Celebrating 20 years of Farmwomen’s Activism
Vision

The vision of WFP 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.

We envisage a society where:

- Equality, respect and dignity are afforded to all women within the economic, social and political institutions, as well as in the community and home.
- Women play a leading role in sustainable agricultural production and are assured of access to secure agricultural employment, food, land and housing, while preserving the natural environment for future generations.
- Access to affordable basic services such as water, health and electricity are ensured and rural women are active in securing these services.
- Women lead the restoration of the social fabric of rural and agricultural communities so that respect, tolerance and accountability prevail.

Our vision is of an alternative South African rural landscape in which women play active leadership roles within the family, community, labour, economic and government structures.

Mission

WFP strives to strengthen the capacity of women who live and work on farms to claim their rights and fulfil their needs.

We do this through socio-economic rights-based and gender education, advocacy and lobbying, casework and support for the building of social movements of farmwomen.

We promote self-reliance, accountability and sustainability of organisations so that women organise themselves, speak for themselves and mobilise resources to support their needs and dreams.

We believe that self-organisation counteracts the marginalisation, abuse and vulnerability experienced by women in the workplace, home and farming community and ensures their leading role in accessing services and securing employment, land and housing.
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This book compiles the stories of women farm workers and dwellers from the Western Cape and Northern Cape. Their stories are testimony to their struggles and personal transformations in overcoming various challenges, such as evictions, labour rights violations, food insecurity and gender-based violence.

As part of the preparations for our 20th anniversary, these women participated in a creative “write-shop” facilitated by Celeste Fortuin about their journeys with Women on Farms Project. There, women started developing their own stories, and identified the issues on which they wished to focus. The space also enabled them to discuss and share their experiences. The process was then completed by one-on-one conversations that Celeste conducted with the women in their homes.

These powerful stories are only a few of the many which could just as easily have been included in this collection. We at Women on Farms Project have been privileged, over the past 20 years, to work with many women and have witnessed their growth, fearlessness and courage.

Despite the diversity of voices in this collection, there are a number of common themes which recur. First, women emphasise the importance of learning about their rights from WFP. For all these women, this resulted in strong feelings of empowerment, agency and more control over their lives. Often, such feelings were underpinned by anger at the realisation of the extent to which their rights had been violated, because they had previously lacked knowledge of these rights. Second, in different ways, women were able to remember the exact moment when their thinking shifted, the “light bulb” moment, when information clarified a particular challenge or question, and resulted in their lives following a different trajectory.

Third, such personal transformation did not stop with the individual woman.

All the women demonstrate a deep commitment to sharing information and knowledge, as well as defending and advancing the rights of other farmwomen. Fourth, there is a common thread of fearlessness and activism among the women: they challenge abusive partners and farmers, while also taking on government officials, from clinic staff to municipal officials, all in the cause of asserting and realising farmwomen’s rights. The most profound manifestation of women’s activism was their active role in the farm worker uprising of 2012/13, with many of them playing leadership roles in that historic strike.

Fifth, women explain how their involvement with WFP has enabled interaction and exchange with women from other farms and areas. While urban communities may take for granted their proximity to neighbours and their ease of mobility, the physical isolation of farm workers has strengthened farmers’ power and inhibited farm workers’ ability to organise. Such interactions have resulted in women organising and mobilising other women, thereby also strengthening Women on Farms Project. In this regard, women also highlight the value they have derived from travelling beyond their own areas, to other provinces and even other countries. This has broadened their perspectives, bolstered their confidence and enabled them to represent the voices of women farm workers and dwellers.

Sixth, women clearly value the participatory and transformative methodologies employed by WFP staff, which they experience as empowering and equitable, as well as being highly effective, as women are able to retain and apply knowledge from capacity-building workshops. In addition, workshops and other WFP engagements have created “safe spaces” where women have found invaluable and unique opportunities to share the most painful aspects of their lives, where they have found support, love and empathy, where they have cried together and laughed together. For most women, such spaces are often their first and only opportunity to talk and share deeply-buried insults, hurts and humiliations.

My final two points relate to WFP’s staff members. There is deep appreciation among women for the knowledge, information and support they get from staff members. There are deep, close and affectionate relations between women and staff members; above all, these relations are characterised by mutual respect and equality.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to all the dedicated WFP staff members, both current and previous colleagues, who have, over the past 20 years, worked closely with women in various communities and contributed to their transformation.

Looking ahead, then, as long as farmwomen’s rights are violated, Women on Farms Project is strongly positioned and committed to taking forward the struggle for the realisation of women’s rights, with the active participation of farmwomen, like those contained in this book.
Aunty Katy is 59, and was born in Dorp Street in Stellenbosch. She was raised by her grandfather, and at a young age, she got married to Oom Adam. Aunty Katy explains that life was very difficult for her at home, and that is why, when Oom Adam proposed to her at the age of 15, she agreed to marry him. Following her marriage, she moved to a farm, where Oom Adam worked.

Life on Knorhoek Farm was not easy. Aunty Katy remembers that, in the years before 1994, they suffered a lot. The farmer still gave the workers wine as part payment; every night the male workers would get a bottle of wine. In those days, the women earned R30 a day, and the men R50, for the same work. Aunty Katy remembers the shop on the farm, and how during the week, they would buy there on credit. At the end of the week, all their wages would go straight to the shop. In that way, the workers worked for ‘nothing’ because the farmer owned the shop. So the money he paid them went straight back to him.

Aunty Katy did everything possible to ensure that the farmer did not discover the true purpose of their meetings.

So I got all the women together. I told them, listen here. This must stay a secret. Don’t let the farmer hear. She is coming to us tonight. Remember what I told you, about the needlework and so on, ok? And Sandra came the Tuesday evening. We met in the crèche. That whole place was packed with women.

Sandra asked us, do you know about your rights? I said no, we know nothing about our rights. Are you telling me that we now have rights? Yes, she said. Do you know about your working hours? I said, no, we know nothing about that. She said, remember Aunty Katy, there are new laws to protect you. You as women must get to know your rights.

When Aunty Katy and the other women heard about their rights, they became very angry about their working conditions. They wanted to take the farmer on immediately. But Sandra stopped them. She explained that first they needed the necessary training to help them handle situations with the farmer.
The first right-based workshops

Aunty Katy and many of her peers could not read or write. However, Aunty Katy explains how the staff made it possible for them to learn about their rights. When Aunty Katy talks about these workshops and the rights they learned, it is with clarity, despite it being 20 years ago. This testifies to the impact of the training methodologies WFP staff employed to raise awareness amongst women farm workers.

She said to us, don’t rush to the farmer, first take it slow. The staff informed us about our rights in a way that we could understand... Every weekend we had a workshop. And we held regular meetings. Sandra told us, Aunty Katy, here you are going to learn. It is not about who is the most important. These rights are for ALL women, so that you can become strong and learn the procedures (of how to negotiate with the farmer). And so I learnt a lot. And I did not keep quiet. Nothing stayed under the carpet, because I would take it out from under there! So that all the women could know, understand!

It is clear that Aunty Katy experienced these workshops as equitable and empowering. Moreover, Aunty Katy can still remember the information they got at these workshops.

See, then we did not know that children under 18 should not work on the farm. Those days, the children had to go and work. And the more the farmer said that the children must work, we told him, no, they can’t. They are under age...

At these workshops, Aunty Katy and the other women learned how to set up a meeting with the farmer to discuss their concerns. They had to make a list of their concerns, and discuss it with the farmer one by one. But it was not always easy to keep calm. Aunty Katy says that, the first time the women met with the farmer, she told him that they had enough of the years of abuse.

In one of the workshops, they asked us, tell us quickly, who is the strongest? Is it now the man, or the woman? Quickly I answered. See, I am not educated, I can’t read or write, but that I knew. I said, but aren’t we stronger than the man? We are the women that put the food on the table, that take care of the children, make sure they have clothes... the man does not do it, just gives half his pay. So, we are stronger than the man, come what may!

The Vroue Regte Groepe (VRG) (Women’s Rights Groups)

Aunty Katy and other women on the farm, became members of WFP’s VRG. One of their key tasks was to recruit women from neighbouring farms to the WFP workshops, and to also inform these women about their rights.

It was a little difficult, you know. Because many women were scared, they did not want trouble... but with time, we worked out a plan. We held meetings with them, we invited the women from the different farms. We took them to many events. Later on, they even stood with us in town with our placards!

Aunty Katy remembers the excitement and business of that time. Before she joined WFP, life on the farm was boring and hard, but now she had opportunities to go to places, and meet other women farm workers.

We did not rest! Every weekend we had a workshop! See, I was excited. I was happy, I was proud. Before that, we did not know about our rights. But when they (WFP) came, to open us up to these rights, we came to realise: why should we be afraid of the farmer? Why must we be scared of our men? Because we now had equal rights! And we took these rights! And let me tell you, now I am not scared.

The women farm workers were no longer scared to talk to the farmer, or to their men. They felt empowered, and they shared this feeling with women on other farms. These VRG played an important role in spreading information to other women workers on isolated farms, about their rights. What was remarkable, was that the conscientised women farm workers did these sessions with other women on their own, with WFP staff only providing support. The VRG not only increased conscientisation among women farm workers about their rights, but also became an integral part of increasing the number of women with whom WFP worked.
Highlights

Over the years, Aunty Katy attended many events and workshops. However, the biggest highlight for her is when she, and other women farm workers, performed a drama in front of various ministers and other government officials, at a Women’s Day event in 1998.

We practised this drama: you strike the woman, you strike the rock. And this is what I told them: We as women suffer daily. Daily we are being oppressed. Why, if you are a woman, must you suffer like that? We as women, we do what the men do, AND we do what the women do. We have to be so strong, because we must do everything. I worked on a farm. There I worked until I was old. I know the pain and the suffering. Why don’t you look after us women? Can you see my eye? I worked in the vineyard, and the stick poked out my eye. The farmer did nothing, although it happened at work!

And I told them, the farmer must know that we are no longer scared of him. We know our rights now. Women on Farms Project came to teach us about our rights. And today we are fighting, not just for us, but for our children, for the future, for our children’s dreams. Because if we don’t get help, and stand up, we will stay under this oppression. And really, one can’t just continue suffering like that! Let us have our rights!

Aunty Katy said that she wanted them to know exactly what women on farms were experiencing. And she felt proud that they could get this message to decision-makers.

A fighter for women’s rights

Aunty Katy’s involvement in promoting women’s rights and informing workers about their labour rights, led to trouble with the owner of Knorhoek. At the time, the housing contract was in her husband’s name. The farmer fired her husband, and although he won the case at the CCMA, life on the farm became unbearable. It was then that Aunty Katy and her family moved to Hydro Farm, where she still lives today.

It took guts to get involved in promoting women’s rights. When asked how and why she did it, Aunty Katy explains:

It was because of the hardship. One suffered so much. That’s why.
Ragel van Rooi, Loxtonvale, Northern Cape

Ragel was born in 1962 on a farm in the Kakamas area, but grew up on the farm of Piet Loodton in Louisvale. Although her parents were strict, they cared for their children with great love. Sadly, her father died tragically when Ragel was still very young; his frozen body was found in a nearby canal. The memory still clearly haunts Ragel.

Shortly afterwards, her mother passed away as a result of heart disease. She had worked for the farmer all her life, even when she first became ill. Her mother asked the farmer to take care of her children after she died, and not send them to an orphanage.

She worked for the farmer as a domestic worker in the morning, and in the vineyards in the afternoon; she was still in her early teens. Pregnant at 19, Ragel married her boyfriend five years later.

After a year of marriage life, things started to go wrong. My husband was a heavy drinker, and I don’t drink. He started abusing me, hitting me when he came home drunk on a Friday. I landed up in hospital a few times after being badly beaten. Still I tried to make the marriage work, and we had two more daughters. But things just got worse between me and my husband. He was violent from the beginning, and he didn’t change. After 10 years of marriage, we got divorced. Now, I was a single mother with three young children. Everything was now on my shoulders.

Because I had to take care of my children, I started working on the farms. But it was only seasonal work. We only had work for about two months of the year and I had three school-going children. You see, I was struggling to put food on the table. I knew I had to find better work, so I went looking for work on the export farms. On the first export farm I worked, I only worked from September to January. In 2005, I went to work on another export farm. It was better because I worked from April to January. I continued working on various export farms, but things did not go well because you just have to what the farmer says. Many of the farmers were very difficult to work for. They just push, push, push.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

A few years later, she heard about Women on Farms Project and decided to get involved. She remembers the day clearly:

We were working in the vineyard, and one of the women got a phone call saying there’s going to be a workshop in Upington over the weekend, and it is for women farm workers. I was curious and decided to go and listen. When I went to the first workshop, I heard about my rights, and I decided that this was the right place for me. I wanted to improve my life and my community. I realised I can get good information here. So, I made sure I never missed a workshop when Lenie called me. I started to understand things much better and could stand up for my rights.

Ragel also recruited other women in her area to participate in WFP activities. She saw the importance of them also acquiring this information.

I knew many of the women had problems. Also, many women were drinking so much. I thought if they can attend weekend workshops, that will get them away from the alcohol over the weekend. Many of them were interested, and really I saw a difference in them. Even in my own life, I saw changes. When you live on a farm, you are withdrawn and shy. When I started learning about my rights, I got more self-confident. I could teach other women about their rights.

When there were problems with the farmers, the workers called on me and I went with them to talk to the farmer. Even the farmers started respecting me. I wasn’t fighting with them, but I only stood up for what was right. Through WFP, I met more women from different communities. I became interested to help other people, other women who had problems. I became interested to help others to empower themselves.
Highlights

For Ragel, a significant highlight was when she learned how to start a food garden. She talks about the impact it has had on her family as well as her neighbours.

*Before the food garden, we hardly ate vegetables. We live far from town and transport is very expensive. When you get there, the vegetables are just as expensive. I was struggling for many years with a white rash on my skin. After I started growing and eating my own vegetables, that rash disappeared! Now, we can eat vegetables right through the year.*

*After we started our own gardens, a few of us women decided to start a community garden. We are seven in that group. We get training and information from Women on Farms; we know how to do everything in our gardens. We are saving a lot of money because of the food gardens. Not to mention the fact that we are healthy and don’t know what hunger is anymore.*

*With WFP, my whole life has changed and I thank God that there is an organisation called Women on Farms Project who is there for the farm workers and our families.*

*All I can say is, Keep up with the good work, WFP and may God grant other women the opportunity as well to drink from your cup and become wise.*
Charmaine Fortuin, Klapmuts

Charmaine is 44-years-old, and was born in Lotus River. She grew up in Elsies River and went to school in Mitchells Plain. Charmaine left school in Standard 10, and found work in various factories in Cape Town. She met her future husband in Cape Town, and when his parents moved to Klapmuts, Charmaine and her husband joined them there.

As a city girl, moving to Klapmuts was a good experience for Charmaine:

*In Mitchell’s Plain, you faced violence every day, and when I came to Klapmuts, things were totally different. It was a small town, although it has grown bigger now. It was quiet. You could walk around any time of the night, and everyone knew everyone those days.*

When Charmaine moved to Klapmuts, she was unemployed. Although she enjoyed the peace and quiet of the small town, she kept to herself most of the time, and only had one good friend. She was young, had two small children, and, although she did not share this with others, she was in an abusive marriage.

While walking past one of the small parks in Klapmuts with her friend one day, Charmaine met one of the staff members of Women on Farms Project. She introduced herself to Charmaine and her friend, and after telling them about her organisation, asked them to invite more women to the park, where she could also share information about the Women on Farms Project with them.

We first thought that she was looking for people who could work for her, because people always came with bakkies, looking for workers (temporary). But then she started talking about this women’s rights organisation, told us about what they do, and how they help the people... also about women who were being abused, and so on. This (talk about abuse) drew a lot of women to the meeting, because that time, when I learned about women’s rights stuff, I was in an abusive relationship. This rang a bell for me, and I told myself: Charmaine, here you must listen, because perhaps this can help you.

Up until that time, Charmaine kept quiet about the abuse she was confronting at home. She felt trapped, not being able to leave, as she had nowhere else to go. When her parents got divorced, Charmaine went through a difficult time, and felt that she had to grow up quickly, and find work to support her family. Her mother later remarried, and Charmaine and her step-father did not have a good relationship. Due to this, she felt that she could not leave her husband, and go back to her mother during this difficult time in her marriage:

*I had a step-father and the two of us didn’t get along, and I felt I’ll rather stay in this relationship, because if I went back home, I’d have to deal with him and his constant complaints and stuff, and I really didn’t feel for that and that is why I stayed (with her husband).*

Charmaine began attending more meetings and workshops held by the Women on Farms Project, and also found work on a farm outside Simondium. At the WFP workshops, she began learning more about her rights and options as a woman living with abuse.

*That time, when we met Rose (from WFP), I did not know much. I was young, just had my second child – I did not realise that these things (abuse) were not supposed to happen, and so on. So I went to the workshops, and listened to what the law said about these things. I used to take the pamphlets (from the workshops), and placed it around the house; he (her husband) would start reading it.*

*We had time during these workshops, where we could write about how we felt and the stuff that was happening to me. Then I used to take the little book that I wrote in, and left it where he (her husband) could read it. Because, well, we were not communicating very well at this time. I always felt scared to tell him about my feelings, about what I didn’t like, and that type of thing.*
But at least I could write these things down. And then he asked me “but why can’t you say these things to me?” So I told him: I am scared to tell, because if I talk, then I am scared of being beaten. Well, things (the abuse) didn’t change overnight, but systematically it became less and less.

The domestic violence awareness and support workshops held by the Women on Farms Project also provided Charmaine with a space where she could process her feelings, and find emotional support.

There would sometimes come a moment where someone feels that (they need to talk). Sometimes it happened during centering, or when we did group work and report back. It was a space where I can talk about stuff that is happening to me, at home, or at work, whatever you feel. The programme created that space where we could just talk (about our feelings). We would cry together, laugh together, and release our feelings.

Charmaine’s personal life changed a lot since she joined WFP. She began talking to her husband, he began supporting her in attending WFP events, and the abuse slowly came to an end. Today, Charmaine describes her marriage as “normal”:

We now have the normal arguments – like any other married couple are, you know... about the kids, and so on, but there is no more fighting.

Other changes in her life

Talking about her experiences, Charmaine emphasises the personal growth she experienced as a result of being part of WFP, and also, working with other women in her community.

I didn’t complete school – I only had what they now called Grade 9, because I left school in Grade 10. So, I wasn’t uneducated - I could read, write and work with money, that type of thing. But world wise, I knew little. I think I grew up within the organisation, through the workshops they presented, and the skills I learned there. I was sent for training to Mosaic to become a lay counsellor so I could help people in the community. There were many other things also; we got training around HIV/AIDS and GBV, and then we could go to the clinic (to engage the health workers).

So I will say that my life changed in terms of.... you can almost say that, with the workshops and the trainings, we became more educated around stuff that went on (in the community). See, sometimes you just stay in your little nest, and you don’t know what is going on around you, and so on. So I think I became more aware that I am not the only one with a problem, and that there are others with bigger problems than my own. I think I came out of that little nest I built for myself. Today I can work with other people – you can reach out to other people – and I think that the knowledge I gained from Women on Farms, I could apply in my community.

And I will also say that I grew up over the years, because I used to keep to myself, I didn’t talk to people. See, if you were beaten around and shouted at every second weekend or day of the week, you do get scared, so I didn’t interact with other people when I arrived in Klapmuts. I only had one friend, and later met Aunty Elsie, and till today I call her Mamma, because she was like a mother to me. But now I can go and sit in a company, and say, Hi, I am Charmaine, and I want to be part of this group; that type of thing that I never used to do. I am more outspoken.

Work in the community

When Charmaine arrived in Klapmuts, she was unemployed. Following her first meeting with WFP, she met other women, most of whom worked and also lived on farms. At these meetings, she heard about their experiences, and ended up also finding employment on the farm Fredericksburg, near Simondium. During her years working on the farm, Charmaine attended various trainings with WFP, and later left farm work to work in the community, mostly around domestic violence and other forms of violence against women.

Her training as a lay counsellor, facilitated by WFP and Mosaic, led Charmaine to become involved with the trauma room at the local police station in Klapmuts. There she assisted young women and girls, who were raped and abused, by providing trauma counselling and support to them. Within the community, Charmaine’s house also became a place of refuge for women who were escaping abusive husbands. Her training enabled her to provide emotional, and sometimes also physical support to these women. It is important to Charmaine not to tell these women what to do, but to provide them with information about their choices, and once these women decided for themselves to support them as best as she can:
Women on Farms Project gave us training around how to do referrals, and where we can refer women to. So, if the woman decides to get divorced, we can refer her to the right place.

Charmaine is passionate about being a positive influence in the life of young girls. In Klapmuts, many young girls are exposed to drugs, and often, according to Charmaine, due to this, become vulnerable to abuse from gangsters in the area. She once assisted a young girl who was drugged, then raped, and later threatened by the perpetrators not to reveal their identity; this affected her deeply.

If people ask me, then I will always tell them: a woman is a pillar of strength. I like to say that a man comes from a woman, so a woman must be appreciated. Sometimes, especially around here (in Klapmuts), you sometimes have to demand of people to realise that: I exist! I am here!

And I tell this message especially to the young girls. You are young, and if you are young, you must enjoy life, so that when you sit back one day, you can tell stories of how you enjoyed your youth, so make wise choices, don't be reckless.

**Highlights in her life**

One of the highlights in Charmaine’s life was when she got the opportunity to travel. It had always been her dream to travel and see other parts of the world, yet she never thought that it would come true. The first time Charmaine travelled to Johannesburg, where she attended a winter school as a WFP representative. What was interesting to her about this experience was the fact that participants came from diverse backgrounds and different organisations, but that they shared a common goal of fighting against inequality within their communities.

Then, in 2015, Charmaine was invited to Belgium, to host talks aimed at creating awareness around the experiences of women farm workers. To her, it was important to know that, although WFP works to address the needs of women farm workers, it stresses the importance of women speaking for themselves, and that women farm workers should be the ones telling their own stories on public platforms.

She also feels proud of the various courses and qualifications she obtained, through the training provided by WFP, and other organisations that partner with WFP.

I mean, other organisations, they ask money in order to provide the training, but here I have a lot of diplomas that I received through the help of the organisation, without paying a cent! And I always think that there are people who walk around with degrees, and here we are (farmwomen), and we don’t have degrees and such things, but with the experience and changes we make here (in our community), and the trainings and stuff I really think that they can make me a doctor! I may not be book-wise, but I am world-wise, because of what I experienced in my life.

Today, Charmaine works as an educare facilitator for children who cannot afford to go to crèches. Charmaine visits these homes daily, providing educational stimulation to the children.
Background

Aunty Bettie was born in Murraysburg, Northern Cape. As a child, her parents moved to Aan-De Dorings in the Hex River Valley, where she grew up on various farms. At a young age, her parents sent her off to work to gain an additional income for their huge family. At age 12, Aunty Bettie started working in the warehouse on the farm. There she encountered the harsh treatment of the farmer for the first time.

Then, at age 14, Aunty Bettie's mother sent her off to work as a domestic worker for a family in Simon's Town. The family did not pay Aunty Bettie directly, but sent her wages directly to her mother. Aunty Bettie describes this experience as one where she felt like she was “rented” out by her mother. After two years of working for this family, Aunty Bettie packed her bags and left.

They were going to De Doorns for a weekend... I quietly packed all my clothes. I did not feel like working for them anymore. They treated me badly, and I worked too hard... I worked so hard, and I was still a girl...

After leaving this family, Aunty Bettie found her way to Cape Town where she worked for a wealthy family in Durbanville. She then moved with this family to Namibia, and stayed there for ten years. There, she met her husband, originally from Ceres; it was also in Windhoek that Aunty Bettie started developing a political consciousness. For, it was during her time there that Sam Nujoma was elected as President of Namibia. For Aunty Bettie, who was raised in the oppressive apartheid years, it was remarkable to see the election of a black president.

Married life on the farm

Aunty Bettie and her husband returned to South Africa in 1991. Her husband found work on a farm in the Warm Bokkeveld, and Aunty Bettie followed him there. It was during the run-up to the first democratic elections that Aunty Bettie started canvassing on farms, telling other farm workers about the vote, and to support the liberation party.

Life on the farm was not easy for Aunty Bettie because of her political involvement. Then, Aunty Bettie's brother and sister-in-law died within nine months of each other. Aunty Bettie took over the care of their children, and went to ask the farmer if the children could come and live with her on the farm.

I went to the farmer, and asked him if I could fetch the kids, and let them come and live with me... One had to ask, you couldn't just do what you wanted (on the farm). But then the farmer told me that his farm is not a crèche. I was forced to leave the farm and move to the township... Just the fact that he refused to let the children come and live with me, was like an eviction. But little did I know then... if only I knew then, what I know now, he would never get away with it, understand? He would not have gotten away with it...

Aunty Bettie is referring to the fact that when she left the farm, she did not know about her tenure rights. She only learned about these rights when she became involved with Women on Farms Project. Aunty Bettie feels that, if she knew her rights then, she never would have left the farm without a fight.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

After moving to the township, Aunty Bettie became very involved in her community. She received training as a community health worker, and began providing healthcare to members of her community, while also working as a seasonal worker on farms in the area. The healthcare workers were invited to a Women’s Day event, and it was there that Aunty Bettie was first introduced to Women on Farms Project. At this event, Aunty Bettie met women farm workers from other areas, and this made a strong impression on her:
That day, strong women spoke, women like Aunty Katy. They spoke about evictions. And how they are no longer scared of the farmer, and so on. At that time, I was working on a farm around here. And I just worked, worked, worked... there you were not allowed to talk, there you just had to do your work. The farmers were very “ignorant”.

The messages from other empowered women farm workers encouraged Aunty Bettie to stand up for herself, when the farmer reprimanded her for something she did not do.

That day, I told the oubaas, Listen here, I won’t let you order me around like that... This is not a school! And I went to the office, and told the man, I resign! Because I was a strong worker, I did my work. He asked me not to leave, but I told him, no, your father is too stupid!

It was in 2008 that Aunty Bettie first had contact with Women on Farms Project. Aunty Bettie was one of the first women in De Doorns to get involved with WFP. She then set out to recruit more farmwomen to the organisation, and as a result, there are now many De Doorns women who are active in the organisation. Aunty Bettie received training in the Labour Right Programme; as a result, she is now a member of the WFP Labour Rights Forum that organises and represents women farm workers in De Doorns. Aunty Bettie not only assists in labour disputes, but also encourages other women to stand up for themselves:

If there is a problem, I am there. I am not one to back away from a problem. Later on, the farmers said, who is she, and what is she? And I would say, no, I know my rights, that Women on Farms taught us very well! And many women followed us [the Labour Rights Forum].

Whenever you arrive at Aunty Bettie’s house, you will always find women sitting in the front room. Aunty Bettie is always ready to assist in instances where these women’s rights are affected. Also, she encourages the women to stand up and speak up on their own behalf, although where it is needed, Aunty Bettie will go directly to the farmer on the woman’s behalf.

**Highlight**

One of the highlights for Aunty Bettie, was the leading role she played during the farm worker uprising that erupted in De Doorns in 2012. She was one of the leaders of the strike committee, and at that time, it was through her association with WFP, that she came to learn about, and started building support for the strike.

Aunty Bettie explained how she organised meetings with all farm workers and how, after talks, the decision was taken to go on strike. They wanted to teach the farmers a lesson. Initially, De Doorns was the first area to strike, but then support spread to farms in other regions, as far as Piketberg, the Koue Bokkeveld, Robertson and beyond. The farm workers protested for a living wage, demanding a minimum wage of R150 per day.

A strike committee was established, and Aunty Bettie was chosen as one of the committee members. Within the committee, male representatives wanted to dominate the discussions, but Aunty Bettie and the other women leaders would not take this.

Because we were part of WFP, we really took them on, hey! We told them, you don’t like us women, hey? The men, they were so arrogant, they wanted to silence us women. But Ida said to us, do not allow them to exclude you, make sure of that. And so, I was part of every negotiation. Then, one farmer came and said, Aunty Bettie, can’t I pay the workers R105? Then I said, no, we don’t want that number. Then he wanted to talk to us on the side, but I told him, no – come and talk to all of us, in front of the commissioner.

The strike showed that farm workers can rise up on their own. We were not a union, we were nothing, just workers. Our voices were heard across the country, even the world... And because of that, I have travelled, to Durban, to Joburg. Everywhere I had to go and make speeches and statements, wow.

I was even given the opportunity to travel abroad. In 2015, I travelled to Namibia with WFP and in 2016 to Spain. In Namibia, we met with fellow women farm and domestic workers. We learned about their struggles and shared strategies. We could engage as strong women and discuss more ways in which to build women.
Going to Spain was a once in a lifetime experience. I did not think that as an ordinary farmwoman without education, I would one day be able to travel so far. When I first heard about the trip, I did not know whether I was coming or going. I was so excited, but at the same time worried. I thought “how will I be able to communicate with people who speak different languages? Will I fit in?” Once I arrived and met the other people, I saw that we spoke about the same things and I felt at ease. I could share about the hard conditions that women farm workers experience on big commercial farms in our country. I also saw that open municipal land in Spain was used productively. Anyone could plant vegetables on open land, so unlike South Africa. It inspired me to plant more vegetables on all the available land that I could access. My experience of the trip is captured in a beautiful photo booklet. My grandchildren and great grandchildren will be able to see that I travelled to Spain.

Community involvement

Aunty Bettie no longer works permanently on a farm, due to a disability. However, she continues her health-care work in the community, and is well-known as a midwife who has delivered many babies in her community. She also received training from the WFP food gardens project, and in the past year, she has established a thriving vegetable garden in her backyard. Aunty Bettie sells some of the proceeds, but visitors often wander into her garden, to pick vegetables for their own homes.

I am proud of my garden. It is my own little kingdom. See, I tell people (pointing at her garden), this is my farm, and Women on Farms Project taught me how to do it. I tell you, if I was not with them, then I would simply not have known that I could farm. All these skills and knowledge that I have, I got from them. And today I am where I am because of them. I don’t just tell people that I am a strong woman, I am a strong woman through and through. Really!
Aunty Stienie is 58-years-old, and lives on the farm, Roeswater, outside Rawsonville. She was born in Barrydale, but as a baby, her parents moved to the farm, Aan-de-Doorns, where she grew up. Aunty Stienie and her husband worked on Soetwater for over 20 years, and both are currently retired due to health reasons.

Aunty Stienie is a friendly, yet straight-forward woman. She had a happy childhood growing up on the farm, but her life took a difficult path when, as a teenager, she was introduced to alcohol and became involved with gangs in the neighbouring town of Worcester. Aunty Stienie talks bravely about this period in her life, and how it affected her children.

Her first boyfriend, and the father of her daughter, did not treat her well, and she decided to leave him. Four months after Aunty Stienie was released from prison, she met her husband, and they are still together today. The first few years of their marriage were turbulent, as Aunty Stienie continued to struggle with alcohol abuse, but reached a turning point when she realised how painful this abusive relationship was for her children. Aunty Stienie has been sober ever since.

Living and working conditions

This house has been home to Aunty Stienie and her family for over 25 years. Her husband worked in the vineyards, and she worked as a seasonal worker during this period. However, the working conditions on the farm led to health complications for Aunty Stienie. She, and the other women, worked in the vineyards while they were being sprayed with pesticides, and they were never issued with protective clothing, neither were the correct procedures followed during the spraying of crops. Aunt Stienie developed respiratory problems as a result of her exposure to pesticides.

I lived here, and I worked here with my husband in the vineyards. And then I left the job in the vineyard. The doctor booked me off, because my chest could not take the poison anymore.

Aunty Stienie received no compensation from the owner, and her circumstances required of her to continue working. She began working as a domestic worker in the neighbouring town of Worcester. Following an operation to her feet, Aunty Stienie can no longer work, and receives a disability grant. Her husband became the sole breadwinner in the family. The farmer, who owned the farm for over 30 years, then fell into financial difficulty, and sold the farm to a new owner. Before he sold the farm, the owner gave some of the workers houses in town, but to Aunty Stienie this was not acceptable. Aunty Stienie and her family remained in their two-bedroom house on the farm. After the farm was sold, her husband continued to work for the new owner:

So it happened that this farmer bought the farm. Pierre van der Merwe. And my husband worked for him. Then, in the winter, my husband got sick in the warehouse. He went to the doctor, and the doctor told him, he can’t work anymore. He gave him forms, the farmer had to complete it. My husband could not work anymore.

Both Aunty Stienie and her husband became unable to work, and after 25 years on the farm, they had no other place to call home. Although the owner knew that their disabilities were caused by their work on the farm, he began murmuring that they have to leave the farm.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

Aunty Stienie is the sister of Sarah Beukes, a woman known as a dedicated fighter for women farm workers’ rights, and who sadly passed away a few years ago. Aunty Stienie said that it was at her sister’s funeral that she saw how big WFP was, and how women farm workers from all over came to pay their respects to her sister. This caused her to become involved with WFP herself, and since then, she has learned to also stand up and fight for her rights on the farm.
Following the 2012 farm worker protests that occurred in the Boland, the farmer changed his tune, and started demanding rent from her family. However, she had learned about her tenure rights at the Land and Housing workshops, and decided to challenge the farmer about this.

After the De Doorns strike, that is where the rent came in. So my husband told them, they can’t deduct rent from him, he is retired. Then they hit my son with rent! Then Women on Farms told me “Aunty Stienie, stand up.” So I went to the councillor, and I told him “I vote for you, I make you strong. So when are you going to help me?” The next day he (the councillor) phoned, and sent a man to me.

Aunty Stienie explained that, during the WFP workshops they were taught to take someone with them when they confront the farmer about unfair treatment, so that there is a witness who can support her story should it have to be taken further. She went to the farmer, to put forward her case. When the farmer asked her why she brought someone along, she explained to him that she needed a witness, should the issue not be resolved. The farmer then agreed to listen to her.

And Women on Farms empowered me. Look, I became so strong, that today I have the guts to go to a farmer. And after that, if he still does not understand, then I know others will come to support me. So I told him: You found us here on the farm. We have the right to be here. You can’t just tell us to leave.

The farmer relented, and stopped talking about them leaving the house, or deducting rent from her son’s wages. Today, Aunty Stienie and her husband still live in the house, without paying any rent.

Involvement in the community

Today, Aunty Stienie is an active member in her community, both on the farm and in the town of Rawsonville. She also participated in the Health Programme of the Women on Farms Project, and has formed a Health Team with women from neighbouring farms. Their goal is to interact with the clinic around service delivery to farms. The committee meets regularly, where they report back and plan their monthly activities. At the moment, they are advocating for the provision of a mobile clinic that can visit farms and do check-ups with farm workers.

Aunty Stienie says that currently, farm workers have to walk the considerable distance to town if they need healthcare. Since there is no ambulance service, mobile clinics can play a huge role in preventative healthcare to farm workers.

Fighting against evictions also lies close to Aunty Stienie’s heart. In the Land and Housing programme, she learned how to deal with eviction threats on farms, and she has been able to apply the skills she acquired on farms in the Rawsonville area.

I listened to what Carmen taught us: don’t shout, don’t swear, don’t speak loudly, but know your facts, know how. It taught us how to work on an equal level with the farmer, not as Baas and Klaas. Carmen taught us how to do this. Today she will teach us. Tomorrow we will role play. And we will practice until we get it right. During the role play, she would say “wait Aunty Stienie, there you were too quick, that farmer is going to win.” Until you get it right. And in this way you get passion for it, and you learn.

Aunty Stienie explains that she represented a worker who was threatened with eviction. During her interactions with the farmer, she did not feel alone, but that she had the backing of the Women on Farms Project in case she needed advice or help. This strengthened her, and after a reasonable discussion with the farmer, the worker was allowed back to work, and to remain in his house.

For Aunty Stienie, becoming involved with WFP changed her life for the better.

For long I wore a mask. I was scared of a farmer for all these years. But then I met Women on Farms, well, I was a straight talker, but I never had support behind me – now I do. Nowadays, to me, it’s not because you are a white man (that I must keep quiet). To me, it is about this: the truth, you must know it! And I tell the other people about Women on Farms. And I encourage them to become involved. I tell them: “come out of your corner. We were stupid in the past, did not know about our rights! Now we are strong because we know our rights.
Barbara-Ann Beukes, De Doorns

Annie, as she is known, is 39-years-old. She was born and raised in De Doorns, and still lives there today. Her mother was a farm worker, and her father worked for the Railways. Following her parents’ divorce, Annie stayed with her mother and siblings.

As a single parent, her mother had to work in order to provide for her family. Annie remembers how tired her mother was, when she returned home in the evening from the farm:

In the evenings, when my mother came home, you could see the tiredness on her face. And tomorrow morning, she just had to get up and go back again, and that evening, again the tiredness. It was a bit traumatising, because I saw that she had to go and work for her children. It was not nice to see her so tired.

Annie fell pregnant at 16, but after her child was born, her mother encouraged her to complete school. Annie continued to complete her high school education, while her mother helped her to take care of her child. This created a strong bond between them. It is also due to her mother, that Annie became involved with Women on Farms Project.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

After completing high school, Annie started working on a farm in the De Doorns area. Six years ago, she started working at Modderdrif Farm, where she still works.

My mother was a Women on Farms Project woman. Whenever she returned from the workshops, she would come and tell me what happened, what was said there, and what was done there. And that stirred my interest, because I was also a farm worker. And things on my farm was not that nice. The circumstances were a bit difficult. And if you don’t have that knowledge, then you think that things are the way they must be on the farm. And so I became interested in going (to the workshops), and to listen as to what was going on there at Women on Farms Project.

As Annie started attending the labour workshops, she realised that things were not as they should be on the farm where she worked. The workshops helped Annie to identify the labour problems on the farm. She explains:

I have worked on that farm for six years, and I am still a seasonal worker. We have still not been appointed as permanent workers. Also... at that time, we were not earning the minimum wage. So, I thought, no man, why are we not being paid the minimum wage, especially because the law said so. And we also worked longer hours for little pay. And if you worked over-time, you did not get money for it. That was the story.

My first workshop was a labour workshop, and it dealt with our labour rights. And there I realised, wait a minute, this is important. And I needed to hear that (information). Because this was not thumb-sucking, this was the law! And that made me very interested...

Annie explains that her training at Women on Farms Project, enabled her to defend herself when the farmer wanted to fire her:

We had targets on the farm, but the targets were not obtainable. So we had to appear at a disciplinary hearing regarding the targets. Our target was a bit low, according to the farmer. People were chased away on the spot – if you did not meet the target, then you must finish tonight, and not come back.

I was so empowered about my rights, that I could tell him (the farmer): you can’t just chase us away. The targets are supposed to be a motivational strategy. The law does not say that we must work according to targets. If you want to do this target-business, then you must pay us differently. If workers don’t make that target, you must still give them the daily wage like the law says.
The farmer stared at me open-mouthed. He was surprised. And when he started swearing and stuff, I just kept calm. And I spoke to him very calmly. Later on he had to listen to me. And do you know what I did then? I took him to the bible! I told him, tell me something: why did they stone Jesus? What did he do? It’s because he said the right stuff, and that’s why they killed him. Why did Mandela have to go to jail? What did Mandela do? Because he spoke about what’s right. And now, because I am also just saying what is right, you want to chase me off the farm. I said no, it doesn’t work like that.

See, they (the farmers) they think that they are cleverer than you. But he had no reply, he could not say anything. Then we were told, go back to your work, and do your job... Today, that farmer has the biggest respect for me,

Having knowledge about her rights enabled Annie to defend herself and other workers. Armed with only the knowledge and lots of guts, Annie was able to stand up for the workers. However, Annie says she was not always that courageous:

I was a very scared person, but that’s the way we were raised. If the baas [boss] talks, you must keep quiet. But that courage came from the knowledge I got from Women on Farms Project. That is where I got my courage. And I say this: WFP really empowered me. Today I feel that I am a strong woman, who can stand up for myself.

The strike

Annie was one of the workers who went on strike during the 2012 farm-worker uprising that began in De Doorns. Annie explains that it was not easy to take a stand, but they pushed through because they wanted the voices of farm workers to be heard.

Oh, it was a difficult time for us. Especially for me as a single parent. And when there was no bread in the house, it was even more difficult. We feared for our lives. We remained on strike until all the negotiations were finalised. Only then did we go back to work. It was a really difficult time, but on the other hand, it was also a good thing for me. Because of the strike, people could hear our voices as farm workers, and how we feel.

Following the strike, things became difficult, as the farmers began punishing workers who participated in the strike.

They kept throwing it at our heads: you wanted to toi-toi. And they took away a lot of our benefits. For example, we used to get gas, doctor and chemist on the farm. But then all that stuff was taken away... they kept throwing it at our heads, you toi-toi’d

The removal of the benefits effectively punished workers who went on strike, and through this, the farmers wanted to make it harder for workers to protest again.

To tell you the honest truth... just after the strikes, there was no such thing as contracts anymore. I think that the farmers know full and well (the laws), but they still do what they want to do. And especially, on our farm, not everyone knows their rights. Or they know their rights, but are scared to defend it. If the boer says jump, then they jump. They are too scared to ask: But why must I jump? What is the reason? Or we won’t... And sometimes I feel a bit hopeless, because I tell them what is going on, but they again became scared of the farmer. It is really difficult.

Annie is a member of the WFP Labour Rights Forum in De Doorns. The training that they receive from WFP, explains Annie, keeps them up-to-date with new laws and labour regulations. In the post-strike context, and in the light of how farmers are retaliating, it has become more difficult to encourage workers to stand up for their rights.

Annie feels that the post-strike context made it very difficult for farm workers to organise. Although farm workers have freedom of association, Annie explains that, because union membership fees get deducted from wages, workers fear that farmers will target them, because he will know of their membership. The workers do not want the farmer to know, and so, explains Annie, they choose not to belong to a union.

Given this context, Annie feels that it is important for the Labour Rights Forum to exist, and to continue intervening on farm workers’ behalf in labour disputes.

I just feel that everyone has a right. And everyone wants to be treated fairly. So why can’t the farmer treat workers fairly? That is my thing.
Farm workers do important work

Annie is passionate about farm worker rights, and that justice must prevail. She is also proud of her work as a farm worker, and reminds us that farm workers play an important role in the provision of food security, but that this is often overlooked by both farmers and the broader community. For Annie, it is not just about labour-rights, but also, about farm workers’ quality of life.

I am proud to be a farm worker because I think that I am doing a very important job. To others it might be simple and small, but I think that it is an important work. And it is my feeling that, if only the farmers can treat workers better, pay them better, then we can also provide a future for our children. Because they don’t do it, people tend to look down upon us.

It’s not that I want to insult farmers, and just say negative things. But, my thought is always that, a healthy worker brings in a healthy harvest, you understand? For, if you work in unhappy conditions, then you will just mess up your work, you know? But if you can work in happy conditions, then I think that contributes to a good harvest.

But, we have to leave our kids early in the morning. At night, when we come home, our kids are fast asleep. You don’t have that time for your children. I mean, when he (the farmer) goes home at night, everything is done for him. And he can spend quality time with his children. But as a farm worker, you don’t get to do that... and it is these small things that also matter in life.

Annie feels that it is important for women farm workers to know, and keep learning about their rights. This continuous learning is what keeps Annie supporting and participating in WFP programmes.

Do you know, that if Women on Farms calls me today to say that there is a workshop on Monday, then I will go. I will even stay out of work. I tell myself, I will rather lose one day’s wages than to lose that knowledge that I go and fetch there. I literally stayed out of work to go to the workshops. Because I wanted to know. And I still want to know more.

And I just want to tell my fellow women farm workers, be strong. Yes, not everyone can be strong, but let’s rise up out of our circumstances, so that we can also be strong for those who are not. Let us stand together as farmwomen, because I really believe that we as women, are the pillars of strength on farms...
Susan Smith, New Rest, Wellington

Susan, or San, as she is known, is 50-years-old. She currently resides in New Rest, an informal settlement outside Wellington. San lived on the farm Soetendal for over twenty years, until she and 22 other families were evicted to the informal settlement a few days before Christmas in December 2015.

San was born in Wellington, and raised by her mother, along with nine other siblings. San remembers her mother as a loving person who instilled strong moral values in her children. As a high school student, San enjoyed school, and excelled as a track athlete. She completed Standard nine, after which she had to leave school in order to start contributing to her household.

San found employment on Soetendal, a farm located nearby Wellington. She was joined there by her boyfriend, who later became her husband, and the father of her two children. One child sadly passed away at a young age. Her remaining son, 29 years old, is married and is an engineer. During the first years after San arrived on Soetendal, it was a prosperous farm. The farmer also owned a transport business, and San’s husband worked there as a driver, whilst San was employed as a seasonal worker. Although San enjoyed life on the farm, she experienced many challenges in her marriage:

We lived there (on Soetendal) for very long, and life there was good. We lived there for over twenty years. But through all of this, my husband cheated, messed with other women, and no woman is happy when her husband does this. If you tried to talk about it (to him), then he tells you that you are being bad luck, and stuff. I had so much sadness and pain, and when he came back from these other women, he would beat me up, sometimes in front of my children – so many times I had to get an interdict against him.

San went through much pain during her marriage, but following her divorce, she promised herself to never go back to her husband again, and worked at keeping a positive attitude. She attributes this positive attitude to her faith and her meeting other survivors of abuse through her involvement with WFP.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

After her divorce, San continued to live on Soetendal. She heard from another woman on the farm about WFP, and asked her to take her along to the workshops.

I said to my friend, Evelien: “take me with you to this Women on Farms place,” and then, when I got into the hall, I learnt what this organisation was about. After I went to Women on Farms, I decided, enough is enough! I want to be here, for here I get complete woman power!

And that is why I feel powerful today, really! Even against a man. I will say what I want to say to a man. For I mean, this abuse – a woman does not like to fight, but yet a woman has more power than a man, here inside her, and that is the truth! A man does not have that power of a woman. A man is quick to fight, but that power of a woman, he will never have, understand? And I got that power from being inside Women on Farms, for there I also learned that a woman is powerful, more powerful than a man!

Today I am not scared to talk. I say how I feel, and I talk to other women (about abuse). I spoke at the Ritz hotel the first time; there I met another woman from Ceres. Her marriage was the same as mine. And right there we became friends. Today we are very good friends. And I feel really good now (about myself).

San’s involvement with WFP, and meeting other women who went through similar experiences, helped her to overcome the pain of the divorce. San began sharing her experiences with other women farm workers and on public platforms. Her message became that of...
victory: that a woman can overcome abuse, and carry on trying to build a meaningful life for themselves as women. She also began drug awareness workshops with the youth on the farm, hoping to inspire them to make healthy choices in their lives.

Eviction

Life was slowly becoming better for San, as a single mother. However, in 2009, Soetendal’s farm business collapsed, after the farmer was bankrupt. The farmer packed up and left, leaving the workers behind – at the time 23 families were living on this farm. This turned into a very stressful time for San, and the other families. They no longer had work on the farm, and slowly things began to deteriorate for them.

The farm became deserted, and then a farmer came to the farm. The farmer told us that he was going to buy the farm, with us (as workers) on the farm. But then, when he bought the farm, he changed his tune. He disconnected our electricity. Before, our garbage used to be removed, but not anymore. You should have seen the state of the place! First it was a prize-winning farm, now neglected. People didn’t have work, we had to go and look for work at different places. We used to walk the long distance to town (in search of work). That was some farmer! He separated himself from us, put a fence around our houses, he didn’t want to see us. He took our privacy away. We changed there. The farm looked dirty, drains were overflowing, and we only had the use of one tap. He cut off the water to the toilets. It was not nice there at all. And then, sometime last year, the bailiff came to us with letters, saying that we must leave. That morning, we did not even know that we had to leave for sure. And then the bailiff and the police arrived, oh that was such a sad day! The police and the council threw our people’s stuff into lorries, just like that!

San and the other 22 households were supported by WFP during the time they faced eviction. Various anti-eviction protests were held, and awareness was raised in the media about the plight of the workers on Soetendal. Although the eviction was challenged in court, it was finally granted.

We were not even gone properly, when he (the farmer) broke down our houses, and that day, when we were kicked out, we came here (to New Rest). The police threw us out like dogs.

We cried, and I was the one that day, I stood up for my community (confronting the police). So the police said to me “are you the cheeky one?” Then I said, “I am not cheeky, I am standing up for my community. Why are you doing this? Are we dogs”? We cried.

Following a traumatic day, when San and the other members of her community were evicted from the farm houses they lived in for over twenty years, they arrived in New Rest, an informal settlement, in the late hours of the evening. What awaited them were cold and dark corrugated iron shacks, set up by the municipality in anticipation of their eviction. Their belongings were scattered or broken, or got lost in the process of the forced removals.

Life in New Rest

Life in New Rest has not been easy for San. She lives alone in a two-room shack, of which one room is the kitchen, and the other her bedroom. The shacks are burning hot in summer, and during winter the rain leaks into the shack, turning the floor into mud. There is no electricity, running water or private toilet facilities.

It is not nice here. Our children got involved in other things here. Young girls who went to school when we were on the farm, when they came here, they left school. Got involved with drugs – Tik, everything. People started drinking more alcohol. It is still difficult for us here. On the farm, life was better than here in town. There we still had some money, but here, we struggle. We can’t understand it, why does our food not last here? There we could still survive, but here (in town) if something is finished, it is finished. We are down on the ground. This place is really not for us, really, it is not.

Although San has been through one of the most painful experiences of being evicted and displaced to a new community where the old way of living on the farm does not apply, she continues to look ahead. She has dreams for the future, and she maintains an optimistic attitude, even in the midst of her current situation. Her biggest dream is to have a house of her own:

My own house, that is my heart’s desire. Where I can look out over my yard. A home with two rooms and a sitting room; I really want a sitting room. Now, if people come to my place, they must sit here (in the kitchen), or in my bedroom.
The Lord must carry me, I must see where I can get money (for a place) because I often go to the municipality. I don’t know when we will get a house, it will certainly take very long. I am number 2000 on the waiting list, we are going to wait a long time.

San continues to speak out against abuse and poor service delivery in her community. San also received training in health rights from WFP, and subsequently began monitoring the service delivery women farm workers received at the local clinic in Wellington. Today, she continues with this work, as the health issues affecting her community in New Rest also demand attention. As such, San has been to the clinic numerous times to address the nurses around the lack of service delivery. San is currently busy resurrecting the Health Team that existed on the farm, now that they are in New Rest. She also attends various public meetings and rallies around health rights and taking a stand against violence against women and children. This is her message that she continues to share on these platforms:

I just want to tell women, who have experienced what I experienced, they must rise up. They must not go and sit on the ground. They must rise up, and liberate themselves from what has happened to them. God is also there to support us, giving us the strength to rise up. I feel that women must not allow a man to push them down. When these things happen, many women have kids, and often they don’t know where to go, and so they don’t want to leave the husband. But you, who are a woman, you can also get a job, you don’t have to rely on a man, and if you are single, go on with your life. Don’t live for a man. Feel proud. Take care of yourself. Don’t let things get you down.
Nonceba Mtukwana-Du Plessis, Warmsand, Northern Cape

Nonceba was born in Queenstown in the Eastern Cape in 1976, one of 11 children. She completed her primary schooling in Queenstown, and then moved to Cape Town where she completed Grade 11 before dropping out of school because she was pregnant.

In those days, it was unacceptable to be pregnant in school, as a young Xhosa girl. It was not like now when young girls still attend school when they are pregnant. After my baby, I worked in the Indian shops for R150 per month. I had to accept these wages because I had to take care of my family because my father had died. I also worked as a char in the houses of some old ladies in Cape Town.

She met and married her husband in Mitchells Plain in 2003. They lived there for a year until Nonceba was assaulted with a firearm by thugs in her home at night while they were sleeping. She was also sexually assaulted during the attack. Nonceba believes they were targeted because her husband was a police officer.

I sustained multiple injuries on my head due to the brutal assault. I lost my memory. My husband resigned from the service for the sake of our safety. We then moved to the Northern Cape in December 2004.

They became part of a Public Works project on agriculture. However, the project collapsed after a couple of years, mainly because of tensions in the group: the “Coloured” women did not want to work with her; she was the only Xhosa woman in the project. The land was eventually been taken away by the Provincial Government. The land is still vacant today. She felt very bitter and sad.

I was rejected by my fellow South African women until I met Lenie Coetzee from Women on Farms. I met Lenie at a function and spoke to her about my life. She took my number and invited me to a workshop. There I was welcomed warmly by my fellow women despite the language barrier. I learned to communicate with women from different backgrounds who made me feel at home. I saw that at Women on Farms, there is no colour, it’s the rainbow nation. I learned that not everybody is the same. There are some very good people.

Before Women on Farms Project, I really didn’t know my rights. It was through them that I learned about women abuse, household budgeting, your rights in marriage. WFP explained that we all have rights, no matter who you are, a farm worker, a Xhosa woman, everybody; we are all equal.

Highlight

Nonceba worked as a seasonal worker on two different farms. Although the farmer treated her well, and the wage was reasonable, the work was only from December to April. Therefore, she was very happy to get involved with WFP’s food gardens project. She says:

We learned how to grow vegetables, about seeds, everything. Then, I started working on vegetables grown in a tunnel because the sun is so hot here in the Northern Cape. Again, Women on Farms Project taught me everything we needed to know. From my food garden, I am able to feed my family. We are 10 people in my household, with my extended relatives. The vegetables feed us all.

I am also able to sell some of my vegetables, so I make some money. With that money, I bought some sheep, goats and chickens. With the money I make, I can send my children to school, I can pay for their school uniforms. I’m able to do all this because of my vegetable garden.

My dream is to extend my garden if I can get more land. Then I will be able to accommodate more women on the garden. My garden is so beautiful that farmers want to hire me to be managers on their farms. But I say, No, I want to depend on my own hands, not work for somebody else.

I was nobody, but Women on Farms made me somebody today, somebody in the community. Women on Farms is my home. I was so alone before, but with Women on Farms, I found family. I am free. You strike a Woman you strike a rock! Amandla! GOD BLESS YOU ALL!
Chantel Kennedy, Wolseley

Chantel is 22-years-old. She was born on the farm De Nou, just outside De Doorns, but later moved to Wolseley with her mother, where she still lives today.

Chantel’s early childhood years were very difficult. Her mother ran away from home when she was three, and she was left behind with her father for two years, before her mother returned to fetch her.

I was three when she ran away. Five, when she came to fetch me. There was lots of abuse in the house... My father hit my mother, and so on. And that is why my mother just decided to leave. To take herself away from us. And she left me behind on the farm.

Those were difficult years for Chantel. Her father used drugs, drank a lot, and also ended up in jail. She still gets flashbacks of how her father beat her mother, and how he wanted to kill her. Chantel stayed with various family members on the farm, until her mother returned to fetch her.

At five, she came to fetch me. I still remember it very well. My sister and I were playing at the warehouse. Then an aunty called me. And I did not know that she was my mother. Then another aunty said, it’s your mother! We ran to her... but then she went away again, but a month later, she came back to fetch me. It was very tragic.

Chantel then went to live with her mother and step-father in Wolseley. When she was older, her mother explained to her that she left because she could not take the abuse anymore, and that she had to leave the relationship. It was a difficult decision, but her mother first had to find another place for her children, before she could fetch them. Her relationship with her mother, however, remained strained.

My mother and I never spoke like mother and daughter. I kept things to myself, and she didn’t know how to approach me... It shook my trust in people, because that day, when my mom came back, and left again... that day I decided to close my heart, to not let people in. Because people can come, but leave any time, just like my mother left. I decided to stand on my own feet. Since the age of five, I did not depend on people. I stood away from people. I just wanted to do my own thing; I did not ask anyone for help, and so on. And that was the mentality I had, growing up. But then Women on Farms came into my life, and I learned that not all people are the same...

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

Chantel explains that it was only when she became involved with Women on Farms, that she gained deeper insight into her mother's actions. At first, she was pessimistic about the organisation, first because she did not want to be with other people, and secondly, because she thought it was for older women, not young women like her. However, this perception changed as she became more involved with the organisation. Although Chantel did not expect it, her involvement in fact led to a defining change in her life, her relationship with her mother, and her view that she could not rely on others:

I studied education for one year, at CPUT. But then I decided that this isn’t what I wanted to do. So I went back home. Then Aunty Valerie asked me if I didn’t want to go with her (to a workshop). That was at Boontjiesrivier. I wasn’t really keen, but went with after all. That’s how I got involved. In the first place, I thought the name alone said Women, and there were a lot of older women.

That first day, I wondered to myself: what am I doing here? But as the workshop went on, I discovered what everything was about. They held workshops about abuse, and so on. What to do when you are being abused. Where to go, and so on...

And that gave me a better concept about why my mother felt that she had to leave. Because, see, my father wanted to kill her! And she realised that, no, this is not the life she wants for her, and her children. And that’s why she went in search of a new life.
She knew that we were safe where we were (on the farm).

That workshop caused me to understand... because I still had a little bit of anger inside me. I still thought, how could my mother leave me at such a young age? But that workshop made me realise why she did what she did. It was not just for her... it was also for us... she wanted a better life for us.

And with all the workshops, I realised what abuse was all about. That helped me to understand why my mother left us. That helped me to get over it all...

During her childhood years, Chantel did not receive any counselling or support. Nobody knew what she was going through. But, as she explains, through the WFP workshops, she was able to understand her mother better, and that in fact, that this changed her relationship with her mother for the better. Chantel and her mother spoke about it, and her mother apologised to her. Chantel told her that she now understands why her mother did what she did.

Chantel is also slowly allowing people into her life, and feels that WFP workshops provided her with a space to talk to other women, and talk about her experiences:

It made me a stronger person. And I learned from my mother’s experiences. And there is a saying: people need other people to make them a person... so today, I feel that I can look ahead, I can breathe again. I must say that Women on Farms helped me a lot, and today, talking about my experiences, also helps...

Rights of young women

Chantel’s involvement with Women on Farms also raised her awareness about her rights. As a result, Chantel also feels that it is important that other young women also know about their rights.

At Women on Farms, I came to learn a lot about my rights as a woman, as a young woman also. At our weekly workshops, I also sat in the company of many older women, and they could share their experiences also with me. And I could ask them questions if I didn’t understand, then they would help me.

During apartheid, women did not have many rights. But today, although women have rights, young women specifically don’t have free access to their rights, and some still have that idea, that they must stay where they are, because they don’t know about their rights... Yes, we do have many rights, but not enough knowledge about it.

The road ahead

Chantel has set goals for her future. She is currently completing a diploma in Human Resources, and plans to pursue a degree in Human Resources at university. She is currently studying with the support of a bursary. Her mother is now her inspiration, to work towards a better future for herself:

I think, what inspired me, is my mother. Although she left me as a child, and all that stuff, she actually inspired me not to stay in an abusive relationship. And she went in search of a better future for us. So I want to return the favour, for what she has done for me, because she wanted to give me a better life. I don’t want to have children at a young age, I don’t want to do drugs... I want a better life for her, and for myself.
Christine Mohobo, Spooky Town, Rawsonville

Christine is 46-years-old, and was born and raised in the Eastern Cape. Her husband left the Eastern Cape in search of work, and found employment on a farm in Rawsonville, called Du Toitskloof. In 1992, Christine followed her husband to the Western Cape, and then also found work on the same farm.

Today, Christine and her family live in Spooky Town, an informal settlement located on the outskirts of Rawsonville. She arrived in Spooky Town five years ago, after she left the farm she had worked on for 20 years.

Spooky Town is an informal settlement located on the outskirts of Rawsonville. The settlement was formed on the banks of a river, and is also nearby the local sewerage works. It is not the location of choice for its residents, but came about because they had nowhere to go. Most of the Spooky Town residents are farm workers who were evicted from farms, and were left with nowhere to go. During the early days, there was no electricity in the settlement, and residents started calling it Spooky Town. Many of the Spooky Town residents still work as “out-workers” on farms in the area, and as such the settlement, by default, serves as a labour reserve for the farms in the Rawsonville area.

Life on the farm

When Christine arrived on the farm she could not speak Afrikaans, but today she is fluent in the language. For a short period she worked on the mushroom farm outside Rawsonville, but returned to Du Toitskloof soon after, and worked on this farm until 2011.

First she was employed as a seasonal worker, but later she worked in the farmer’s house. Christine was later employed in the laboratory, where she was trained in testing acidity levels. Christine explains that she taught herself how to work on the computer, because she had no formal training, but learned everything on the job.

In 2006, Rawsonville appeared in the national news when it became known that a doctor in town still kept separate entrances for white and black patients, as was the racist practice during the apartheid era. As a result, Women on Farms Project drew attention to this racist practice, and many farm workers joined a protest march aimed at bringing it to an end:

*Women on Farms came to the town, and invited us to the March. We all got T-shirts and then we marched to that doctor. But I was working very hard at that time, and so I did not go back (to Women on Farms) at that time.*

Then, in 2008, WFP visited Du Toitskloof farm to talk to the workers. At that time, temporary workers were being housed in a big hall on the farm, and there were no proper housing or toilet facilities. Christine took the WFP staff to the hall, and as such, awareness was raised about these inhumane living conditions on the farm:

*When I got to Women on Farms, I thought, this is the stuff that we need to talk about! Important also, to know that Women on Farms is not a political organisation, but we do discuss political stuff in the workshops. And so, when I heard (the workshop discussions) I said to myself: “I must stay here!”* 

In 2011, when Christine landed up in Spooky Town, she became actively involved with Women on Farms. Christine has been part of the Land and Housing Programme ever since, and has participated in the various workshops and trainings of this programme. For Christine, her participation in the march, trainings and workshops all built her skills, and made her stronger.

*It makes me angry to see how farm workers suffer. I felt powerless and did not know how to help them. I did not know where to start. When I became involved with WFP I knew there were people who could support me. I feel very relieved now.*
At first I felt afraid. I heard people spoke about the municipality, but I did not know where it was. My eyes were closed; WFP opened my eyes and I found the courage to confront those in power. WFP taught me how to engage with municipal officials and office bearers. We negotiated for better conditions in Spooky Town and managed to get toilets and lights. The struggle for household electricity and proper housing continues. After each struggle I became a little stronger. I am not afraid to challenge farmers. More and more people approach me to help them.

Moving to Spooky Town

In 2011, drastic changes occurred in Christine’s life. Firstly, the farm where she worked was sold to new owners. The new owners did not like the fact that Christine worked in the lab, and demoted her to a general worker. Her replacement was a white woman, who had studied at university, and Christine felt that she lost this job because she did not have formal education. Secondly, Christine, whilst still working on the farm, was elected as a ward candidate to participate in the upcoming local elections, on behalf of a national political party. This caused tension for Christine at work, as the farmer did not take kindly to the fact that one of his workers was nominated for local elections. Christine explains that the confluence of a few incidents led to her decision to leave Du Toitskloof, and to find a place to stay in Spooky Town:

First, they (the owners) saw that my face was on the poles (referring to the electricity poles where ward candidates hang their posters for elections). Then, another thing, when we went to canvas at Louwshoek, I scolded his (the owner’s) brother, without knowing that it was his brother!

The owner had already been unhappy with the fact that Christine was a political candidate, and when he heard about this incident, he started making life very difficult for Christine on the farm. Christine decided to leave Du Toitskloof:

“I’d seen how people were being kicked off the farm, and I just knew that my turn was going to come.”

Community involvement

A life changing moment was when I visited Cuba as part of a WFP delegation. I noticed people were not defined by skin colour; not being confined by colour barriers created a sense of freedom. It inspired me to work harder to create a more equal society where people are not slaves to white farmers.

Christine was not elected in the 2011 local elections, but she did not give up campaigning for farm worker rights in the local community. When asked why she is so passionate about social justice, she explains that she grew up in a household where her parents talked about inequality, and that witnessing the student protests of the 1980s, when she was still young, stirred an awareness within her.

Life in Spooky Town is not easy for Christine, and many others who live there. Most of the residents are farm workers, who have been evicted off farms, and who had nowhere else to go:

Here in Spooky Town, there’s over 300 shacks. We try to fight the farmers, but it is hard. The magistrate even, he allows the farmers to throw people out of their homes. People moved here over ten years ago. And most of the people who live here were kicked off the farms. And then, we also fight with the municipality about the river; when it rains, these shacks get flooded.

Living in cold shacks with no electricity was hard for Spooky Town residents. And the local municipality, according to them, did nothing to prevent the growth of the settlement – by not resisting the farm evictions, and not installing services in the community, such as running water, toilets and electricity. The housing waiting list has also been causing tension in the community, and Spooky Town residents were angered by the sight of 72 empty houses that were not being allocated to them.

Christine explains that it was partly out of frustration about their living conditions, and also to bring attention to the plight of evicted farm workers, that she and other members of the community decided to occupy the empty houses:
We held a meeting, and there we talked about the houses that are empty. Nobody is being given houses, and the houses are just standing there, empty. And then I told the people, “let’s start something. Let’s move into the houses.” So that morning, we went to the houses. At around eight in the morning. We were about sixteen people; three of us, all women, we went to push open the gate (to the houses).

The police came. I was inside the house, but I prayed: Lord, you know that I need a house. Please let the security just knock, don’t let them turn the door handle. And he just knocked, and I said, thank you Lord. But then, what happened – they (the security) went to the other houses, and they found people with a little baby, and the reason I left the house was because they grabbed that mother, and told her she must go to jail, and her little child just stood there, watching. So I said to the other woman, we can’t leave that woman alone, we must go and help that woman.

This led to a confrontation between Christine and the police. She was defiant, and prevented the other woman from being arrested. She explained:

They brought dogs, reinforcements. I did not worry about them. Why? I did not steal anything. I did not break anything. I only occupied a house. And so I told them (the police) “I am not leaving. Are you going to kill me? Because your minister taught you very well how to live with people, taught you to kill people, just like you killed the Marikana people. So now, do you want to kill me, just because I want a house?”

It all ended when Christine and the other occupants were evicted by the bailiff, and served with papers to appear before the High Court. Christine explains that during the hearings, Women on Farms Project supported her and the other defendants, and provided them with transport to get to court. Christine explains that she refused to go back to court. To her, and the other occupants, occupying the houses was about taking a stand, and getting the authorities to pay attention to their plight as evicted and homeless farm workers.

Yes, they must listen, because here people are being flooded in Spooky Town. Nobody cares about us. We even went to the provincial parliament. They said that they will move us, but where? They never came back. They said they would give us electricity, but still nothing. And the farmers, they do nothing, they just keep evicting the workers.

Houses for all

In the past local elections, held in August of this year, Christine was finally elected as a municipal councillor for Rawsonville. Christine is excited, but also a bit nervous about her new role as a councillor. But, she does not lack confidence, as she explains:

I do feel good. Because you see, that time, the women had too much respect for the man, they just expected that men would do things. But now, we as women must take up the issues; we as women, we can start a thing, and we can end it. We can!

It is her dream that the residents of Spooky Town will find decent work and housing, and these issues are what she will continue to address, both as resident of Spooky Town, and as ward councillor:

They (the previous council) did not provide our people with feedback. If there is employment opportunities, they would not think to tell our people about it. There was no awareness-raising. People must be informed about employment opportunities, and also at the municipality – give our people the work, not people coming from elsewhere. I also really want to see that our people can move into their own homes. Don’t move people from one shack to another shack! So, I will continue fighting with my people. I told them. I am not far away. I am right here. If you see something that isn’t right, and I haven’t noticed it, come to me; come through my gate, and come and tell me, then we can see how we can work together. We must stand together. We must work together.
Jenny Nkala, Klapmuts

I am Jenny Nkala. I was born on the farm Backsberg, and grew up there. My father is from the Eastern Cape, and my mother is from a farm, then called Tiervlei. Today it is known as Ravensmead.

Jenny has four siblings, of whom one brother is deceased. Her parents got divorced when she was very young, after which her father left for the Eastern Cape. Jenny’s mother raised the children single-handedly, until she later married again. Jenny spent the rest of her childhood on the farm Signal Hill, near Simondium. Jenny lost contact with her father over the years. She met the father of her children at the age of 15. At the time, she was working on the farm, Signal Hill, as a seasonal worker. They later married, and had two children.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

It was around 2001 when Jenny first heard about Women on Farms. I already had two kids. My daughter was five, and my son 10 years old. And one day, a woman with a white golf came to our farm (Backsberg). Her name was Rose, and she had another woman, Ida, with her. They came to explain to us what the organisation was about, and a lot of us women became involved. A week after we met them, we held our first meeting in the old school – then it was called Simonsvlei school.

At that first meeting, they talked about our rights on the farm as women. At the time, it was called the Vroue Regte Groepe. I became part of the Vroue Regte Groep, and I can remember clearly, it was in August, the first week of August, that I was invited to a workshop with women from other farms. I was the first woman on the farm that went away for a weekend on a workshop.

The workshop was about domestic violence. It was held in Villiersdorp. I took my daughter with me, she was always the one that went with (to the workshops) because my son was already 10, and big enough to stay with his dad. It was nice to go there, we stayed in a nice place – to get away a little, you know? It was nice to get away from home, but I did not really enjoy the weekend. You see, I was in an abusive marriage, and my husband, he had an extra-marital affair, and that same weekend that I went away – well earlier that week, I heard about it (the affair).

Some of the things he did, it was not nice – it was sad. I felt that, here I am going away, and this gives him the opportunity to do his things – wrong things. At that time, my son was 10 years old and he saw these things, yet he was too scared to talk, for he knew that if he told me, that it would cause trouble between his father and I.

At the workshop Jenny attended that weekend, and further follow-up workshops by WFP, she learned how to deal with the situation at home.

It helped me to handle the situation better. I became a strong woman, because I learned how to talk. I also learned how to deal with the situation. You see, I had to be there for my children.

Jenny went through a painful time in her marriage, following the arrest and imprisonment of her husband. He had been cheating on her with a schoolgirl. Her parents laid a charge of rape against him, and he was subsequently sent to jail. His imprisonment was hard on Jenny. She became a single parent, and also lost her home on the farm, as it was in her husband’s name, and not hers.

I had to leave the farm, and that is how I ended up in Klapmuts. My belongings were stored all over the place with family. I came to live here in Klapmuts with my cousin. I didn’t enjoy living there, because sometimes I got work, and other times, when I didn’t have work, they would abuse my kids. I felt like I was on my own. I had to work, pay rent, and I was the only one. When the work (seasonal) ended, I had to leave the house, because I couldn’t afford the rent.
Jenny kept moving from place to place, because, as a seasonal worker, she only had a temporary income. These were stressful years, as she was a single parent, and often at the mercy of family members. When her husband was released from prison, he was a changed man:

*Today, he is the most wonderful husband. You know, it takes hard work to make a marriage work. We talked things through, and forgave each other. And up until today, we don’t talk about the past any more. We are a healthy family, and he supports me an awful lot. I became very ill with time, and he has been my support throughout my illness.*

Jenny gained the courage to talk about her experiences with other women.

*It is my hope that my story will empower other women. I think there are women out there who are still being abused, and it is my hope that, if they listen to my story, it might bring about a change in their lives. I have spoken to many women in the community. I can motivate them, and I always use my story as an example.*

Jenny’s life changed for the better when she became employed by WFP as a general assistant. She worked for the organisation for four years, until she resigned due to health reasons. However, even if she is unable to work anymore, she continues to be involved in the Klapmuts community.

*I am at home, but it is like many others who say they are at home – they work! My daughter and son tells me that I keep running around (in the community), but this is what I want to do! I want to reach out to the Klapmuts community; every day I talk to someone. There are many women who come to my house with problems, and I will help them.*

Jenny contacts social workers to intervene in family situations, and also goes to the police station to follow up on reported crimes. Jenny feels that it is her responsibility to ensure that people’s problems are addressed. When I asked her what motivates her to be involved, and not turn a blind eye, she replied:

*We did not have a lot when I grew up. We were poor. I was raised barefoot. And I feel that, our children of today, they don’t need to grow up the way we did.*

And it is my feeling that it is really unnecessary that our children must experience hurt in this life. We have experienced enough hurt in our lives, and we don’t want our children to also experience this hurt.

To Jenny, the highlight of her years at WFP was when she was involved in the Vroue Regte Groepe. She said that during those early years, farmwomen were excited to learn about their rights, and to know what is going on in the world and attend the workshops. Jenny’s dream for the future is to see her children’s children, especially given that she is very ill. “I always tell the Lord: I am not ready to go yet. I have so much left to do; for my children, for my community.”
Lena is 36 and was raised on Sterkwater Farm, outside Ceres. Both her parents worked on this farm. Her father was a gardener, and her mother was a seasonal worker. Her childhood years were difficult. Her mother was abused by her father, which caused her to flee from home with her children. After a few years of living on the streets of Stellenbosch, her mother returned to Sterkwater, where she still lives.

Life on the farm was hard, and the owner was vicious:

*Those days, Willa (the owner) still beat the workers. It was during the apartheid years. Mamma-and them all suffered at his hands. They worked like slaves. The women worked with a ten-pound hammer, with axes and spades. Even us children suffered. It hurt a lot, because many times we didn’t have food to eat. We were so hungry, but no food.*

When Lena got married, she moved to the farm, De Eike, where her husband worked. However, only a year after they got married, her husband died. At the time, she was pregnant with their first child. Despite this tragic loss, the farmer ordered her off the farm, because he needed the house.

*At that time, I was pregnant with my son. I was so mistreated by that farmer, Jan Theron, because he decided that I must get off the farm. My husband’s uncle, Jannie, signed the eviction notice. They loaded my stuff on a tractor, and highly pregnant, I was kicked off that farm. And so I had to come back (to Sterkwater).*

When she returned to Sterkwater, the owner didn’t want to take her back. He told her that the only place he had for her, was in the hostel where the male contract workers lived. Lena refused, and against his will, she moved back in with her mother on the farm.

**Involvement with Women on Farms Project**

It was shortly after her return to Sterkwater, that Lena learned of Women on Farms Project. She was invited to a workshop at Boontjesrivier, and was at first hesitant. However, when she heard what the women talked about, she became interested:

*I felt a bit shy; I did not know my rights. And I didn’t talk to people. Nobody knew what I went through. I sat there, and I listened. And there I heard of many other women, who went through similar problems like mine. And it was then that I decided to stay.*

Although Lena was quiet before she joined WFP, knowing that she is not alone, but that there are other women who also went through the same troubles, changed her. Today she speaks openly and frankly about the hurt in her life. One of these painful experiences, was when she was sexually assaulted by a male worker on the farm six years ago.

*Although it is sad, I share it with others. I was sexually assaulted here on Sterkwater. And I took the case to court. We appeared before the court. That day, Sharon and Glynis (from WFP) came to support me. They were a pillar of strength.*

When she appeared in court, Lena wore her WFP T-shirt that says: “Ek besluit oor my lyf!” (“I decide over my body”). She says that the Magistrate didn’t even read the interdict, but rather, her T-shirt! The magistrate gave the offender a strong warning, and a suspended sentence. Lena feels that the support she received from WFP during this time helped her to report the case, and to face her attacker in court.
Land and Housing Programme

Since her involvement with WFP, Lena has struggled to find work.

I am not getting work, and I feel that the farmers are trying to belittle me... because this farmer (on Sterkwater) says that he won’t give me work, because I am from Women on Farms... Because see, WFP came to defend my mother and me here on this farm. But I am not worried, because I won’t let anyone kick me off this farm. He hasn’t given me an eviction notice, because he is scared of Women on Farms!

Lena explains that she is not afraid of the farmer, because, through WFP’s Land and Housing workshops, she learned how to handle the farmer. Today, she doesn’t back off, but speaks to the farmer on an equal basis:

Yes, because Carmen taught us. Don’t just talk back to the farmer. Listen to what he says. And don’t just say yes, or no. He threatened me all the time, and asked me: when are you going to f*** off my farm? And I told him simply, No. Don’t talk to me on the side of the road, we can discuss it in court. Then he said to me, yes, you are big and fat, go and find other work. And I told him, I don’t have to work, because I am a boer [farmer] just like you! He got so angry at me! He could not stand the fact that I called myself a boer [farmer]!

Highlight

After years of involvement in the WHEP programme, she became involved with the food gardens project. A highlight of her time at WFP is the two-year training she received in agro-ecology, from WFP in partnership with an organisation in Brazil. She started growing various vegetables and herbs in her garden where she applies what she learned.

We were with the Brazilians for two years. There they taught us how to catch seeds, and how to store seeds. How to monitor the soil... I know all of this, because they taught me. They taught us what is agro-ecology. How to work with, not against nature. And if the insects and animals return, don’t kill them. The pesticides they used caused these animals to flee, but if you practice AE, they will return to the soil.

Her garden is thriving. Ironically, her relationship with the farmer improved as a result of her food garden. She explained to him that her garden ensures that households on the farm get to eat balanced meals, and that the children often come to eat vegetables straight out of the garden! He is impressed with her crops, and has even asked the Department of Agriculture to donate a Jo-jo tank to her.

She prioritises the catching and storing of seeds for future harvests. She also shares these seeds with other families on the farm, and elsewhere. And, after years of struggling to find work, Lena is now able to gain an income from her crops. She sells the vegetables in the nearest town; but when she sees that a family is in need, she will simply share crops with them.

Community involvement

Lena has become an ardent fighter against farm evictions. Two experiences made a big impression on her first, as she attended Land and Housing workshops, she came to realise that her eviction from De Eike, was illegal. Secondly, she also learned through these workshops about South Africa’s history of land dispossession. These realisations spurred her on to fight against evictions, and to try to ensure that no women loses, or gets kicked out of, her house on a farm.

Carmen took us all the way from Jan Van Riebeeck, to now. And then I started getting very angry, because I did not know that our land was taken away from us. And one morning, when I raised my hand and told Carmen my story, she could tell me that I was unfairly dismissed and illegally evicted... and I didn’t even know that! But then, afterwards, I said to myself: I will not let another woman get evicted, or any other person. No one must go through what I went through. And now I am helping other farm workers.

In this past year, Lena has successfully defended two women, who were threatened with evictions. To help other women fend off evictions, brings her great joy and satisfaction:

Afterwards, if I look at what we achieved, I get this big sense of satisfaction. I went to help this woman on Vastrap. She worked on the farm for 10 years, and then the farmer wanted to kick her out... I told her no, if you were booked off sick by the doctor, then you can’t leave your house. Then you have security of tenure for the rest of your life.
And then I told her, if they take you to court or wherever, don’t sign any forms! The woman is still in her house.

Lena has been through many challenges in her life, but does not allow them to stop her fighting for her community. She is one of the WFP members who works hard on the ground to defend farm workers’ rights. She is frustrated by the lack of service delivery from the various spheres of government, and the long time it takes for labour disputes to be resolved at the labour court. To bring about change, requires two things for her: one, that land distribution must be accelerated, and that women must continue to stand up in the protection of and fighting for the realisation of their rights.

Since 1913, the same 70% still owns land. After twenty years, we still do not have land. My desire is that our land must be returned to us. Because, we are still struggling. You must eat in such a way that your children get enough to eat. You can’t eat, your children must. And this impacts on our health, because we as farm workers are not eating healthy meals. But, if there is land, then things can go better. And if the evictions stop, then things will also go better on farms. And if the farmers stop abusing our workers, then things will also improve on farms.

And I want to go to the Constitutional Court, I want to go and tell them, where were you, when my stuff was loaded onto a truck, and taken to another farm. Where were you? You were not there for me as a woman. We are now tired, and we had enough. Today, I can only say to the women, that they must stand up, and defend their rights. Then more things can change. Now we are saying one woman, one hectare... I am telling you, they must make it one woman, one hectare, with a house!

And with a laugh, she says:

When they give me back my land, there must be a house on that land! And I said that I want a nice upstairs house, because I want to be able to see Women on Farms Project from afar, whenever they come to our farm!
Aunty Magda is 65, and was born on Asara farm, just outside Stellenbosch. Both her parents worked and lived on this farm. Today, after years of working in Stellenbosch, Aunty Magda once again lives on Asara, with her husband, and children.

Aunty Magda had to leave school in Grade 2, as she had to help her mother, who worked on the farm, take care of her brother and sister. Then, at 16, she also started working on the farm. She planted vegetables, plucked tobacco, and cut grapes. In fact, she says that she knows everything related to a farm, as a result of the variety of tasks she had to perform. Later on, through her cousin, she found work in the town of Stellenbosch, where, to her surprise, she was hired as a cook. It surprised her, because she never had formal training, but managed to learn it quickly:

Her husband was also born and raised on Asara. Aunty Magda married him late in life, and following their marriage, returned to the farm, where they raised their children.

**Involvement with Women on Farms Project**

Aunty Magda lived, but did not work on the farm. Instead, she travelled 10 kilometres to Stellenbosch where she worked. However, her husband had worked on Asara his whole life, and it was when a dispute arose between her husband and the owner, that she made contact with decided to find help for him. One of her cousin’s daughters belonged to Women on Farms, and Aunty Magda always heard from her about the organisation, and its work. As such, when her husband had problems with the farmer, Aunt Magda decided to go and ask for help at WFP.

With the intervention of WFP, the problem was resolved in favour of Aunt Magda’s husband. This made a great impression on Aunt Magda.

*And that is why I will always support Women on Farms. And that is how I became part of Women on Farms. That’s why, when they had workshops, I always supported attended. And because of Women on Farms, I am that strong person that I am today. A person who can’t read or write, but who can fight back! And I have a reason for this because it is at Women on Farms that I learnt to fight back! There I learnt about the rights of a woman. And that a woman does not have to stand back, or be walked over. She has a right to fight back. This made a big change in my life, and I am thankful for joining Women on Farms."

**Highlights**

Aunty Magda has green fingers, and in her front garden grow the most exquisite flowers, while her back garden is filled with a variety of vegetables. When Aunty Magda discovered the food gardens project at WFP, she immediately joined it.

*See, I have various flowers. I really love flowers. I make flower arrangements. When Women on Farms came here, I had my flowers, but now I also have vegetables in my back garden.*

With her love for gardening, it was an absolute highlight for Aunty Magda when, as part of WFP training, she went to Kwa-Zulu Natal, to learn how other women do food gardening.

*With Women on Farms, I went to Kwa-Zulu Natal. I went there to go and look at the gardens. It was really amazing. See, there’s not a lot of water there, but they manage to grow... beetroot that are just this big! It was beautiful. When I came back (from KZN), WFP helped me get that hectare of land, and now I am planting big!* 

Aunty Magda is referring to a hectare of land, outside Lynedoch, where she, along with a few other women, is doing small-scale farming where they farm with beans, carrots, potatoes and spinach. They sell their harvests, and through this, Aunty Magda, who no longer works, gets a much-needed income to sustain her household.
Magrieta Prins, De Doorns

Aunty Magrieta Prins, also fondly known as Aunty Ding, is 53 and lives in the town of De Doorns. For many years, she has worked on farms in and around De Doorns as a seasonal worker, a domestic worker, and also, for some time, as the manager of a crèche on one of the farms.

Aunty Ding was born in Murraysburg, in the Northern Cape. At a young age, her parents moved to the Hex River valley, and on this farm she and her 15 siblings were raised. She recalls her childhood as difficult, but also happy because of her loving mother. Her father, however, drank a lot, and this caused many problems in the household. When talking about this abuse, Aunty Ding attributes the drinking to the effects of the tot-system, which resulted in farmers purposefully leading their workforce into alcohol-dependency:

They (the workers) used to get that plaasmossie, mornings and evenings. They had this cup, and then my father had to take the cup with him to work in the mornings, and then at night, he would return with that cup (filled with wine from the farmer). And that was that. We (the children) did not understand what was happening. We thought things had to be like that. In those days, you see, the farmer, you can say that he managed our lives (as farm workers).

But Aunty Ding also remembers that the very same farmer, who provided alcohol to his workers, also stepped in when the abuse her mother endured became too much.

His wife, she was almost like a second mother to me. There were times when my father used to abuse my mother, that we would run to her house.

And then he (the farmer) would go out of his way. My mother should have been dead many times, as a result of the beatings my father gave her, but that farmer, he would one, two, three, rush my mother to the hospital, very fast. He would see to it that she gets to the doctor or the hospital. He saved her life many times.

Aunty Ding had to leave school after completing Standard Five, as her mother needed help in raising her many children. Their father left them time and again, leaving her mother to take care of the children alone. Aunty Ding was very disappointed, because she enjoyed school, but she had no choice, her mother needed her help. However, after a few years, at the age of 14, Aunty Ding ran away from home, and ended up in Cape Town, where, not knowing anyone, she began to make a life for herself.

Life as a farm worker

After years of living in Cape Town, some of these years spent on the streets, or as a domestic worker, Aunty Ding returned to De Doorns and was reunited with her family. She gave birth to her first child and, as a single parent, found work on one of the farms outside the town. She first worked as a domestic worker in the farmer’s house. When the farmer relocated, Aunty Ding found work as a seasonal worker on another farm, and worked herself up to become a supervisor. For some time, Aunty Ding also managed a crèche for farm worker’s children.

I worked on that farm for 23 years. It was not nice. Because one had to work, work, work. That is all we knew. Life on the farm was very, very boring. Later I became a shop steward for the Union, and that is where I started getting involved (in labour issues). See, that time, the farmers treated us as workers very badly.

Aunty Ding played a prominent role during the farm worker protests that erupted in the De Doorns area in 2012. Her union, of which she was a shop steward, was one of the trade unions that called for the strike to take place.

The farmers were treating us badly. They paid the workers different wages. Contract workers got R90 a day, whereas we only got R69 a day. That is why the strike actually started, because of this unfairness. We all do the same work, but get paid different wages. During the
strike, we closed the N1! But it makes one angry, because the government does not pay attention to us. And there is a lot of money in this valley. The farmers are rich, but they don’t want to pay the workers!

It was also during the strike that she got to know the Women on Farms Project. Her sister had invited her to one of the WFP meetings organised during the strike.

I immediately fell in love with Women on Farms. When I got there, I discovered something valuable, and decided to check it out. And so I became interested. We then formed a coalition, that coordinated the strike. We used to meet regularly, with the representatives from the other regions. We as women were really leading that strike. Most of us who went on strike were women. After the strike, we tried to work, but we were fired. The farmer said that we were the biggest ‘politickers’.

Following the strike, Aunty Ding stopped working on the farm. Farmers no longer wanted to employ her, because they considered her a troublemaker. Her health also started to deteriorate, and she decided to leave farm work. Since then, she has become active in the land and housing programme of the Women on Farms Project. She is part of the labour committee, along with four other women, also members of the Women on Farms Project. Their role is to educate workers about their labour rights, and to intervene in labour disputes on the worker’s behalf:

You see, I am now no longer a shop steward, I am a defender of women! See, if anything happens on the farm; there might be a woman who comes to us in need of help. Then we will go to the farmer, and we will go and investigate the matter. Our work is to see to it that women keep their jobs, that is what we do. We work all over the Hex River Valley. We are just women (no men). Women on Farms trained us how to handle labour disputes.

A highlight for Aunty Ding was when she attended the Training for Transformation course, held at the Grail Centre in Kleinmond. Also, she feels that through WFP, she went on a journey of self-discovery that revealed her courage and ability to contribute to change:

WFP led me on a spiritual journey of self-discovery. The Tft (Training for Transformation) training at Kleinmond helped me to discover my inner strength that I never knew I had. Our engagements at workshops and marches helped to increase the power within. It gave me courage and boldness to speak out against what is wrong. The first time we marched to parliament was an unbelievable experience. It showed me that as women we have the power to confront the authorities and change our circumstances. I can now express myself in a clear and informed way. WFP created opportunities to travel to other places, meet other women and learn from one another. I never thought that I would one day experience what I’ve experienced through WFP.

Involvement in the community

Aunty Ding has also turned into an avid gardener. Since becoming part of the Women on Farms Project, she was introduced to farming methods and planting vegetables to promote food security and healthy nutrition. As a result of this training, she has started a thriving vegetable garden, and its proceeds assists her in feeding her family. The WFP training also created a passion for organic gardening, and Aunty Ding only plants organic seeds in her vegetable garden.

Aunty Ding has a big heart. Although she no longer works on the farm, she continues to play an active role in her community. She is a safety parent, and also a foster parent to three kids. She works closely with the local social services and police. As a safety parent, she is on standby to provide immediate support and protection to children who have been sexually abused.
Miena Gouws, Skanskop, Northern Cape

Miena was born in 1971 in Khôms in the Northern Cape, the fourth of six children. She grew up and went to school until Grade 7 when she fell pregnant. After they had their second child, they decided to get married in May 1994. After moving from farm to farm, she and her husband both found work on the same farm, and today they are both supervisors.

Involvement in Women on Farms Project

While working one day I heard the women talking about someone called Lenie Coetzee from the organisation Women on Farms. One of my friends invited me to a workshop. I didn’t know what to expect, but I went to listen what it was about. There aren’t many organisations that work with farm workers.

I learned so many things at that workshop that I decided I will attend all the workshops in the future. I was hungry for more information. I learned about my rights, what are the labour laws. I also learned about violence against women, and that was close to my heart. We didn’t know about these things.

You see, I was a victim of violence against women. I was in such a marriage. All those years, I was just crying and ashamed, never speaking about it. I just thought that’s the way my life is supposed to be. I didn’t know I had rights as a wife and woman.

Through Women on Farms, I learned that I do have rights. I also became strong, because the organisation builds you up. I decided to put my foot down with my husband, and stop the abuse.

I said enough is enough. He saw my strength and knew about Women on Farms, and he changed his behaviour. Now, I am proud about what I went through, because I’m now an example to other women. You can also do it.

I saw the changes in other women’s lives as well. The women on Kanoneiland, and others. They were also being hit by their husbands. I said to them, come to Women on Farms and learn. After some time, I saw it myself, their husbands stopped beating them because they are also strong women now.

Highlights

In 2014, Lenie entered me into the “Women farm worker of the year” competition in Kuruman and I received two certificates, a big photograph of myself, as well as the Female Entrepreneur award in 2015. I was so proud and so happy that Lenie saw that in me. But it was through Women on Farms that am so strong.

My other highlight is when I started growing my own food garden. You see, when we celebrated World Food Day at Women on Farms, I was jealous when I saw the other women’s beautiful gardens. I started attending the food garden workshops to learn how to grow vegetables.

Today, I am so proud of my garden. I have lovely vegetables. Before, we didn’t always have vegetables in the house. Now, there is always something in the garden that I can prepare for the children. I was so proud when my vegetables were part of the 2015 World Food day celebrations of WFP.

I am so very proud of the organisation, Women on Farms, because today I have a lot of information. I know my rights as a woman, working on a farm as well as living on a farm. I am very proud of Lenie Coetzee because she taught us a lot about growing a garden. Today I am a very strong woman who can talk to other women and share my experiences with them.
Jeanette, or Nettie as she is known to her family, is 25-years-old. She lives in Klapmuts, with her mother and eight-month-old baby. Nettie was born in 1990, and is the third of four children. She grew up in various places until her family received a municipal house in Klapmuts when she was in her early teens.

Nettie grew up with her grandmother, and during holidays she visited the family on the farm. She grew up in a big household, as her parents lived with her grandmother and her other aunts. From a young age, Nettie accompanied her mother to WFP meetings, and later, she also joined the youth programme:

I learned about Women on Farms at a very young age. I was only 13-years-old when I became involved. Everything was new to me because I was not one who liked to talk. My best friend used to take me along to the youth meeting. There I used to sit and wonder: What are they talking about women’s rights? But that evening, when we went to bed, I asked my friend: “Tassa, what are these women’s rights they are talking about?” And then she told me that women have rights, the right to be heard, and also a right where she can tell a man, this is as far as it goes, you know. So she explained to me what my rights are. And then I also began to understand what women’s rights are.

Once Nettie understood what the Youth Programme was about, she became involved as a member. There she participated in many activities:

We learned how to become a facilitator, because we always wanted to know what it is like to stand there in front of people – would you shiver, or would you be on your nerves, you know? And then they also taught us, that, if you have a boyfriend, what you must do, and what you must use, like, not to sleep together without a condom, yes.

Nettie feels that these workshops provided her and other youth from farms with skills and emotional support as teenagers. They learned how to deal with bad habits, and how to make positive choices in their lives. She recalls one evening when one of the youth members became very emotional, and how the other youth members rallied to support her. She was impressed with how the facilitators handled the situation; they invited the participant to talk to them in private, and did not force her to talk where she was not comfortable:

And there I saw how privacy also mattered, and having people that you can trust, because as teenagers we dealt with many things. Young girls who are being raped by their own fathers, or their own boyfriends, but then they still live in that relationship, because they are being told that they do not deserve any better.

They (the youth) received support (from WFP) during our workshops. We used to make time for a silent creative space, we used to cry in that space, or then there would come a time in the space where someone would tell a joke. And we would take it slow; take breaks, and come back to listen to others, and that was a space where we could just talk. And what we discussed stayed with us as young girls, and I think, through this we got a lot of support – for me, it was important to have someone to talk to.

When we held these creative spaces, where everyone could talk, and where you could tell your story (in confidence), it was always like this. We sat with you, we gave you love, and we gave our support. From the youth programme, I then became involved in the adult programmes. I became involved with the Health Programme, also with the Labour Programme.

The skills Nettie acquired during these trainings influenced her in many ways:

Till today if my friends feel troubled, then I will always tell them, talk to me, because I can assure you that, after you talked to me, you will feel relieved. It might not solve the problem, but you will feel relief. That is how WFP taught me; I learnt how to communicate with other people.
Before, I was not one who liked talking to other people. I actually learned everything there: how to talk, how to handle situations, and many more things. If I see people around me have a problem, like with evictions or something like that, I will always phone Women on Farms, and when they come, then I always go with them (to the person with the problem).

When she left school, she went in search of work on the farm, and found work at Simondium, on a farm owned by Mr Du Toit. There she picked plums and pears, and earned R75 a day. Work on the farm did not come easy to Nettie, but she had no real choice:

Yes, it was nice (on the farm), but we faced a lot of challenges. It was new to me, and the first time I had to work. The sun burnt us, and we had to work very hard, and we were always outside. It was like life and death it was so hot there. After lunch, one felt tired and not in the mood to continue work. You just want to go home, but they pressured me because I had to work, for we were the only breadwinners in the family.

Work on the farm was tough, and the wages were low. However, Nettie continued to work on farms from the age of 17 until last year, when she fell pregnant with her first child. Nettie worked as a seasonal worker on various farms in and around Klapmuts. She also worked in a restaurant for a short while, and enjoyed the work there. Since the birth of her son, Nettie has been at home, taking care of him. Her plans for the future include finding work again, and to remain involved with WFP. For Nettie, farm work is not her ideal job, but as she says, it is better than not having any work at all.

My brain is telling me that I must just get a job. But I also want to remain involved with Women on Farms because, how can I put it – what you learn there, they teach you so much, and you gain knowledge of so many things. They make me feel positive about the future.

**Highlights**

One of Nettie’s favourite experiences was when she and other youth members performed a drama to other youth and women on farms. The drama was also performed during the 16 days of Activism. The drama portrayed the challenges of a young girl who became HIV-positive after having unprotected sex, as well as the challenges of peer pressure. It also demonstrated how information and knowledge about your rights can make a difference in a young girl’s life. Nettie felt that this drama was an important way of creating awareness about the situation faced by young girls and the importance of knowing your rights.

This play was a big thing for the young girls and the older women. We tried to tell them “my child is your child, and your child is my child,” and that we must fight violence 365 days of the year; every day of the year we must fight against it. There are still many people who do not know what their rights are, and who still live in abusive relationships, and I know of many women who do not have any other place to go, and then they end up with a lot of children – and then where do they go? How will their children eat if they leave the marriage? A lot of the women cried during this performance. We think that this (abuse) does not happen anymore, but it still happens every day.

Nettie’s involvement in the youth programme and other WFP activities, in her own words, made a big difference in her life:

It made such a big difference to me, because I was that type of person that would sit still and watch how a man beats a woman. But today he will not do that in front of me again! Because now I know what to do. I break that fight up, because what he is doing is wrong, and I will tell him so. I will also call the police to have him arrested because you don’t beat a woman!

My involvement brought me to a whole new place. Where I am today, the silence within me is broken. I can give other women advice, something I could never do before.
Alida Appollis, Voorsorg Farm, Rawsonville

Alida is 54-years-old, and lives and works on the farm Voorsorg, located on the outskirts of Rawsonville. She has lived on this farm for twenty years.

Alida was born in Somerset-West, on the farm Lourensford, where her parents lived and worked. At a very young age, she moved with her parents to Tulbagh, where she grew up, and went to school. After completing Standard 7, Alida left school to help her mother with the household. At a young age, Alida also worked on the farm on a seasonal basis when work was available.

Alida got married in 1981, and had two children: a boy and a girl. After 15 years of marriage, during which she was subjected to abuse, Alida decided to leave her husband. Her divorce was finalised in 1996. Following her divorce, Alida became a single parent, raising her two children alone. She remained living and working on the farm Voorsorg.

Life on the farm

Alida is employed as a general worker on the farm. She lives alone in a house on the farm; both her children also live on the farm, but on their own. For Alida, life on the farm is better than living in a town:

*The farm life is ok. It is cheaper on the farm. You don’t pay that much as you would in town, for rent and electricity. It is also peaceful on the farm, the people here are peaceful.*

Life on Voorsorg is not that bad for Alida. She explains that the workers are being paid above the minimum wage, and that they are the only farm in the area where workers get paid more. The farmer also seeks to adhere to the various ethical codes, as they supply grapes to export wine producers. As such, workers have access to training, and Alida also receives no resistance from the owners if she wants to attend Women on Farms events or trainings.

*See, the farmer gives permission that I go on trainings, and does not deduct money from my wages if I go for training. And I call him by his name, I don’t call him Baas.*

*On the one hand they (the farmers) are good, but on the other hand, they can also be difficult. They don’t really care for the children. The children have to walk (to school). The department stopped the school bus, and now our children must walk. We asked him for transport, but he said, it is not his kids, he already did what he had to do for his kids. And the school is far away from here. Nobody has been hurt yet, but just last week a child (from another farm) got hit by a car, when he wanted to cross the big road. Now, if it rains, then we have to keep our kids at home. We also worry when it is harvest time, because then the lorries and tractors drive around.*

Life appears to be comparatively better for the workers on Voorsorg compared to other farms in the area, yet still there are certain issues that the workers have to contend with on the farm. The houses leak during winter, and need a new coat of paint. Health issues arise from the leaky houses, and Alida feels that this can be prevented if the houses are regularly maintained.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

Talking to Alida, one realises that she is passionate about health and access to healthcare. Alida became involved with Women on Farms Project in 2007, but before that she was trained as a Health Officer. Through her friend, she was invited to a food gardens training hosted by the Women on Farms Project. Although she appreciates the skills she learned at the workshop, she cannot apply it on her farm, as there is no land available for a garden. In her own yard, there is a big tree that uses all the water supply, making it difficult for plants and vegetables to grow there. Alida has asked the farmer to remove the tree, but he says it will cost too much money.
However, when Alida discovered the WFP Health Programme, she felt that she found what she was looking for.

*Health, that is actually my thing. Perhaps it is because I wanted to become a doctor, but there was never money for that. When someone (on the farm) is sick, they come and call me. If the kids have a fever, then I can sponge them. But if I see that it is serious, I will call the ambulance.*

Alida received first-aid training from WFP, and especially appreciated the training she received to deliver babies. However, she has not yet delivered a baby, and this remains one of her biggest dreams! Providing this assistance to her community is not seen as an effort by Alida, but seems to come naturally to her:

To have a trained health worker on the farm is a real benefit to the community of Voorsorg. The closest town, Rawsonville, is five kilometres away, and farm workers often have to walk to town to see the doctor. This is because there is no transport available from the farm, and also because there is no ambulance service in Rawsonville, only in Worcester, a bigger town about 15 kilometres away from the farm. However, Alida has also formed a relationship with the local police station, and often when there is an immediate need, she calls them to come and assist someone from the farm with transport to town, in case of an emergency.

For Alida, health rights are not isolated rights, but links up with other rights, such as labour and women’s rights.

*Health covers almost everything; many times we learn about our labour rights and other rights at the Health workshops. And now I know at least what my rights are on the farm. And when I go (to workshops), I bring the pamphlets back home that tells us about our rights. The other day I asked them (WFP) for a copy of the ESTA law.*

*ESTA actually protects the farm worker. Here, on this farm, there has not been any evictions. The retired people still live here. The owners wanted one man out of the house, but I told him: stay where you are. They (the owners) wanted to buy him a bungalow, and then put it in Wolseley. We went to the municipality, and they said that either he must stay on the farm, or the farmer must buy him a house in town. I told him don’t (move out of his house), because he had worked on the farm for more than ten years, and he retired when he turned 60. He was also sickly. So, he has the right to remain here.*

Alida was able to persuade the man to stay on the farm, and also made sure that he understood the information about his retirement policy. The man still lives on the farm today.

**Involvement in the community**

Alida plays an active role in the small community on the farm. The farm community often relies on Alida in times of medical emergencies. She also arranges various activities for the women and youth on the farm. Life on the farm can be very isolated, and often the women and youth on the farm do not have many opportunities for relaxation, or access to information. Alida raises funds for, arranges and hosts various awareness events for the small farmworker community on the farm. For women’s Day this year, Alida invited a well-known local radio presenter to come and talk to the women on the farm. Alida explains why she invited this woman to speak to the women on the farm:

*We invited speakers. Fiona Adams from Radio Vallei, she has a beautiful story, and she told it to the women. When I asked her to come, she was willing. Her story is an inspiration for other women, about abuse; it is an inspiration for women who are caught up in abuse. But she managed to survive it. I want to arrange a similar event for 16 Days of Activism.*

It is clear that Alida enjoys bringing women and youth together, and to educate them about their rights. When asked to talk about this passion, she replied:

*For me, it is nice to be involved with the community. I don’t know (where it comes from), it is just who I am. I also learned from Women on Farms how to arrange things. They taught me a lot. And I am not doing it for any reward. It is really voluntary. I feel that we need to give each other appreciation. Women are not always appreciated for what they do, and for who they are.*
Maya Barley, De Doorns

Maria, or Maya as she is known to her friends, was born on the farm, De Hoop in the Bo-Vallei, in 1972. Bo-Vallei is located in the Hex River Valley. When she was a young girl, her mother left her father and moved Maya and her four siblings to a location in De Doorns. Maya was raised by her grandmother, as her mother had to work on a farm, where she could not take her children with her.

As a young woman, Maya fell pregnant and went to live with her boyfriend's parents. His parents worked and lived on a farm called The Pines. After her daughter's birth, Maya also found work on this farm. After a short while, she was able to get a house on the farm, after which her mother and siblings joined her there. After working on The Pines for a couple of years, Maya fell pregnant again, and had to leave the house on The Pines. As a result, Maya and her mother moved to the location in De Doorns. Today, she still shares a home with her mother and youngest son in De Doorns.

Maya has worked on farms in the De Doorns area for over 25 years. She is not a permanent worker, but works on various farms as what she cynically calls a “permanent casual worker”. As a result, she has worked on various farms in the Valley, and this has enabled her to see how circumstances differ from farm to farm:

I can say that not much has changed on a farm. Actually, it is getting more strict on farms. The salary is better, but circumstances have become worse; it is only the salary that improved, after the strike we had here. But now there are no benefits, everything was taken away from our people.

Maya is referring to the 2012 farm worker strike, where workers from De Doorns came together to demand an increase to the minimum wage for farm workers, as many farmers still paid workers less than R80 per day. This strike was supported by workers from other farming areas in the Western Cape, and subsequently led to a 52% increase in the minimum wage for farm workers across South Africa.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

It was during the farm worker strikes that Maya became involved with the Women on Farms Project. Before the strikes, Maya had been involved in community structures and political activism. She was also a member of a trade union, and as such was in the thick of things during the strike. Through this activism, she met women from other farms in the Valley, and it was one of these women, Aunty Bettie, who introduced her to the organisation during a crucial time in the farm worker strikes:

During the strike, things were crazy. Aunty Bettie grabbed me, and said “come with!” That specific day, it was on a Wednesday, I can remember clearly, (Aunty Bettie said) “Maya, you must come with, because last night a woman was caught (arrested); a woman with a child, and the child has also been locked up since last night! Ida is also coming, from Women on Farms. You must come with!” And so I went with her, and that is where it started.

Talking to Maya about the strike, it becomes apparent that women workers played a crucial part in the planning, coordination and negotiations that were part of the strike:

We had coalition meetings for the strike. Committees from the various areas came together. From as far as Citrusdal, Robertson, Ashton, Klapmuts, Villiersdorp. There were mostly women on these committees, and Women on Farms had the most women. Women played an important role during the strike. If you could only see the masses of workers (at the strike); we were more than 12 000, and most of us were women.

Maya and some of the other women from De Doorns also addressed the media, giving a perspective on how women were experiencing working conditions on farms. The strike proved to be a victory for the farm workers. But farmers were unhappy with the increased daily wage, and Maya says that following the strike, many of workers’ benefits were taken away:
In the past we had ‘doctor’, we had ‘chemist’. Workers could get transport if they had to go to all pay, or to the doctor. EVERYTHING was taken away. There is no transport – emergencies, you have to see for yourself. Whereas in the past, well, today, you start work at seven thirty, half past five you clock out. The whole day you are on your feet.

It is because of the continued challenges farm workers experience on farms that Maya continues to fight for farm worker labour rights in the Valley. Following the strike, Maya started attending labour rights workshops, hosted by the Women on Farms Project. Along with other women in De Doorns, they formed a Labour Rights Forum.

See, Women on Farms has many departments: health, labour, the gardens, the youth, land and housing. I am with labour. De Doorns is completely labour! We do recruit workers for health, but labour is our thing.

Maya explains that the Labour Rights Forum, of which she is a member, assists workers on various farms with labour-related issues. Furthermore, they also work on various farms to inform workers of their labour rights, and to recruit them to become part of their activities as well as those of the Women on Farms Project.

On the farm where Maya currently works, the farmer knows of Maya’s activism:

The management knows about my involvement. He knows where he stands with me. I wear a T-shirt every day (with logos about women’s rights), so he can see! We work with farm workers – women farm workers. I stipulate it to him, point by point. He told me the other day, “Maya, a new manager is coming. Please don’t give him a hard time!” I said, “no, he must just treat us right, and then everything will be fine.”

For Maya, labour rights for farm workers are not an unreasonable thing, but about doing the right thing.

We are not being unreasonable, but where something is wrong, we can’t say that it is right.

Workers often contact their Labour Rights Forum in cases of labour disputes. Maya has learned how to negotiate with farmers and managers, through training she received from the Women on Farms Project, the department of labour, and the CCMA.

It is important to Maya that women farm workers know about their rights, as there are still cases of intimidation and limitations to freedom of association on some farms in the Valley. As such, she makes work of it to go to farms to talk to women and recruit them to meetings hosted by the Women on Farms Project.

On each farm, I tell them about women on farms. And then, those people, we tell them “now go to your closest farm, and tell the women there about Women on Farms. Bring a friend with to a meeting,” and in this way we are managing to make women aware of their rights.
Martha Matroos, Brakbos Eiland, Northern Cape

Martha is 45-years-old and lives on a small farm in the Keimoes area of the Northern Cape. Her parents separated when she was very young, and her mother raised her eight children on her own. The four older children moved away to earn a living, and her mother worked hard to take care of the remaining four children.

If I think about it today, I become very emotional. It was hard to survive. My mother had to pay our school fees, monies for athletic activities as well as school bazaars. I was the youngest and could never understand when my mother told us that she does not have money. I always cried. I realised afterwards that crying does not help and I had to go to school the next day with those sad feelings.

Martha remembers that their entire lives revolved around the farm. They did not even leave the farm to go shopping, as the farmer had a shop on the farm.

At that time, the farmer had a little shop on the farm and my mother bought everything from that shop. That meant that her money stayed on the farm, she did not go to town for shopping like other women. When I’m reminiscing how my mother had to suffer, my heart breaks into pieces. For me that was slavery and my mother was a slave. I was denied of my childhood because I had to work on a farm just to get a pair of shoes for the church.

Despite her mother’s financial struggles, she still took in other children whose parents were struggling or deceased, to live with them. Martha remembers that there was much love in the home, and her mother cared for all of them to the best of her ability. She worked as a domestic worker for the farmer. She worked long hours, getting home late at night when Martha and the other children were already in bed.

When I think back to those years, I remember when my mother got small loose pieces of cloth from the farmer, my aunt made us some skirts out of it…we were the happiest girls alive because we felt like we had new clothes. When I got older, I realised that we don’t have the material stuff like others. Since then, I never cared about material things. We did not have the furniture that others had, it did not matter to me because we had love.

When Martha went to high school, her mother asked her father to contribute to Martha’s schooling expenses because she was struggling. Martha says:

It was the 1980s, but my father only gave my mother R10.00 per month. It was very little because I needed a lot. I was forced to drop out of school in 1986. Myself and my sister had to leave school to go and work. The only work I could find, was on the farms. That’s why I became a farm worker, because of poverty.

In 1998, Martha married and had four children; two of them have passed away. She then fostered seven other children because she loves children. She is happily married and says her home is full of love.
Involvement with Women on Farms Project

Martha recalls her first contact with WFP in 2009.

I met Lenie Coetzee who invited me to the Women’s Day event. I immediately said “Yes” because I thought maybe this woman saw something within me. From that day, I have been with Women on Farms. From that day, I received new information that was important for me and my community.

I learned about my rights as a woman and as a farm worker. All this was new to us. We took that information and shared it with other women. So, our numbers also increased. WFP has really changed me, as a person.

I had very little confidence and never spoke in front of people and hated parties. By attending the WFP workshops, I learned so many things and became more confident. Today, I can speak in front of different people. Thanks God, today I am a strong woman because of an organisation called Women on Farms. I know my rights and I share it with my fellow farm workers. Women on Farms made a difference in my life as well as in other people’s lives. Nobody, like in nobody, will ever have the opportunity to oppress me ever again. Today I can proudly stand in front of a crowd and speak from my heart.
Aunty Elsabe was born on a farm outside Caledon. In her early life, she grew up on various farms outside Cape Town, until her family settled down in Kraaifontein.

Aunty Elsabe first worked in a factory in Cape Town. There she met her husband, who was also born and raised on a farm, outside Piketberg. After their marriage, her husband found work on the farm Klein Wolmerans, and they moved there with their family. Following the move, Aunty Elsabe also started working on the farm as a seasonal worker.

Life on the farm

Life on the farm was an adjustment for Aunty Elsabe, who spent most of her early years in Kraaifontein. She was struck by the conditions on the farm, especially how the farmer and the male workers treated the women farm workers:

The farm was called Klein Wolmerans. I could not take the drinking on the farm. I myself do not drink. The women often came to work with blue eyes, the way the men were fighting with them, and with each other.

The farmer on that farm, he also used to hit the women. See, if you were not at work on a Monday morning, he would go and look for you, and then he would hit you, really hard. And that specific morning, I told the women: “Women, if we don’t stand together, then this white man will treat us like pigs!” The women asked me “Aunty Elsabe, how will we do it, because this farmer, he already beat a man to death, and got away with it!”

At that time, Aunty Elsabe encouraged the women to stop drinking, and held daily prayer meetings to support each other. The women stopped drinking, and according to Aunty Elsabe, the farmer did not get another chance to hit the women.

After a few years, Aunty Elsabe’s husband found another job on a farm outside Paarl. There, life was also made difficult by a farmer who not only expected the children on the farm to work, but also discouraged them from attending school in town. But for Aunty Elsabe, her children’s education was a priority.

Involvement with the Women on Farms Project

It was during the time that she lived on this farm that Aunty Elsabe became involved with WFP. She started attending the workshops with other women from her farm.

I am so thankful for the workshops I attended at Women on Farms. There I learned many things about how to be of help within my community, and to not be scared to talk. Let the women talk! I was once at a workshop in Kleinmond with Women on Farms. I will never forget it. We learned about a tree. See, it has a main root and then it has these side roots, yes? That main root, it is the one that sucks all the water from the ground, so as to give the other roots water, so that the tree can grow and get fruit. And I listened carefully, and thought to myself: Women on Farms is that main root, and I am one of those side roots, that get water from it, that helps me to grow, and that helps me to help the tree to grow. And that day I decided, and I said to the Lord: Lord, now you must strengthen me, so that I can be a strong woman. And I became a strong woman!

The skills and knowledge Aunty Elsabe gained from the WFP workshops enabled her to not only identify but also address the problems the women and children were experiencing on her farm.
The farmer expected the children of the workers to also work on the farm, instead of going to school. At the WFP workshops, Aunty Elsabe learned about the minimum age for workers, and she shared this information with the other workers.

One morning, my children were getting ready for school. That morning I said to the Lord, Lord, I don’t want my children to one day have the life that I have. I can read, I can write, but I am not in the position to find a better job for myself, or my husband. And I decided right there, that my children would get a better education. But on that very same morning, the boer was so rude to those children of mine. He swore at them, and I stood still. And the next week, the kids had to help with fencing the vineyard, and some people thought that the kids were too slow for the other workers. And he (the farmer) came that morning, and insulted and swore at us.

So I went to him, and I said: “Bennie? My heart is aching,” “Why?” he asked me. I told him, “Bennie, I don’t like the way you are talking to our people; it is not right,” I told him. And then, all the women came out of the vineyard, and I told them: “let’s go, let’s not bother talking to Bennie.” So we took our lunch bags, and walked away from the work. And as we walked away, he continued swearing at us; “go to hell!” he said.

Aunty Elsabe explains that she encouraged the other women workers to stage a walk-out, in order to show the farmer that they were not happy with the treatment they and their children were receiving. Aunty Elsabe says that what gave them courage to stage the walk-out, was knowing that they could call on WFP for support:

That afternoon, Bennie called me at home. “Aunty, please come back to work. I had problems at home.” And then I explained to him over the phone: “Bennie, if you have problems at home, never ever take it out on your workers.” I told him, “do you know that if I take this matter further with the organisation I belong to, you don’t want to know what will happen to you! You won’t get away with this!” But he begged me, and we decided to go back to work the next day. When I arrived there that morning, he took my hand, and said: “Aunty Elsabe, I don’t know if I must call you Elsabe or Aunty, but you are a person that does not swear at people. You don’t shout at people. You are straight-forward and respectable.” And I told him, “Bennie, that is how I was raised. I won’t shout or swear at you, but you must NEVER again speak to us like that!” And from that morning on, we understood each other.

Aunty Elsabe was also part of the campaign to bring an end to the tot system on her farm, and managed to negotiate with the farmer around this issue. She explains that it is through the skills she learned at WFP, that she was able to stand up and speak out:

That thing, of where I used to give people a dop at the end of the day, also came to an end. Because I told him, “this tot system does not work anymore. Don’t think that, because you could do that with our ancestors, that we cannot change. We are rising up. We also have sense, and we can take hands.” And from that day, the tot system was cancelled. And I thank Women on Farms that I joined them that time, for they taught me things I never knew. About how I can negotiate with the farmer. But I am not done fighting yet! I now belong to the Health Team, and there I want to help the women and children here in Klapmuts.

Involvement in the community

Aunty Elsabe later moved to Klapmuts with her husband, but still remains part of WFP. There, her house has become a place where women can come for help or support with issues that they are facing. Aunty Elsabe’s training at WFP taught her how to refer cases to various social services, and about women’s rights when it comes to sexual abuse and domestic violence.

My neighbour told me this morning, “Aunty Elsabe, I see your gate is quiet this morning.” And I said, “yes, I am a bit glad.” Because you see, people always come to me with their problems. Right now I am actually busy with a case there in the squatter camp, with Sharon from WFP. The matter is appearing before court next Monday.

Klapmuts is a small town, situated between Paarl and Stellenbosch. The community consists of many retired or seasonal farm workers, and has grown steadily over the past decade. Although small, the community faces many challenges of substance abuse and violence against women. Aunty Elsabe, and other members of WFP, such as Charmaine and Jenny, often provide much-needed assistance to women in this community. One of the incidents that touched Aunty Elsabe deeply was when she assisted a young girl who was being sexually abused by her own father.

Aunty Elsabe explains:
One day, I had just returned from a WFP workshop. I was busy making supper, when this child came running into my house, crying. I got such a big fright. But I asked her “my girl, what is wrong?” She told me that her father tried to rape her, and my heart broke into tiny pieces. I thought, Lord, what else will still happen in our country? But I phoned the social worker, and in less than half an hour, she was at my house. And I took the girl to her mother’s work, and we (with the social worker), picked her up and took her to the police station. She had suffered for years under that man. She had known that her husband was the father of her daughter’s child, but was too scared to ask, too scared to talk, because he used to beat her up, horribly.

As a result of Aunty Elsabe’s intervention, not only was the father arrested, but she also feels that this intervention led to protecting the future of the youngest daughter in that family.

I thank the Lord that I was able to help them. They (the police) locked that man up. He didn’t get bail. I told them, “do not give that man bail!” And he went to jail, appeared before the court, and they locked him up. Within six months, that man got very sick, and died before he could serve his sentence! But that is why I say, if we take hands, then perhaps we can clean up our community.

Education can bring about change

Aunty Elsabe’s commitment to give her children an education also bore fruit. She had eight children – four sons and four daughters – of whom one son died:

But let me tell you, I said to myself that day (when the farmer swore at her children on their way to school) I do not want my children to suffer the way that I suffered. And I had a vision that my children must get an opportunity (in life), even if I lived on a farm.

Today, four of her children have good jobs. One works as a manager at Sasol in Secunda; another at the Education Offices in Pretoria. Her son is employed by the Atlantis municipality, and her other son is a cabinet maker. Her youngest son is currently at university, studying economics. Two of her girls did not want to go and study after matric, but one has now decided that she wants to become a social worker. Aunty Elsabe’s advice to her daughter: “Yes, I told you that time, but it is never too late...”
Jacoba Armoed, Louw’s Hoek Boerdery, Rawsonville

Aunty Koba is 57-years-old, and was born in the town of Worcester. For the first six years of her life, she lived with her grandparents, after which she moved in with her mother on a farm outside Rawsonville.

Aunty Koba’s early years were not easy. She had to leave school after only two years, as a result of an injury. In 1972, at the age of 11, she was sent to work as a domestic help in the farmer’s parents' home in Worcester. Those were not easy days, as Aunty Koba, still a child, had to take responsibility for a household, scrubbing floors, cleaning windows, and washing clothes by hand. After two years as a domestic worker, Aunty Koba moved back to the farm. She immediately had to start working on the farm, and at the age of 14, she was a regular worker on the farm. She later met her husband, and moved with him to the farm Louw se Boerdery, where she still lives today.

Life on the farm

Aunty Koba describes her marriage as difficult, as she suffered abuse from her husband. For Aunty Koba, there was no way out. She had small children who relied on her; without the unwavering support of her mother during these times, she would not have been able to carry on.

At the age of 40, due to an injury at work, Aunty Koba permanently lost the sight in her right eye. The farmer only took her to a doctor the following day, but infection had already set in.

We were busy topping the vines. See, you cut off the top (of the vine) so that when the men come to prune, it is easier for them. I pulled at a branch, loot, see, it can be very stubborn... and I pulled, and that loot jumped straight into my eye... The pain was terrible. But it was not taken seriously, and only the next day, did the farmer send me to the doctor... But I learned later that I had to see an eye specialist, not a doctor... the doctor said I had an infection, and gave me tablets. But with time, the eye got weaker. So I went to the doctor again, at my own expense... then he referred me to the hospital. There an eye specialist discovered that I had an injury behind my eye, and because it was not treated, I lost my sight completely.

If Aunty Koba had received proper medical attention at the time, she would not have lost her eyesight. The farmer refused to pay or compensate her for the injury, and even deducted the costs of the initial visit to the doctor from her salary. The loss of her eyesight affected Aunty Koba badly. She could no longer work, and also suffered from depression for a while.

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

In 2004, Aunty Koba, along with other women farm workers, took the train to Pretoria, to commemorate the march of the women to the Union Buildings in 1956. It was the first time she encountered women who belonged to WFP. She became interested after reading pamphlets they distributed on the train. Aunty Koba then became involved with WFP when a friend of hers invited her to attend WFP’s 10th anniversary. She had heard of Women on Farms before because of its various interventions concerning the abuse of farm workers in Rawsonville. Aunty Koba remembers those early years fondly, saying that those were exciting years, where they were active, and attended a programme almost every weekend.

Aunty Koba feels that her involvement in WFP over the years empowered her at many levels. She became involved in most of the WFP programmes.

The important thing was the empowerment, and the self-empowerment we got out of the programmes. Just the fact that you could empower yourself, in the workplace, and even in your own home... at so many levels. All those programmes they hosted, from social services, to health... in land and housing I was empowered,
in labour I was empowered, in health I was empowered... so much so that one could make a difference. And I must say, that people need this more and more, because as the laws change with time, so you must stay involved in the programmes, so that you can understand the new changes. And I was really empowered!

To her, it is important that women on farms know about their rights. Although there is information available, either in the newspapers, on radio or an TV, Aunty Koba feels that to attend workshops on these rights are more useful, as it provides an opportunity for women to ask questions, get answers, and also engage with each other around the meaning of these rights.

See, in the workshops, you get the knowledge first-hand... there is someone who you can talk to face-to-face; you can ask questions... that open communication, the open channels, that face-to-face, and the freedom to ask questions... that makes it easier for many women to learn.

**Highlights**

Rawsonville is a small farming community, and is surrounded by many prestigious wine farms. However, in this town, many cases of abuse against farm workers still persisted, and Aunty Koba feels that the presence of WFP in the town provided farm workers with not only recourse, but contributed to their empowerment.

Evictions were taking place here in Rawsonville, a young girl was raped, and those people there by Groenvlei, where the woman and her child was dragged with a tractor... and the people realised that here is an organisation that does not back down... and this is what Women on Farms does: they defend farm workers, they teach people about their rights, they do everything that involves farm workers, their development and their empowerment.

To her, what matters most, is that women were able to show their power, and did it all by themselves:

If I look at labour... we were able to help someone, who almost lost his job, to get it back. That was a real highlight for me, especially because we were only women! At that stage, it was me, Ida and Florina – it was women only, who managed to get that man back onto the farm.

On that specific day, the farmer actually trembled! I think it was because he got a fright that it was a bunch of women who came onto the farm that day. But for us, it was only about doing the right thing, because what is right, is right, and what is wrong, is wrong. And also, on another farm, we prevented a woman from being evicted. That day, we spent the whole day on that farm, and we could keep that woman in her house...

Another highlight for Aunty Koba was her involvement in the mushroom cooperative.

We had our own cooperative here in Rawsonville. We grew our own mushrooms. We had a spot here outside Brandwacht that we got from Cape Winelands (District Municipality). We felt extremely proud, and we enjoyed it. We felt proud of our hard work, we grew and harvested it ourselves. I felt like a real small farmer.

**Personal change**

Aunty Koba's involvement in WFP not only affected change in her community involvement, but also in her own personal life. She says that she was withdrawn but because of the manner in which WFP workshops were facilitated, she gained courage and belief in herself.

I was very shy, and I will be honest, in the beginning, I did not ask questions in the workshops, not because I did not want to, but because I did not believe in myself... But at this organisation I came to learn that I can also talk, really! The staff at the workshops always encouraged us to ask questions. They would tell us, there is no such thing as a stupid question, only a question. And through that, they encouraged us, you see, and I started believing in myself.

It was at one of the WFP workshops last year that Aunty Koba felt safe enough to share a childhood experience of abuse. For 49 years she never spoke to anyone about what happened to her, until that day. The ability to share this pain, and find understanding and support when she shared it, brought immense positive change in her life.

I was raped at the age of 8, by my stepfather. That is the one thing that made me the person that I was (quiet). Until I could talk about it, when we had that workshop around health, and the abuse of women and children...
And that day I could talk, because for years, years, years, I did not talk about it, until that day. And since that day, when I spoke about it, when we all cried together... because see, there were other women in the workshop who also went through the same thing, and who also did not talk about it... But when I started talking, we all cried, all of us who went through this, and also the other women who did not go through it...

And since that day, I am more spontaneous than ever before. I can talk, and so much so, that I can’t stop talking! That is where it happened. Because, if you feel that trust, that confidence... when you know someone builds your trust and confidence (to talk), then you can talk about your past, and you can release yourself from it. Then you are free... really.

And this is what this organisation means to me, and what it means to so many other women. Women who become interested, women who join, without asking any money from them... and from them we get that courage and power.

**Community involvement**

Aunty Koba remains involved in her community. In particular, she monitors and acts on cases of abuse against farm workers. Just a month ago, a farmer assaulted a worker, yet nobody took notice of it. Aunty Koba was not happy about this, and began making enquiries. As a result of these enquiries, the story finally ended up in the local newspaper, creating awareness about the incident. She is also part of the local WFP Health Team, where the members do regular monitoring of the service delivery at the local clinic. People come to them if they experience poor service; they then take it up with the clinic. Since the team became involved, things have improved at the clinic.

Following years of depression about the loss of her sight, Aunty Koba’s life gained new meaning. She explains that it was always her desire to contribute to making a difference, but that she did not know how, until she became involved with Women on Farms:

*I really had this desire to make a change, in my life, and that of others. I wanted to help to change the world, but I did not have the knowledge. That is why I say, that when I became involved with Women*
Joyce Sobashe, Idas Valley, Stellenbosch

We only had a room, where we all slept, and then further down the road was a garage, where we had to prepare food...

Involvement with Women on Farms Project

Aunty Joyce was one of the first women to become involved in the Vroue Regte Groepe (Women’s Rights Groups), which preceded the formal establishment of Women on Farms Project. This was during the early 1990s, when access to farms was strictly controlled by the farmer. As such, the farm workers lived isolated lives in the Jonkershoek Valley. Aunty Joyce remembers well how she got to know the organisation.

It was during the 90s that we met them. It was Sandra who came to our farm, Sandra Hill. She came here, and asked Hans (the owner) if she could talk to us. But she told him that she wanted to talk to us about how to build relationships with step-children. That’s what she told him, and then he told us, and it was in that way that he allowed her to come onto the farm, and that she got to hold meetings with us.

Aunty Joyce and the other women on the farm, kept the real reason for the meetings a secret, and made sure that the farmer did not discover what they were actually learning:

And we never told him what the meetings were about! Why would he want to know anyway. And really, when Sandra came into that meeting, it was like a real wake-up call... Those days things were different. Now you can meet people in your own time, and at your own place. But those days it wasn’t like that. We had to meet during working hours or lunch-time.

The women workers enjoyed the workshops. Aunty Joyce explains that it broadened their insight about their labour rights. But what the women enjoyed equally, was the opportunity to leave the farm, to attend workshops elsewhere, and to make contact with women workers from other farms:

They taught us more about our rights, and also about our rights in the home, not just in the workplace. Because many women did not actually know their rights... you just carried on! Sandra came regularly, and later Levurn came, and Sharon, and Bernie-them. They came to

Aunty Joyce is 62-years-old. She was born on the farm, Norsdruk, in the Groot-Drakenstein area. Both her parents were farm workers, and she was raised on various farms in the Franschhoek area. Aunty Joyce began working on a farm at a very young age.

We had to start working at a young age. We had to help our father in the vineyards and orchards. Those days it was piece-work, and we had to pick fruit, so there could be a little extra money in the home. We worked during the school holidays and over weekends.

Aunty Joyce later went to work in Cape Town as a domestic worker. After her marriage, she moved with her husband to the farm Lourensford. There they worked for a number of years: Aunty Joyce first worked in the vineyards, but after her second child, she began working in the house of the owner, Anton Rupert (a famous multi-millionaire businessperson). She still remembers how, highly pregnant, she still worked in the vineyards on the Friday, and her daughter was born on the Monday.

In 1982, she moved with her husband to the farm De Oude Nektar, in the Jonkershoek Valley. Life on the farm was not that good in the beginning.

It was very difficult... not nice at all. The money was less. That time, the farm belonged to the Pecks. That first year, oh man, I was so sad. It was hectic on that farm. The houses were not what it looks like now. It was very old houses. There was no electricity, not water, an outside toilet. It was a big adjustment for us.
fetch us for workshops, and for weekend workshops. And so we could learn more, also about how it was for other women farm workers from other farms.

During those days, in the early 1990s, farmers regularly assaulted farm workers with impunity. Aunty Joyce remembers how Women on Farms Project intervened when they learned about another farm worker that was assaulted.

There was this case, in those early days (of WFP), about this farm manager. He always used to go and fetch workers on the Bottelary Road. Amper-Bo, was the name of his farm. Now I don’t know what happened that morning... it was a Saturday morning... they (the workers) were working, and then he (the manager) started beating this worker up. Then he told them (the other workers) to load this worker in the wheel-barrow, but they refused... and when they went to check up on the man, he was dead! And that became a real big story... And Sandra handled that case... got the police and so on... and then she also represented the wife (widow)... He (the manager), now has to provide for her as long as she lives.

This intervention made a huge impression on the workers in the Valley, as for the first time, a farmer in the Valley did not get away with murder. It was also during this time that the farmers in the Valley, according to Aunty Joyce, became disgruntled about WFP’s assistance to farm workers, and they tried to make life very difficult for the WFP staff.

The workshops held by WFP, however, began to show results. Aunty Joyce explains that the women workers, through the skills acquired at these workshops, entered into negotiations with farmers and farm managers about their working conditions:

The women who worked in the vineyard were unhappy because, when it rained, they had to work, without any rain coats or water boots. So, when it rained, they refused to do the work. Sandra explained to them how they can talk (to the farmer) about things they were unhappy with. So they explained: it’s not that they don’t want to work in the rain, but that they cannot do the work without rain clothes and water boots. And that also made them (the women) stronger (to be able to express themselves and their needs).

### Highlights

Aunty Joyce has had many highlights in her many experiences with Women on Farms Project. However, to her, those initial days, where she and the other women began learning about their rights, and became involved with the Vroue Regte Groepe, remain one of the experiences that made a deep impression on her.

Aunty Joyce explained how the VRG operated:

We were women from various farms. Then we would come together. But we also had a group (on her own farm). Then, so after three months, then all the women from the different farms would come together. In those days we did not use taxis, so Levurn-them had to pick us up and drive us to the meetings! There (at the meetings) they would inform us; if we had problems, then we could ask them there, what should we do? How should we do it? How can we address this problem?...And what they always used to tell us... it does not help to swear at the farmer, rather, talk to him about what makes you unhappy. They also explained to us: two committee members must go to the owner, and talk about what causes our unhappiness... What they told us, is if we don’t go and talk to the farmer, then he will think that we don’t have a problem with our wages. And they explained to us how to set up a meeting... and to make a list of everything before we go and talk to them!

Her involvement in these VRG and experience of negotiating with the farmer, contributed to Aunty Joyce’s leadership abilities, which came to the fore when she was chosen as one of the leaders of the Jonkershoek Crisis Committee. In 2004, when Jonkershoek Valley became known for illegal evictions of farm workers, the workers in the Valley rose up in protest against this. Aunty Joyce was chosen as one of the leaders, and was the only woman leader in the Crisis Committee leadership. During this time of protest, WFP played a supporting role in creating awareness about the illegal evictions, and providing logistical and practical support to the Crisis Committee. Aunty Joyce remembers that WFP also helped them to practice negotiations, before the Committee went into talks with the Municipality and other stakeholders. WFP also always accompanied the Committee to these talks, to provide support where needed.
Aunty Joyce remembers the experience well, and also how she felt as one of the women leaders during this protest:

There were three protest marches in Jonkershoek: to Lanzerac, to Nature Conservation... If there was a march, I would tell him (the farmer) that I am going! It was about the evictions. Cobus Dowry was the provincial minister then. He refused to admit that illegal evictions was a problem. we said it then: they wanted to turn Jonkershoek into a white lily. And if you look at the Valley now... well, it is a white lily.

And I felt strong, because I was a leader, along with the men. And I had to think carefully before I spoke, because I was the voice for women farm workers. Because see, men, they only looked at things one way, but if women are there, then we can put our case forward too, and make them aware.

The protest action led by the farm workers, resulted in the signing of a moratorium on farm evictions in the Valley, and Aunty Joyce was one of the signatories. At the time, this was a huge victory for the workers in the Valley.

**Life today**

Aunty Joyce still works on De Oude Nektar, but she no longer lives on the farm. Three years ago, the farmer provided her, along with the other workers who lived on the farm, with off-farmhouses in Idas Valley, where they live today.

Aunty Joyce is still an active member of Women on Farms Project, and is really a stalwart in the struggle for women farm workers’ rights. She also served in the leadership of Sikhula Sonke, a women-led trade union, for some time.

Aunty Joyce is passionate about fighting against violence against women. Even on the farms, she encouraged women not to accept abuse, and often intervened in cases where both the farmer and husbands of women farm workers tried to abuse them. Aunty Joyce feels that the knowledge, experience and exposure she gained through her involvement with WFP, has made a huge difference in her life: Really, Women on Farms means a lot to us. Everything that I learned from them, I use it. We learned to defend ourselves. I know that many men think that they can abuse us. But now we know how to tell him, that how you are treating me, is not right. And we no longer have that fear... yes, some women have that fear, that he is the man of the house, and can do just what he wants. But, really, that self-confidence, that knowing that you can defend yourself against that man. Even in the workplace, you can talk to them about how they are treating you. And many farmers talk to us as if they are your father or your husband. And now I can tell him, don’t talk to me like that. I am not your wife. You would not like it if my husband spoke to your wife like that! And this is why I say, Women on Farms made strong women of us. That wisdom we got from Women on Farms, we can apply it everywhere!
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