



Family Digest 5
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Women and Their Families on Farms

It is noteworthy that a Google search of 'families on farms' results in pages and pages of information regarding recreational opportunities and holiday destinations on farms. This is indicative of the extreme marginalization of those who live and work on farms with their families. Further Google searches, however, reveal that looking at the position of women on farms provides more information about families, and indicate the vital role that women play in agricultural settings.

Lindiwe Sibanda, of the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), states that "it is unfortunate that it is only those women who enjoy a space and platform in academics, science, economics and politics who are celebrated, and yet in Africa there is a deserving group of extraordinary women who still have no voice - the African women farmers.¹" According to the most recent Household Survey, the number of households/families in South Africa involved in one or more agricultural production activity is high, with 2 820 000 households. Furthermore, there are 15.7% more women than men active in the industry².

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, more than two-thirds of all women in Africa work in the agricultural sector.³ In 2006 Fatima Shabodien from the Women on Farms Project noted that "the woman's position is usually determined by her relationship to a male farmworker... her labour on the farm is valued less than that of men and generally doesn't hold a high status within the agricultural hierarchy⁴."

Little has changed since 2006; a policy brief by the HSRC notes that "gender and gender dynamics inherent in agricultural production need to be taken into account if women farmers are not to continue being marginalised members of their rural development community⁵." According to this report, women deal with a compound of socio-economic factors such as low levels of education and a lack of resources, and farming is often their primary source of income. This underpins the fact that families on farms are a vulnerable and marginalized group. Their circumstances inhibit them from moving beyond basic self-sufficiency.

The effects of being a female farmworker are described by Mara Kardas-Nelson, who states that "Women are the most likely to go hungry...have less stable work. Many farmworkers' children, who often grow up in single-headed households, don't have enough to eat and are thus vulnerable to a variety of infections and diseases. Stunted growth is not unusual: a study done by the University of Cape Town in the 1990s showed that farmworkers in the province are, on average, an inch (2.5cm) shorter than city dwellers."⁶

Gender based violence is common and is often inter-generational, impacting negatively on the socialization of children. Historically, farm workers and their families have been tied to a particular farm. While the 'dop' system has been abolished, its legacy persists in the lives of many farm workers and their children.⁷ Alcoholism is common and constitutes a major factor in domestic violence toward

women and their children. Alcohol abuse affects the whole family: it engenders violence, it leads to massive wastage of wages, it demotivates and dehumanises men and women and it creates intellectually disadvantaged children. Dysfunctional family life, depressed socio-economic conditions in many rural areas, and the paucity of health, educational and social infrastructure as well as the lack of appropriate role models, render young people vulnerable to substance abuse. The most devastating consequence of this culture of substance abuse is foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). This describes “children who have growth deficiencies, irreversible mental retardation, as well as physical and central nervous system abnormalities as a result of their mothers’ alcohol intake during pregnancy. The effects are permanent and irreversible”.⁸ FAS seriously impairs a child's lifetime ability to function mentally, physically and socially and to achieve his/her full potential. The Western Cape has long been acknowledged as having the highest incidence of FAS in the world.

Working conditions on farms can be dangerous. While there certainly are farms at which protective clothing is mandatory, Kardas-Nelson notes that farmworkers, and in particular women, are often not given access to protective clothing and equipment, or given a place to wash their clothing, which is a legal requirement⁹. The effects of crop sprays cause breathing problems and skin lesions - pregnant women being particularly vulnerable.

Below are some links to articles which reflect different aspects of the circumstances and difficulties confronting families on farms.

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¹ Sisanda, L. (nd). Women Farmers: Voiceless Pillars of African Agriculture. <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/blogs/100-years-of-international-womens-day/women-farmers-voiceless-pillars-of-african-agriculture>

² Statistics South Africa. (2014). General Households Survey. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182013.pdf>

³ Sisanda, L. (n.d) op.cit

⁴ Shabodien, F. (2006). Livelihoods Struggles of Farmworkers in South Africa. <http://csaawu.alwaysdata.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/75-livelihood-struggles-of-sa-women-farm-workers-2006.pdf>

⁵ Hart, T; Aliber, M. (2012). Inequalities in agricultural support for women in South Africa. <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/3025/InequalitiesLR.pdf>

⁶ Kardas-Nelson, M. (2013). Farmworkers reap a grim harvest. <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-02-01-00-farmworkers-reap-a-grim-harvest>

⁷ The ‘*dop*’ system refers to the traditional practice of paying farm labourers on wine farms a percentage of their weekly wage in cheap wine.

⁸ Experts believe that between one and two-thirds of all children with special educational needs were affected by their mothers’ alcohol intake during pregnancy.

⁹ Kardas-Nelson, M. (2013) op.cit

www.nda.co.new/index.php?option=3&id=1&com_id=304&parent_id=304&com_task=1

<http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/women-hard-hit-by-farm-job-losses->

<http://mg.co.za/article/2013-02-01-00-farmworkers-reap-a-grim-harvest>

<http://www.nwu.ac.za/content/project-help-women-farms-finalist-competition1.1790358#.VTSpapMW76g>

<http://www.lhr.org.za/news/2013/farm-workers%E2%80%99-toil-rewarded-degrading-wages>

https://www.westerncape.gov.za/Text/2005/4/reviewed_farmworkers.pdf

<http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2014/12/11/letter-from-cape-town-women-feel-effects-of-minimum-wage-on-farms>

<http://www.ssonke.org.za/>

<http://www.tlac.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/farming-submission-sa-human-rights-commission.pdf>

<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/89/6/11-020611/en/>

<http://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/salary-increase-farmworkers>

<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-02-05-r105-a-day-farmworkers-farmers-and-an-uneasy-compromise/#.VTTj7JMW76g>