



The plight of female farm workers

After decades of enduring threats, eviction, violence and sexual abuse, women in rural KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga are banding together to advocate for their rights.

By: Chris Makhaye

Photographer: Mlungisi Mbele

22 Jun 2021

Features



26 May 2021: Former farmworkers Freeda Mkhabela, Lucia Foster and Gugu Ngubane.

The life of Ntombikayise Mthembu, a 52-year-old widow from Mooi Plaas farm near Dannhauser in northern KwaZulu-Natal, has all the hallmarks of the hardship and complexities of Black women living on farms in rural South Africa.

Share this:

She was born on the farm, raised on the farm and got married to a fellow farm dweller there. Now, widowed since 2002, she has been threatened with eviction and having her family's herd of cattle taken away.

Poverty and hardship endured at the hands of commercial farmers have propelled her to join the struggle against the abuse of farm workers and tenants, especially women. She is one of the leading activists of Qina Mbokodo (translated as Be Strong, Woman), an advocacy group formed by women farm workers and tenants in rural KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Mpumalanga province.

She has three scars on her left arm and back, the result of rubber bullet wounds. She remembers the incident vividly. "It was in 2007 and a farmer from here in Dannhauser had thrown an elderly woman, Ntombizodwa Nkosi, her children and their belongings on the road after her husband, who had worked at the farm, had died.

"We were trying to return the woman [Nkosi] and her children to the cottage on the farm, but when we arrived the farmer had already called the police and they fired tear gas and rubber bullets at us," she said.

Nkosi never returned to the farm and now lives with relatives. Her children and belongings have been divided among her relatives in the local township and other parts of northern KwaZulu-Natal.

'Thrown out in the veld'

Mthembu and other land rights activists say laws such as the Extension of Security of Tenure Act, which protects people who have permission to live on commercial farms, are often not enough to shield farm dwellers.

"Even ESTA [the act] allows a farmer to evict, after a year, a woman and her children once her husband, who was a farm worker, dies. Imagine living all your life on a farm and, suddenly, you are thrown out in the veld," Mthembu said.

There are many similar cases.

Them bani Dlamini, 54, and her family have been living as labour tenants on a maize farm near Paulpietersburg, KwaZulu-Natal, for more than 30 years. Her husband, also a tenant farm labour, died seven years ago.

She says the new farm owner has been aggressive and violent towards her and her children, demanding that they move off the farm because they don't work for him.

She has 23 head of cattle, but says the new owner has taken to shooting her livestock in recent years, killing four of them. "I have opened a number of cases against this farmer but he has evaded justice. In cases where the farmer is taken to court, the cases drag on and on forever. In the meantime, he continues to harass and violate my rights," she said.

Open cases

Before their deaths, Dlamini's parents were also land tenants. But they often told her that Black people were once owners of the land on which they now are *izikhonzi* (servants or land tenants) and their lives are at the mercy of the commercial farmers.

The farmer on whose land Dlamini and her family live has not granted her permission to allow the eDumbe local municipality to install water and electricity in her home on the farm. They have to collect firewood to cook and get water at the same well from which the cows drink.

“We’ve heard that South Africa has been free for 27 years. But for those of us who are living on farms, freedom is something we hear about in the news. We’ve never experienced or enjoyed it,” she said.

Mfana Zwane, a human rights activist in eDumbe, about 368km north of Durban, said Dlamini’s is just one of more than 200 open cases at police stations in the region and most of them are ignored.

“These farmers are a law unto themselves. They shoot and assault people, they desecrate and plant over people’s graves. There are just so many atrocities, but our government does not intervene. Even the police do not protect [us]. They tend to act only when the farmer has opened a case against the tenants,” he said.

Standing up for farm workers

The Association for Rural Advancement (Afra) is a Pietermaritzburg-based non-governmental organisation that advocates for land rights. It supports marginalised Black people from rural areas, with a particular focus on farm dwellers.

Afra has been compiling cases of violations for the past 42 years and, where necessary, spearheading litigation against farmers and other violators. Communications officer Nokuthula Mthimunye says violations and atrocities committed by farmers against people living on their farms still occur regularly.

“There are many cases where farm tenants and farm workers suffer in silence and don’t report cases. But those that come to our attention, we try by all means to assist the victims,” she said.

One of the cases Afra is handling is that of six women from Trustfeed, outside the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands farming area of Wartburg. The farmer summarily dismissed these women at the end of April. Prior to their dismissal, the women say they endured harassment for telling rights activists about their terrible working conditions, including being forced to work unpaid overtime.

“At times, the farmer forced us to reap tomatoes and green pepper in the dark, using his cellphone torch as the light,” said Gugu Ngubane, 43, one of the fired workers. “When he heard that we reported him, he became nasty and started victimising us.”

'He died of a broken heart'

Despite working for more than five years on the farm, the women were given little more than R6 000 each. The farmer had been deducting Unemployment Insurance Fund contributions from their salaries, but officials at the Pietermaritzburg office of the Department of Labour and Employment have said there is no record of him passing on their contributions. Now these women are left out in the cold.

The farmer in question, Graeme Koch, declined to answer questions regarding the dismissal of the six women.

"I only talk with the Department of Labour and if they [the six women] have any problem, they can contact the Department of Labour. I paid them all their outstanding money, including notice period payment. I gave them all their documents and if they have a problem they can go there [to the department] and the officials," he said.

New Frame was denied access on 26 May to several farms in the Midlands area where violations of this sort are said to have taken place.

Also in dire straits is 81-year-old Tawana Dlamini, who lives with her grandchildren on a sugar cane and livestock farm near Wartburg. She and her husband, who died more than 15 years ago, worked and lived on the farm, but now none of her family members work on it.

"The new farmer has been asking me why we are still on the farm when nobody works there. My husband worked on this farm for more than 30 years, but he wasn't given a cent when he retired. He died of a broken heart because he was fighting for compensation for all the years he worked here," said Dlamini.

"The farmer doesn't want to have visitors here and asks many irritating questions. I fear that one day he will tell us to leave. I don't know where we will go if he chases us away from here," she added.

Sexual abuse is also rife in farming communities, which is another reason the women decided to establish Qina Mbokodo.



26 May 2021: Nokuthula Mthimunye 43 who is a gender leader at Association for Rural for Advancement that is based in Pietermaritzburg. Photographs by Mlungisi Mbele

One farm worker in the Midlands, who asked that her name be withheld for fear of retribution, said she was one of those Black women farm workers who had been sexually abused by farm *indunas* (supervisors).

“They [farm supervisors] take advantage of our fragile and defenceless situation to force us to have sex with them so that we can be employed. Even when we are employed, they blackmail us to sleep with them, saying if we don’t they will claim we failed to achieve our daily scores, so that we will not get paid the full amount. “We found ourselves being abused by white farmers on the one hand, and Black supervisors who demand sex from us on the other,” she said.

Polarised relationships

According to Statistics South Africa, the number of households engaged in agriculture (also referred to as agricultural households) fell to 2.3 million in 2016 from 2.9 million in 2011. The decrease of 20.7% over the five years was mainly because of the drought experienced in the country in 2014 and 2015.

The number of people employed permanently in agriculture in 2019 was about 885 000. There are many more farm workers who are employed seasonally, especially during the planting and harvesting seasons.

Economists and social scientists say the agricultural sector plays an important role in the economy, in terms of its contribution to the country’s gross domestic product and in absorbing a large number of job seekers. But land activists say a number of violent incidents and atrocities have further polarised relationships between commercial farmers and farm workers and tenants.

A group of white farmers and their workers allegedly murdered brothers Zenzele and Mgcini Coka near a farm in Dirkiesdorp, Mkhondo (formerly Piet Retief), in April this year. Their murders led to violent protests in Mkhondo and other Mpumalanga towns. Five people, including three farmers, are facing charges for the murders.

In August last year, farming couple Glen and Vida Rafferty were murdered on their farm near Newcastle. The police moved quickly to arrest the suspect and quell the situation.

Minister of Police Bheki Cele addressed one imbizo in the area, during which Landless People's Movement Amajuba district chair Somnandi Hadebe impatiently asked, "*Nibasabani abelungu* (Government leaders, what is it you fear from white farmers)?" He was implying that government officials and agencies move swiftly when a white farmer has been attacked but are slow or unmoved when white farmers commit atrocities against farm dwellers.

Another emotive incident took place in Senekal, near Welkom in the Free State, in October 2020 when protesting white farmers, angered by the brutal murder of farm manager Brendin Horner, demanded that the police hand over to them the two suspects arrested for his murder. They torched a police vehicle and overturned another.

'We treat every case equally'

The police and other law enforcement agencies say they are trying their best to maintain law and order. KwaZulu-Natal police spokesperson Colonel Thembeke Mbhele denied allegations that the police are quick to respond when a white farmer has been attacked.

"There is no truth in that. We treat every case equally and take appropriate action to investigate each and every case, regardless whether it was opened by a Black or white person. We will investigate allegations that some of the cases opened by farm workers have been ignored and eventually closed," she said.

Sandy La Marque, the chief executive of KwaZulu-Natal agricultural union Kwanalu, acknowledged that there are some problems, but said "on most farms excellent relations exist". She blamed government incompetence for the failure of land reform in South Africa.

She said her union has been "pro-active over the years and directly engaged with rights issues", working with farmers, farm labourers and farm tenants and the government, "encouraging compliance and willingly seeking sustainable solutions".