

Interview with Sikhula Sonke and Women on Farms

This week SOLIDAR hosted a Round Table with two South African organisations working on women farm workers' rights in the Western Cape. The organisations were touring Belgium with SOLIDAR's Belgian member FOS, following the Belgian national-level Decent Work Decent Life campaign.

In the last decade, accelerating deregulation and liberalisation of the South African agricultural sector has brought about changes in labour relations – often to the detriment of farm workers. Protection previously offered by the state to farmers has decreased, while many farms have gone out of business. Multinational food retail companies have gained increasing control over the supply chain.

In the past, low wages on farms were partially offset by paternalistic relations between farmers and (male) workers: food, transport, provision of certain basic services were part of the social wages. These benefits have since been retracted in the face of new legislation. Social conditions for workers remain extremely poor. HIV/AIDS, TB, alcoholism, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancies, inadequate nutrition and Foetal Alcohol Syndrome are pervasive.*

What is the current situation in the Western Cape regarding women working in the rural sector?

Wendy Pekeur, Secretary General: *We face a number of challenges, one of which is the discrimination of women in the workplace, with women earning less money than men. Another challenge is with the casualisation of work, which mainly affects women with two thirds of seasonal or temporary jobs being held by women, which violates people's rights as there is no sick leave, no pension,... On top of that there is no job security which in turn means no housing security. A recent statistic showed that 1 million people have been evicted from farmland, of which 77% are women. This is because housing contracts are made out in the name of the man. Due to this housing insecurity, women also have a tendency to stay in abusive relationships.*

Glynis Rhodes, Women's Health and Empowerment Programme Coordinator: *In South Africa every 30 seconds a woman is raped, every 6 hours a woman is killed by her intimate partner and more than 80% of crimes committed in rural areas happen on farms and the crime committed is rape; meanwhile the focus of police work is on stock theft. Another fact is that there are 15 million people living with AIDS in South Africa of which a majority are aged between 15-29.*

Wendy, could you briefly explain the aims and activities of Sikhula Sonke?

Wendy Pekeur: *Sikhula Sonke aims to improve the living and working conditions of our members by empowering them to exercise their rights. We carry out activities such as institution building, that is to say for example organising committees on farms to be the link between the community and the employer; training and capacity building; case work, using legal methods to represent workers who have been dismissed; and collective bargaining. We also carry out*

campaigns such as asking employers to provide workers with protective clothing against pesticides. You can read more on our website.

Since its creation in 2004, Sikhula Sonke has reached out to 4000 members, 29% of which are seasonal workers, which are the hardest to reach. Moreover, for Sikhula Sonke empowering women is a real commitment and for that reason our statutes stipulate that the President and Secretary General of our organisation are always women.

Glynis, could you briefly explain the aims and activities of 'Women on Farms'?

Glynis Rhodes: WFP's vision is an engendered society that treats women who live and work on farms with dignity and respect in accordance with the constitutional rights guaranteed to all South African citizens. And we do this through socio-economic rights-based and gender education, advocacy and lobbying, case work and support for the building of social movements of farmwomen. There is more information on specific campaigns on our website.

What is the relevance of Decent Work for your workers?

The Decent Work Decent Life campaign is very relevant as farm workers earn the lowest wages in South Africa. Decent Work means that a person earns enough to live with their family, as opposed to just living on the bare minimum. It also means health & safety at work, a social system and permanent work contracts.

How do you think that campaigns run by European organisations (for example SOLIDAR) can help your cause?

There are similarities in what the campaign demands in Belgium and South Africa. As the most powerful decision-makers are based in the North, it is great that Belgian and European organisations put pressure on their governments to make a change, which will also mean a change for us. Also, since much of our farm products are produced for consumption in the North, with the ethical sourcing of food sources, this means a fair price paid for products and a fair income for farm workers.

For more information on Women on Farms: <http://www.wfp.org.za/content/XID1-home.html>

For more information on Sikhula Sonke: http://www.wfp.org.za/content/XID3-sikhula_sonke.html

*Taken from Sikhula Sonke's leaflet