance. A quarter of the people living on Nineveh said they left their previous employment because they did not get on with the *baas*. Mobility is high, suggesting that the

workers' search for good relationships with farmers is an ideal which few manage to attain and maintain.

Heather explained how she and her family came to be on Nineveh farm.

"Last year we moved here. We moved because the *baas* sold the farm and we did not wish to remain with the new *baas*. His laws were stricter. Actually it was over our mother. He wanted our mother to work and in the end he wanted her out of the house because she could not work (Heather's

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mother was 76 years old at the time.)”

“It’s a better idea to be here, because some Friday nights, those people get almost none of their money. You get fined. There are strict laws, sometimes you get fined R50, the people complain a lot. So we are very happy here.”

Marina, who works on a nearby farm, commented on her dislike for working with grapes and on her own reasons for moving to different farms.

“In 1984 we came to Monte Roza. We had worked under this *baas* for a long time before we moved. The first time we left because of the trouble my husband caused. I decided to move and we went to another farm nearby. Then I took a liking to the Karoo and we moved to the Karoo because I no longer felt like working with grapes. I didn’t work there and my husband worked on the lands, sowing and ploughing. I stayed there a long time and came back when my man died because, look, such a farm does not have work for women who are alone. You must have a man who can work for the house. I moved by myself and came here because my children still went to school here.

“Kleinnooi helped me and she helped me get a pension for the children while they were in school. Since then I have lived here. Yes, I am *doodgelukkig* (happy) here, I am not going to move.”

People who live on the farms find themselves with few options other than to work on the farms. I have quoted these women at length in order to afford women farm residents some space in the current awareness of women’s issues. I do not purport to present all that these women have to say. What has been presented here is, hopefully, the beginnings of a future awareness, debate and discussion over women’s issues, especially women who live and work on white-owned farms.

The recent legislation has raised questions and expectations about improved living facilities and employment conditions for farm workers. However, women’s interests and concerns have been omitted both from the legislation and from future policy formation. In the light of the new legislation and the threat of a minimum wage to be introduced to farmworkers, it is the seasonal workers, namely the women, who are most likely to suffer from the farmers’ rationalisation of labour. ☆