Commission for Gender Equality

Do women reap what they sow?

The experiences of women farm workers, a sequel

2025

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Women working on farms in South Africa navigate a complex and often challenging landscape characterised by a multitude of socio-economic, cultural, and labour-related dynamics. Agriculture serves as a cornerstone of employment in rural areas, and the resilient efforts of women are pivotal to its success across various subsectors, including crop production, livestock management, and processing. Despite their indispensable contributions, these women farm workers face systemic inequities that permeate their daily lives.

Women farm workers contend with significant challenges such as job insecurity, where many work under temporary contracts or as seasonal labourers, leading to income instability. The risk of exploitation looms large, with many women facing instances of sexual abuse and harassment in the workplace, often exacerbated by a lack of reporting mechanisms and inadequate protection.

Moreover, women in agriculture frequently find themselves marginalised in decision-making processes that directly affect their work conditions and livelihoods. Cultural norms and institutional barriers often restrict their voices in leadership roles, limiting their ability to advocate for better wages, safer working conditions, and access to resources. This multifaceted struggle highlights the urgent need for interventions that promote gender equity and protect the rights of women in agriculture, ensuring they receive the recognition and support they deserve in this essential sector.

This study delves into the lived experiences of women in the horticulture and meat product sectors, with a particular focus on the realms of vineyards and dairy farming. Building on a previous study conducted during the 2023/24 financial year, *Do Women Reap What They Sow? The Experiences of Women Farm Workers*, this research extends the conversation by illuminating the unique challenges women face in these crucial sectors.

The study is underpinned by the constitutional mandate of the CGE. The CGE is an independent statutory body established in terms of Section 187 of the Constitution of South Africa. The CGE is mandated to promote respect for gender equality and

the protection, development, and attainment of gender equality in the Republic of South Africa. The powers and functions of the CGE are outlined in the Commission for Gender Equality Act No. 39 of 1996. Specifically, in terms of section 11(1)(a) of the CGE Act, the CGE has the powers to monitor and evaluate policies and practices of State organs, State agencies, public bodies and the private sector to promote gender equality and to prepare and submit reports to Parliament.

The CGE would like to acknowledge and thank the women farm workers who generously contributed their time and valuable insights to this research project. The CGE also extends its gratitude to the farm owners and managers who cooperated with the research team and those who participated in the study. Additionally, sincere appreciation is expressed for the involvement of trade unions and sector associations in this research endeavour.

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- Siwakhile Ngcobo
- Thandiwe Matshazi
- Edward Thabani Mdlongwa
- Charles Wambulawaye (Research Intern)
- Gontse Prince Motaung, who was the project leader but left the organisation during the time of compiling the report.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

4IR	Fourth industrial revolution
BCEA	Basic Conditions of Employment Act
CASP	Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration
CGE	Commission for Gender Equality
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COGTA	Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
DFFE	Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment
DALRRD	Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development
DEL	Department of Employment and Labour
DHS	Department of Human Settlements
DOJ&CD	Department of Justice and Constitutional Development
DWS	Department of Water and Sanitation
ESTA	Extension of Security of Land Tenure Act
FAWU	Food and Allied Workers Union
FTC	Fixed-term contract
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Growth domestic product
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ILO	International Labour Organization
LRA	Labour Relations Act
MTSF	Medium Term and Strategic Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NSP	National Strategic Framework
OECD	Organization of Economic Co-operative and Development
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety Act
PLAAS	Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies

PMG	Parliamentary Monitoring Group
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SAFDA	South African Farmers Development Association
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WFP	World Food Programme
WSP	Workplace Skills Plan

1. INTRODUCTION

Women working on farms in South Africa navigate a complex and often challenging environment shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and labour-related dynamics. Agriculture remains a key source of employment, particularly in rural areas, where women play a significant role in various subsectors (PMG, 2024). However, despite their contributions, women farm workers continue to face systemic inequities, including job insecurity, wage disparities, exploitation, sexual abuse and harassment, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

This study focuses on the lived experiences of women working in the horticulture and meat product sectors, with a specific focus on the vineyards and dairy subsectors. It builds upon a previous study conducted during the 2023/24 financial year, *Do women reap what they sow? The experiences of women farm workers,* which examined the sugar subsector within field crops.

The initial study in the sugar sector revealed widespread challenges, including job insecurity, limited decision-making power, significant pay gaps, and exploitative wage structures. Additionally, issues such as gender roles and inequality, poor health and safety standards, unfavourable working conditions, and broader labour-related struggles were prevalent. This study expands the research focus to include horticulture and meat products. For a comprehensive understanding, however, both reports should be read together.

1.1 Problem statement and rationale

Women farm workers in South Africa operate within a labour system shaped by the country's apartheid past and ongoing structural inequalities. They face exploitative working conditions, economic insecurity, and the intersectional oppressions of patriarchy and discrimination (CGE, 2024). Although agriculture remains a cornerstone of employment in rural areas, these women encounter structural vulnerabilities that hinder their economic empowerment and expose them to dangerous working conditions (Naser, Solomon, & Louw, 2021).

The neoliberal policies implemented during the post-apartheid era have often favoured large-scale commercial farming operations, leaving small-scale farmers in

a vulnerable and marginalised position. This economic framework has exacerbated existing disparities, particularly impacting women, who are predominantly relegated to low-wage, insecure employment lacking essential social protections. Such circumstances have limited their economic opportunities and perpetuated systemic inequalities within the agricultural sector (Oxfam South Africa, 2020).

Partridge, Morokong, and Sibulali (2020) emphasise that women's labour is the backbone of the vineyards supporting South Africa's internationally renowned wine industry in the Western Cape. However, women farm workers typically hold subordinate, seasonal jobs with low pay that lack job security, social benefits, opportunities for promotion, and access to decent housing and healthcare. In addition, the women are subjected to unlawful evictions and workplace sexual harassment (Naser, Solomon & Louw, 2021; WFP, 2024). They occupy the lowest positions in the gendered labour hierarchy, performing tasks such as grape picking and packing, while patriarchal structures often keep them away from managerial and technical roles (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). The seasonal nature of their work exacerbates their vulnerability, making it difficult for them to achieve a sustainable income.

Furthermore, the Women on Farms Project (WFP, 2024) reports numerous cases of farm workers being evicted from employer-supplied housing, leading to homelessness and poverty for women farm workers and their families (WFP, 2024). The inadequate implementation of labour regulations permits farm owners to neglect their legal obligations, fostering a cycle in which exploitative labour practices persist without accountability.

Gender-based violence (GBV) on farms is a significant issue. Reports indicate that women are at a higher risk of harassment and assault by employers, supervisors, and male coworkers. Many women have little to no legal recourse, largely due to power imbalances and fear of retaliation (Visser & Ferrer, 2015).

Structural gender norms further limit women's opportunities to participate in the economy and own their farmland, compounding workplace inequalities (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020). Over the years, land reform initiatives in South Africa have favoured men, making women farm workers reliant on male relatives or employers for housing and economic security (Walker, 2011). The lack of land ownership not only perpetuates a gendered division of labour but also restricts women's ability to use

agricultural work as a pathway to economic independence. Without access to land, capital, and decision-making power, women in agriculture struggle to escape cycles of economic dependency and labour exploitation (Walker, 2011).

Despite South Africa's progressive labour legislation, including the Basic Conditions of Employment Act No. 75 of 1997 and the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 (Walker, 2011), compliance within the agricultural sector has been inconsistent. Most women farm workers are not aware of their labour rights, which limits their ability to report violations (CGE, 2024). This neglect of regulation allows farm owners to evade responsibility for poor working conditions, wage disparities, and gender discrimination (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020). The failure to implement policies underscores the need for interventions to strengthen women's rights in agriculture and enhance their economic decision-making capacity.

Some of these issues are being addressed through initiatives such as the Women on Farms Project and Women in Wine, which aim to improve labour protections, provide legal assistance, and create economic opportunities for women in agriculture (WFP, 2024). However, inclusive transformation will require structural changes, including policy reforms, corporate responsibility, and active social activism.

The CGE is conducting this study to fulfil its constitutional mandate of promoting, protecting, and advancing gender equality and justice in the country. The research aims to identify specific challenges faced by women working on farms. This information will help develop targeted policy recommendations to address these challenges, enhance labour protections for women in the agricultural sector, and create a more equitable working environment that recognises and upholds their rights and contributions to the farming industry.

1.2 Study aims and objectives

1.2.1 Aim

This study aims to explore the multifaceted lived experiences of women working on farms, with a particular focus on the vineyards and dairy subsectors. The study examines the challenges and opportunities these women encounter in their daily roles, including the nature of their labour, working conditions, social dynamics, and

economic implications. Additionally, the research will delve into the intersection of gender, culture, and labour practices, shedding light on the personal narratives of women farm workers as they navigate their professional environments in the agricultural industry.

1.2.2 Objectives

The objectives of the study were the following:

- To comprehensively examine the working conditions faced by women farm workers, including the assessment of the physical environment, labour hours, wages, and access to basic amenities such as sanitation and healthcare on the farms, and other relevant components.
- To delve into the lived experiences of women working in agricultural settings, focusing on their daily challenges, personal stories, and the socio-economic factors that influence their work life. This exploration will also consider aspects such as job security, opportunities for advancement, living arrangements, and the impact of cultural norms on their roles within the farming community.
- To investigate the existing mechanisms and policies aimed to promote gender equality on South African farms, encompassing an analysis of legislation, training programmes, and support systems designed to empower women and ensure equitable treatment in terms of pay, responsibilities, and professional development opportunities.

1.3 Research question

What are the personal stories and unique challenges women working in the vineyards and dairy subsectors of agriculture face?

2. CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

The study faced two main limitations during the data collection process, which are as follows:

The Eastern Cape province was initially chosen for inclusion in the study because of its dairy production. However, access to farms was limited mainly due to foot and mouth disease outbreaks, which led many farms to decline participation. To overcome this challenge, the research team shifted its focus to Gauteng and Free State dairy farms.

Additionally, accessing stakeholders from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, and various sector associations proved challenging due to their lack of response to CGE requests. Their insights would have provided a deeper understanding of the issues affecting women farm workers in South Africa.

Despite the challenges and limitations, the research team is optimistic that the data collected during the data-gathering process is of high quality, allowing them to compile this report based on a strong foundation of reliable data.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Politics, history, and social context

The history of land ownership, farm ownership, and farm work in South Africa is deeply intertwined with painful legacies of land dispossession and forced removals. The racially exclusionary and dispossessive policies established during the colonial and apartheid eras have created complex, lasting impacts on land reform in the country, complicating current efforts for equitable access to land.

According to Walker (2017), the 1913 Natives Land Act was a pivotal law that severely restricted Black land ownership. It confined the Black majority to designated reserves, which constituted only a small percentage of the country's land. This Act prohibited Black South Africans from buying or renting land outside these reserves and forbade white landowners from selling or leasing land to Black individuals. Consequently, the law entrenched racial segregation in land ownership, resulting in overcrowded reserves and hindering large-scale, commercially viable agriculture (Bolt, 2017).

Plessis (2023) notes that legislation like the Group Areas Act further solidified these spatial limitations. This Act dictated where different racial groups could live and conduct business, effectively removing Black South Africans from 'White' spaces. The impact was not confined to urban settings, as rural Black communities were increasingly marginalised, and deprived of fertile and productive land. These laws worked together to create a highly unequal structure of land ownership, leaving Black South Africans with insufficient agricultural land (Bolt, 2017). The modern-day land reform programme seeks to address the lingering consequences of such legislation.

During the apartheid era, the government used land dispossession to confine Black South Africans to homelands, where they had limited access to land and struggled to sustain agricultural practices (Yeni, 2019). The restitution programme acknowledges that dispossession was racially motivated and includes provisions outlined in the Department of Land Affairs White Paper for the restitution of land rights or compensation. However, despite recognising these historical injustices, the land reform programme has not effectively reversed the economic impacts of dispossession. Although the White Paper states that land reform aims to promote economic development and job creation through agricultural productivity, much of the land transferred through this programme remains uncultivated due to a lack of government support and the underdevelopment of necessary institutions (Kloppers and Pienaar, 2014)

The economic and social consequences of historical exclusion from land ownership persist. The interventions imposed by the apartheid State not only dispossessed Black South Africans but also entrenched economic inequalities by preventing the accumulation of wealth through land ownership that could be passed down through generations (Devereux, 2019). Devereux (2019) emphasises that, throughout the history of land reform, the government has often focused more on statistics (such as the number of hectares transferred) rather than considering the long-term impacts of these land transfers. Ultimately, reparations without adequate support have often failed to provide sustainable livelihoods for recipients, highlighting that the legacies of colonial and apartheid-era dispossession persist in subtle yet significant ways (Walker, 2017).

3.1.1 State of gender transformation, land reform, and agrarian reform

Eriksson (2017) argues that patriarchy plays a crucial role in shaping women's ownership rights and their involvement in land tenure processes, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, a period marked by land reform struggles and demands for farm work. The deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset in rural society poses a significant obstacle for women seeking land and benefit from land reforms (Dodson, 2018). Despite constitutional provisions that aim to ensure women enjoy equal status and rights, patriarchal structures often deny women their agency over land (Eriksson, 2017). In contexts where rural local governance institutions, such as traditional authorities, exist, the power to allocate land frequently rests with chiefs (Yeni, 2019).

These entrenched patriarchal norms affect the practical accessibility and realisation of legal mechanisms established by the State to promote gender equality in land reform (Dodson, 2018). Women are often excluded from land reform due to the dynamics of national politics and rural communities, where decision-making regarding land ownership is predominantly male-dominated. This male-dominated land ownership suggests that those tasked with implementing government land reform may not fully understand the gender dynamics (Bolt, 2017). While women can access land rights, these rights are at risk due to the pervasive patriarchal context surrounding land allocation. The disconnect between policy intentions and actual practices perpetuates gendered inequities in land tenure and farm work, as women's land rights remain an incomplete project, constrained by patriarchal control over land resources and governance systems (Devereux, 2019).

Furthermore, women typically lack the knowledge and resources necessary to assert their land rights (Walker, 2017), and male family members or community leaders often represent them during land disputes. The marginalisation of women in negotiation and settlement processes reflects their exclusion from ownership and women's limited decision-making roles (Partridge, Morokong & Sibulali, 2020).

Furthermore, the limited availability of resources has not been balanced by a strong and well-funded women's advocacy movement in remote rural areas (Dodson, 2018). While some efforts are being made, particularly by organisations like the National Land Committee, women in rural communities remain excluded from such support. Additionally, they often lack the organisation and empowerment necessary to engage meaningfully in the land reform process (Dodson, 2018). Given the lack of capacity within the organisations advocating for change and the slow pace at which the government responds to gender injustices in land reform, women end up missing out on their rightful ownership of land.

Walker (2011) highlights that restitution, redistribution, and tenure reform policies have significantly influenced the politics and economics of land reform in post-1994 South Africa. While these policies were designed to address historical injustices, they have not sufficiently narrowed the gender equity gap. Land reform efforts aimed to rectify historical land dispossession, but their implementation has mainly benefited male-headed households and elite beneficiaries. Although land restitution has returned

land to dispossessed communities, it has not always benefited everyone equally. Yeni (2019) adds that although communal property is a means of land ownership, women are often ignored, and men are typically the ones making decisions.

3.1.2 Marginalisation of women on farms

Farm work in South Africa is deeply rooted in long-standing systems of racial and gender exploitation, with Black women often occupying some of the lowest-paying and lowest-status jobs on farms (Eriksson, 2017). The racial dynamics of labour, influenced by the remnants of apartheid, shaped the structure of work in the agricultural sector, systematically assigning Black women to the most menial tasks (Eriksson, 2017). During the colonial and apartheid eras, farm labour was divided along racial lines, with White farmers predominantly in command and ownership roles, while Black South Africans, particularly women, were relegated to the most arduous and menial labour (Walker, 2017). These tasks typically included planting, harvesting, and cleaning, all of which were performed under deplorable conditions in the fields by Black women.

Moreover, being female exacerbated the challenges faced by Black women in agricultural work. Patriarchal systems confined Black women to domestic roles (Devereux, 2019). While Black men could take on slightly more privileged support roles, such as herding cattle or serving as overseers, the domestic and agricultural work done by Black women remained largely invisible and unrewarded (Bolt, 2017). This economic marginalisation also had a social dimension. Black women were often excluded from decision-making processes and denied land and property rights, which would have enabled them to gain greater agency within the agricultural sector (Bolt, 2017). Racially discriminatory laws, such as pass laws and labour contracts that restricted the movement and employment of Black individuals, further entrenched the racialised division of labour in farming (Devereux, 2019). Despite labouring as much as men, women received lower wages and faced limited opportunities for advancement in the farming industry.

The gendered and racially structured nature of African farm labour has led to the marginalisation of workers on farms and has become embedded in the socio-political structures and legal frameworks of South Africa. This exclusion has had detrimental effects on women, particularly in rural areas, limiting their access to land and resources.

3.2 Labour tenancy, household, and family life

The farming industry in South Africa is characterised by complex labour relations, with dual contracts and tenancy arrangements being two prevalent forms of labour organisation (Du Toit, 1993). Dual contracts refer to arrangements where farm workers are employed by a farmer while also being permitted to cultivate a portion of the farm for their personal benefit (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005). For women farm workers, these contracts can be particularly exploitative, often involving long hours of labour and limited autonomy (Mather, 2002). Additionally, women may face challenges such as restricted access to credit, limited market opportunities, and a lack of control over their production (Walker, 2005).

In contrast, tenancy arrangements involve farm workers renting land from farmers in exchange for a portion of the crop (Van Zyl, 1996). For women farm workers, these arrangements can provide opportunities for empowerment, as they allow for greater autonomy and control over production (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005). However, challenges persist, including limited access to resources and markets and a lack of support from male-dominated farmer organisations (Mather, 2002).

Both dual contracts and tenancy arrangements exhibit unequal power dynamics between farmers and farm workers (Du Toit, 1993). However, women farm workers are not merely passive victims of these imbalances, as they have demonstrated various forms of agency and resistance. Women have formed women's organisations that advocate for policy changes (Mather, 2002).

The dynamics of dual contracts and tenancy arrangements in South Africa's farming industry are complex and multifaceted. For women farm workers, these arrangements can be both empowering and exploitative. To tackle the challenges faced by women in this sector, policymakers and stakeholders must promote more equitable and sustainable labour practices while supporting women's empowerment and agency.

Farm workers in South Africa, particularly women, face significant challenges regarding their living conditions and housing arrangements. Research consistently shows that these farm workers live in poor conditions, with inadequate access to basic services such as water, sanitation, and electricity (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005). Women farm workers are especially vulnerable, as they often encounter additional challenges, including limited access to healthcare and education (Mather, 2002).

The housing conditions for farm workers in South Africa are often inadequate and overcrowded (Van Zyl, 1996). Women farm workers may encounter specific challenges related to housing, as they are often required to live in single-sex hostels or other types of communal accommodations (Walker, 2005). The living conditions and housing arrangements for women working on farms in South Africa have significant gender-specific implications (Mather, 2002). Additionally, they may face issues such as sexual harassment and violence, especially in the context of farm worker hostels (Jansen van Rensburg, 2017).

The South African government has introduced several policies and legislative measures to improve the living conditions of farm workers, including the Extension of Security of Tenure Act of 1997, the Labour Tenants Act of 1996, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997, and the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1993. These aim to protect workers from unfair evictions, ensure access to adequate housing, and promote safe working environments. However, research shows these laws are often poorly enforced or inconsistently applied, especially in rural areas. As a result, many farm workers, particularly women, continue to experience insecure housing, poor living conditions, and limited protection, highlighting ongoing challenges in the agricultural sector (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005; Department of Labour, 2018).

Family life on farms, however, is often shaped by structural precarity and harsh living conditions. Housing is typically overcrowded, poorly maintained, and lacks access to essential services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005). Women, in particular, shoulder the double burden of earning a living through agricultural labour while also managing household responsibilities such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning. This double burden is intensified by the absence of social infrastructure such as crèches, clinics, and schools in many rural farming communities (Mather, 2002).

The communal nature of living arrangements, including shared spaces in hostels or compound-style housing, can expose women and their children to various vulnerabilities. These include a lack of privacy, domestic conflict, and exposure to GBV, particularly in cases where unrelated male workers live nearby (Jansen van Rensburg, 2017). Despite these challenges, the household unit often remains a site of resilience, with women playing a central role in maintaining family cohesion and stability.

When evictions occur, these already vulnerable households face deep upheaval. Being forcibly removed from farm dwellings often results in family separation, children may be sent to live with relatives in distant areas while mothers search for work or housing, and elderly dependents may be left without caregivers. The eviction disrupts children's education and leads to the breakdown of established social support systems, such as local churches, clinics, and extended kin networks (Du Toit, 1993). For many families, the farm has been home for generations, and eviction represents not just the loss of housing but the severing of historical and emotional ties to land and community.

3.2.1 Impact of evictions on women farm workers and their families

The effects of evictions on women farm workers and their families have notable gendered dimensions. These women often face unique challenges, such as limited access to resources and support and increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation (Mather, 2002).

Evictions of farm workers, especially women, have been a persistent issue in South Africa, with serious consequences for their livelihoods and well-being (Du Toit, 1993). Research has demonstrated that evictions significantly affect the social lives of women farm workers and their families, leading to a loss of community and social networks (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005). Women may also experience stigma and shame, particularly if they are forced to relocate to urban areas (Mather, 2002).

Economically, evictions have detrimental effects on women farm workers and their families, including the loss of income and means of support (Van Zyl, 1996). These women may struggle to find alternative employment and housing, particularly in rural areas (Walker, 2005).

Furthermore, research indicates that evictions can cause significant stress, anxiety, and trauma to women farm workers and their families (Jansen van Rensburg, 2017). Women may also feel powerless and hopeless, especially when forced to move to unfamiliar locations.

3.3 Labour issues

Women farm workers in South Africa face systemic labour challenges that are deeply entrenched in historical, economic, and gendered inequalities. Despite legislative advancements in labour rights and gender equality, women working in agriculture continue to endure precarious employment conditions, wage disparities, unfair dismissals, lack of social protections, and limited opportunities for professional growth. These challenges are not unique to South Africa but are reflected globally, where women farm workers struggle with similar labour injustices. However, various countries have implemented progressive labour policies and collective bargaining agreements that offer potential solutions.

3.3.1 Social insecurity and gender inequality

Women in seasonal farm work face significant barriers to accessing social protections such as unemployment insurance, maternity benefits, and pension schemes. The temporary nature of their employment often disqualifies them from these benefits, leaving them financially insecure during periods of unemployment. In cases where farm owners provide accommodation, seasonal contracts mean that women risk eviction when their employment ends, further exacerbating their precarious living conditions (Khan, 2020). This reliance on employer-provided housing creates an additional power imbalance that can be exploited, particularly in cases where women have limited alternative housing options.

Beyond economic hardships, women farm workers in vineyards and dairy farms also experience high levels of GBV and harassment. Power dynamics between farm owners, supervisors, and seasonal workers create an environment where women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Studies have documented cases where women farm workers face sexual harassment and intimidation, yet they have limited avenues for reporting such abuses due to fear of losing their jobs or housing (Naser et al., 2021). The patriarchal structures that dominate these agricultural industries further silence women's voices, limiting their ability to seek justice or workplace protection.

3.3.2 Unfair dismissals and retrenchments

Unfair dismissals and retrenchments are a persistent issue affecting farm workers in South Africa, driven by a combination of insecure employment arrangements, weak enforcement of labour laws, and broader structural inequalities. Many farm workers are employed on a seasonal or temporary basis, which leaves them vulnerable to sudden termination without adherence to due process (Du Toit, 2004). Although legislation such as the Labour Relations Act No. 66 of 1995 sets out clear procedures for fair dismissals and retrenchments, including consultation, notice, and severance pay, these legal protections are often not upheld in practice, particularly in rural farming areas where oversight is limited (Department of Labour, 2018).

A significant contributing factor is the limited awareness of workers' legal rights and the lack of access to legal support or representation, making it difficult to contest unlawful terminations (Ewert & Du Toit, 2005). Furthermore, economic pressures frequently lead employers to cut costs by retrenching workers under the pretext of operational requirements without exploring viable alternatives or following legal requirements for fair retrenchment procedures (CRLS, 2010). In addition, the suppression of union activity remains a crucial issue, with some workers facing dismissal simply for attempting to organise or join trade unions despite legal protections (Barrientos & Kritsinger, 2004).

Gender-based discrimination further compounds the problem, with women farm workers particularly vulnerable to unfair dismissal. They are often let go when they fall pregnant, speak out against harassment, or demand better working conditions, situations that reflect broader gender inequalities within the agricultural sector (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Economic insecurity is a primary consequence of unfair dismissals and retrenchments for women working on farms. Studies indicate that women in the agricultural sector generally earn less than their male counterparts and have limited access to formal employment contracts.

When they are unfairly dismissed or retrenched, their ability to secure alternative employment is significantly hindered due to gender biases in hiring practices and the scarcity of agricultural jobs that offer stable incomes. Unemployment exacerbates poverty levels among affected women and their dependents, as many are sole

breadwinners in their households (Dibakoane et al., 2022). Furthermore, in contexts where farm workers live on the land they work on, job loss often results in forced evictions, deepening their economic insecurity (Wegerif, 2017).

Socially, the dismissal or retrenchment of women farm workers has far-reaching implications for their families and communities. Many women in agricultural employment use their earnings to support their children's education and household nutrition. Job losses disrupt this economic contribution, often leading to increased food insecurity and diminished educational opportunities for their children. Moreover, unfair dismissals and retrenchments exacerbate existing gender inequalities, as women who lose employment are often forced into informal or unpaid labour, reinforcing their economic dependence on male family members (Meagher, 2010).

The psychological impact of unfair dismissals and retrenchments on women farm workers is also profound. Without a doubt, job insecurity and sudden loss of employment contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression. Women in farm labour, already subjected to exploitative working conditions, experience heightened levels of psychological distress when dismissed unfairly or retrenched without adequate compensation or alternative employment opportunities. In some cases, retrenchment processes fail to consider the disproportionate impact on women, who may face greater difficulty reintegrating into the labour market due to age, education limitations, or household responsibilities (ILO, 2016).

Legislative protections for farm workers remain inadequate in many regions, particularly in the Global South. Although international labour conventions advocate equal labour rights, enforcement mechanisms are often weak (FAO, 2011). Gendered power dynamics in rural economies further limit women's ability to seek legal recourse in cases of unfair dismissal or retrenchment. Studies suggest that collective bargaining and unionisation efforts could mitigate some of these challenges, but women farm workers frequently encounter barriers to union membership, including intimidation and exclusion from leadership positions (Barrientos et al., 2011).

The impact of unfair dismissals and retrenchment on women working in farms extends beyond immediate job loss, affecting economic stability, social structures, and mental well-being. The intersection of gender-based discrimination and precarious employment conditions exacerbates these effects, necessitating stronger legal protections and policy interventions.

3.3.3 Labour brokers and exploitation

The agricultural sector in South Africa is characterised by a high reliance on seasonal labour, which disproportionately affects women. The use of labour brokers, who act as intermediaries between workers and employers, has intensified these vulnerabilities. In many instances, labour brokers deduct exorbitant fees from workers' wages, provide substandard working conditions, and fail to secure proper contracts for workers, leaving them without job security or legal protections (SAMM Project, 2024). Women employed through such systems frequently face higher risks of exploitation due to their limited bargaining power.

In Germany, a key factor contributing to the exploitation of migrant farm workers is the widespread use of labour brokers or subcontracting agencies. Rather than hiring workers directly, many farms rely on third-party brokers, often based in Eastern European countries, to recruit and manage seasonal labour. This system creates a buffer between farm owners and workers, allowing employers to evade direct responsibility for working conditions, legal compliance, and wage standards. Investigations have shown that labour brokers often mislead workers about their wages, contract terms, and working hours before arrival (Fair Agriculture Initiative, 2023). In Germany, many workers are paid less than the legal minimum wage due to unauthorised deductions for accommodation, transport, and food, expenses often controlled by brokers (Welle, 2018).

Furthermore, these workers are frequently employed without formal contracts, which limits their ability to seek redress for labour violations. Because responsibility is dispersed across multiple actors, accountability is often unclear, and labour brokers are rarely held liable for the mistreatment of workers. This system significantly increases the vulnerability of migrant workers, many of whom are unfamiliar with their rights and unable to access legal support due to language barriers and isolation. Many of these workers, particularly women, have little to no recourse when labour rights violations occur (Uhlová, 2024). These violations demonstrate the systemic nature of seasonal labour exploitation across various agricultural economies.

3.3.4 Organised labour and collective bargaining

Trade unions in South Africa have been essential in advocating for women farm workers' rights, particularly in terms of collective bargaining to address gender-based labour injustices. Trade unions have emphasised the need for stronger bargaining efforts to secure equal pay, safer working conditions, and better job security for women (COSATU, 2024). However, challenges remain in ensuring that unionisation efforts reach vulnerable women workers, especially those in informal or seasonal employment. In Morocco, where collective bargaining agreements in the agricultural sector have led to improvements in wages, reduced discrimination, and better working conditions for women, there are useful lessons for South Africa (COSATU, 2024). These examples underscore the significance of both local and international efforts to secure fair wages and working conditions for women, showing how systemic changes can occur when policy and labour organisations collaborate to challenge gender inequality.

3.3.5 Sexual and reproductive health

According to Rahimi et al. (2020), female farm workers are at a higher risk of experiencing reproductive issues, especially those who work with or are exposed to pesticides. They argue that pregnant women exposed to agricultural pesticides face an increased risk of premature birth during the first or second trimester, which can sometimes lead to spontaneous abortions.

In a study conducted in Bolivia that examined pesticide use among farmers and the availability of protective equipment, it was found that women in that region experienced miscarriages, and some delivered stillborn babies (Counce et al., 2020). A similar study in KwaZulu Natal by Naidoo et al. (2011) also found that women exposed to pesticides during their first trimester reported experiencing spontaneous miscarriages among small-scale female farm workers.

Exposure to pesticides can have negative reproductive outcomes for women working on farms, increasing their risk of experiencing miscarriages. These miscarriages raise the question of whether personal protective equipment (PPE) is provided for female farm workers, particularly those on small-scale farms (Naidoo et al., 2011). Proper personal protective equipment use requires both farmers and farm workers to know how to use and wear it correctly (Garrigouet al., 2020). The fact that workers still experience side effects from pesticides, even while using protective gear, may indicate that it is not being used properly.

3.3.6 Mental health

Mental health among agricultural producers has become a significant focus in public health research, extending the field of occupational health. Common occupational stressors within the agricultural sector have been linked to increased levels of depression and anxiety. While both men and women in this sector experience mental health challenges, women are particularly at risk for high levels of stress due to their workload and conflicts related to gender roles.

A study conducted in Japan explored the prevalence of depressive symptoms and their relationship with various work environment factors, specifically focusing on gender differences. The findings indicated that exposure to multiple stressors, such as high workload, safety concerns, climate change, and financial issues, significantly affected depressive symptoms (Sato et al., 2020). Additionally, the study revealed that women who were worried about their financial situations faced nearly a fivefold increase in the risk of experiencing depressive symptoms.

3.3.7 Gender-based violence and sexual harassment

The agricultural sector mostly comprises immigrant workers (Liebman et al., 2013). Migrants have limited health coverage and labour protection in this sector. Issues of workplace sexual harassment and GBV within the sector also pose occupational health risks, which affect the performance and productivity of farm workers.

Rocha and Sexsmith (2024) assert that workplace sexual harassment is a pervasive issue faced by women in the labour force across various contexts and sectors. Farah et al. (2022) argue that sexual harassment has been considered an occupational hazard that directly affects the quality of life and obstructs the promotion of decent working circumstances for employees. There is an intersectionality of factors that exacerbate the prevalence of sexual harassment in the agricultural sector. These intersectional factors include workplace culture, gendered working groups and power dynamics (Jacobs, Brahic, & Olaiya, 2015).

Workplace culture refers to the collective values, attitudes, and behaviours within the organisation (Jacobs et al., 2015). In a sector whose workforce is dominated by women, with men being in charge of supervision and management, the culture, dynamic,

and gender working groups are influenced by those in charge. Jacobs (2015) argues that supervisors and managers are the perpetrators of sexual harassment within the workplace. These marked gender disparities within the workforce make women more vulnerable to sexual harassment and sexual violence, particularly seasonal and migrant workers.

Scholars (Jacobs et al., 2015; Rocha & Sexsmith, 2024; Farah, 2022; International Finance Cooperation, 2020) argue that seasonal workers and immigrant workers are more at risk for experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace due to their socio-economic status and in some cases their immigration status. UN Women (2021) asserts that women who migrate illegally to other countries due to economic vulnerability are often exploited by their handlers, soliciting sex for free passage or sex for unpaid debt. Exploiting vulnerability for sex is also the case for the agricultural sector, where immigrant women endure sexual harassment for the sake of keeping a job, and their immigration status makes them more vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. The International Finance Cooperation (2020) argues that because commercial farms are in remote and rural locations, men often exploit the situation to perpetrate GBV and sexual harassment.

3.3.8 Transport

Farms or farming communities are usually located in rural areas or areas far away from the city, with no public transport, and rely on farm-provided transportation to make it into town for work. Visser and Ferrer (2015) assert that access to transport remains a problem for farm dwellers who need to attend school or social events and for farm workers' spouses who work outside the farm. In South Africa, Tshwete (2023) highlights the circumstances of transportation used to transport farm workers to and from work. The workers are usually transported in open trucks used for farm purposes, causing health and safety issues.

Farm workers in South Africa, particularly those from low-income and middle-income backgrounds, rely heavily on public transportation for their daily commutes. As Venter (2019) highlights, transport affordability plays a significant role in determining the mode of transport used, such as taxis or buses. However, many farm workers are unable to afford transportation daily and are forced to walk long distances to reach their workplaces. Farms in remote locations are often far from public transport routes and lack adequate road infrastructure (Lucas, 2011).

Walking these long distances, often during early morning or late evening hours, places farm workers, especially women, at increased risk of violence, including muggings and sexual assault (Gibbs et al., 2017). The lack of street lighting, safe walkways, and visible policing in rural areas further contributes to their vulnerability. In addition to the physical threats, the long distances and physical strain often lead to fatigue, which can affect workers' productivity and overall health (Drah and Khemi, 2023).

3.4 Climate change, gender, and farm work

The gender-specific impact of climate change in agriculture is increasingly evident, particularly as research highlights the unique vulnerabilities faced by women. Kant (2020) notes two primary factors shape these disparities: the gender division of labour in agriculture and the feminisation of agriculture. These elements influence which crops and livestock women manage, the kinds of labour they perform, and their ability to adapt to environmental stressors. For example, in Sri Lanka's tea plantations, changing rainfall patterns are expected to reduce labour demand by over one million person-days per year by 2050, disproportionately affecting Tamil women who rely on this sector for both employment and essential social services (Kant, 2020).

The gendered nature of agricultural labour is echoed also in other parts of the world. In South Africa, women working in small-scale farming often experience unequal access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs, exacerbating their vulnerability to climate change (GJIA, 2020). This inequality is intensified by agribusiness models that prioritise monoculture farming systems, which marginalise women's roles and limit their capacity to cope with environmental stressors. As a result, female-managed plots tend to underperform relative to male-managed farms, further deepening economic disparities (GJIA, 2020).

The feminisation of agriculture, the second factor discussed by Kant (2020), has been significantly driven by male outmigration and broader economic shifts. This trend is visible across the Global South, where women are increasingly responsible for farm management. Although this shift can be empowering, it often results in a heavier burden without a corresponding increase in resources or support. Research shows that in South Asia, hotter-than-average weather conditions increase the likelihood of women being drawn into agricultural work, especially women with lower education levels (Sorensen et al., 2022). This increased participation, while necessary for household survival, exposes them further to climate-related risks.

In West Africa, efforts to counter these challenges include programmes like We Are the Solution in Senegal, which aim to empower women through education on land rights and sustainable farming practices (Thompson, 2024). However, structural barriers persist. Women often lack access to land titles, credit, and agricultural training, essential for building resilience against climate-induced shocks. These obstacles leave women particularly susceptible to income loss and food insecurity in times of environmental crisis.

The economic consequences of climate change for women farmers are especially severe. In Sri Lanka, unpredictable weather patterns have led many women into cycles of debt and economic exploitation as they struggle to repay loans taken out in anticipation of successful harvests that never materialise (Attanayaka, 2024). Similarly, rural women have reported increased workloads and must now balance longer agricultural hours with household responsibilities while coping with declining productivity (IWMI, 2024). According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, female-headed rural households lose more income to heat stress and flooding than male-headed households, underlining the disproportionate economic toll of climate-related disasters (Harvey, 2024).

While increased participation in agriculture can lead to greater decision-making power for women, increased participation can also heighten their exposure to poverty and food insecurity. Feminisation without adequate structural support may worsen gender disparities rather than alleviate them (Paudyal et al., 2020). Therefore, gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies are essential.

4. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research approach and design

To deepen the understanding of the nuanced experiences of women working in the vineyards and dairy subsectors, a qualitative research approach was employed. This method facilitates access to rich, descriptive data, enabling a thorough exploration of individuals' behaviours, beliefs, perceptions, and personal narratives. As highlighted by Creswell (2009), qualitative research reveals the intricacies of human experiences, providing a platform for voices often underrepresented and illuminating the unique challenges and triumphs these women face in their respective industries.

The study employed an exploratory research design suited for in-depth exploration of phenomena using qualitative data (Hunter, McCollum, & Howes, 2019). The exploratory design was appropriate for this study as it seeks to explore in-depth challenges experienced by women farm workers (Creswell, Clark & Garrett, 2008). The researchers utilised in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather data, allowing direct engagement with the participants to share their experiences and challenges.

4.2 Methods of data collection

This study used a combination of focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. The focus group discussions were held with women farm workers, while in-depth interviews were undertaken with farm managers, representatives from sector associations, representatives from trade unions, a subject expert, a member of civil society organisations, and farm owners. The focus groups allowed women to share their collective experiences and discuss challenges such as gendered labour divisions, discrimination, and limited access to resources (Gill, 2018). In addition, the in-depth interviews with key role-players provided insights into the structural and organisational factors that shape gender dynamics, including policies and labour practices (Miller & Glassner,1997). This combined method facilitated a comprehensive understanding of both personal experiences and the broader dynamics within the industry.

4.3 Population and sampling

The study employed a purposive non-probability sampling technique, which involves selecting participants based on the researchers' judgment and specific characteristics rather than through a random process (Kim, 2022). Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals or groups that met specific criteria relevant to the research questions and objectives. The purposive sample included subject matter experts, trade union representatives, farm workers, owners, and managers.

The sample size was 55 participants, including 44 women farm workers, five farm owners and managers, one subject expert, one senior official from the sector association, three officials from two trade unions, and one representative from a non-governmental organisation that addresses issues related to farm workers.

Table 1: Participants of the study

Experts	Trade unions	Farm owners and managers	Farm workers	NGOs	Sector Assassociations	TOTAL
1 researcher	3 senior officials	5 farm owners and managers	44 women farm workers	1 representative	1 senior official	55

4.4 Recruitment strategy

A recruitment strategy is a systematic plan researchers employ to identify, approach, and enrol participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives (Browne, 2005). Study participants were recruited from three targeted provinces: Western Cape, Gauteng, and Free State. These provinces were selected because of their significant contributions to dairy and wine production, among other agricultural outputs.

To identify farms, researchers collaborated with organisations that work with farm workers. Formal recruitment letters were sent to relevant organisations, requesting interviews and assistance in referring suitable participants for the study. The involvement of CGE provincial offices in the selected provinces further supported recruitment efforts, ensuring broader access to the target population.

4.5 Method of data analysis

The study utilised thematic data analysis as the method of data analysis. This method involved an analysis of qualitative data by identifying themes and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method required for the organisation and description of data sets aims to answer the research question. Researchers looked for recurring themes, similarities, and differences in the participants' responses. The following steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were followed in the thematic analysis:

- Researchers familiarised themselves with the collected data.
- Codes were generated to classify respondents.
- Themes were derived from the existing literature and data collected.
- Themes were defined and reviewed, leading to this report's production.

5. STATEMENT OF RESEARCH ETHICS

To ensure the welfare of research participants, the CGE research team adhered to ethical principles, which included informed consent, beneficent and non-maleficent, anonymity and voluntary participation.

- Informed consent requires that the researcher provide participants with clear and detailed information about the study, assure them that their participation is voluntary, and that they are free to withdraw at any point without consequences (Wassenaar, 2006). All study participants were briefed prior to participation about the aim and objectives of the study and were informed that their identities will not be used in the reporting. Participants further signed consent forms to indicate free will to participate in the study.

- The principles of anonymity and confidentiality are essential for protecting participants' identities, especially since they may disclose sensitive information (Sharif, 2024). Participants were informed that they would be assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. Additionally, the research data will be kept under lock and key and on password-protected laptops to ensure confidentiality. This data will be disposed of after five years.

- Beneficent refers to the researcher's ethical obligation to promote the well-being and maximise the benefits of study participants (Wassenaar, 2006). Non-maleficence aims to ensure that the researcher minimises and avoids any harm that may befall the participants. There was no anticipated risk that would result from the study. However, if participants required psycho-social support because they participated in the study, they would have been referred to the nearest public health facility.

6. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

6.1 Living conditions

6.1.1 Housing conditions

Women working in the vineyards and dairy subsectors in the Western Cape, Free State, and Gauteng face significant challenges related to their living conditions. The dwellings they occupy, ranging from compound housing (dormitory-style accommodation) to hostels to *opstal* houses (main homestead area), reflect the systemic inequalities in agricultural labour. The women's experiences with these housing types are shaped by gendered dynamics that influence their access to resources, privacy, and safety.

These challenges are further compounded by seasonal and permanent employment contracts, with differing access levels to services and infrastructure. In the Western Cape and Gauteng, participants shared concerns about inconsistent access to essential services such as water, electricity, and sanitation, which were largely determined at the discretion of farm managers. The lack of access to essential services often led to disparities in living conditions between seasonal and permanent workers. One participant explained:

"In our farm area, we reside in a dormitory-type of housing. We have a lady who does our laundry and also cleans our rooms, but we notice that this is done once a day, and she is the only cleaning lady in this entire farm dwelling" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

This statement raised concerns among the participants about the hygiene standards of communal toilets and bathrooms, which were cleaned only once a day despite being used frequently by a large group of women. The infrequent cleaning and high usage posed serious health risks, especially in overcrowded conditions. The lack of attention to hygiene and sanitation further underscored the gendered vulnerabilities of women, particularly in communal settings. These conditions highlighted the disparities in living conditions that farm workers face, as access to proper sanitation and hygiene services remains largely inconsistent across farms.

The study also revealed that overcrowding, poor maintenance, and lack of privacy were significant challenges for women in both compound housing and *opstal*

dwellings. Many participants reported that their rooms were too small to comfortably accommodate their families, contributing to claustrophobia and disempowerment. Limited space for movement made it difficult to meet basic living needs, including personal space, child-rearing, and household duties. A participant from the Western Cape shared the following regarding poor maintenance:

"I have stayed here for more than 18 years, and my roof has had a water leak for about six years. I've reported the matter numerous times, but I gave up. The least I can do is put plastic over it to protect myself. All these managers and owners care about is getting the work done on the farms, not taking care of where we live" (FGD participant, 12 December 2024, Western Cape).

This statement reflected the general neglect of maintenance and renovations, with many women living in deteriorating conditions. Broken doors, windows, taps, and door handles were common, and there was an overwhelming sense of disregard for the well-being of the workers. These issues were physical and symbolised a broader lack of respect for the workers' dignity and basic rights. The issue of safe sanitation was particularly pressing in the communal toilet facilities shared by both men and women. Many women expressed fears of violence and harassment, especially when accessing the toilets at night or during inclement weather. One participant explained:

"Health is a major concern because we tend to relieve ourselves inside the house, in a bucket, and not use the designated toilets because one is afraid of going out in the night because of possible violations" (FGD participant, 28 January 2025, Free State).

This statement underscores the gendered nature of safety concerns, where women's mobility and access to basic amenities are restricted due to fears of violence or harassment. The lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as separate, well-lit, and safe bathroom facilities, further intensified these risks. Another notable issue was the competition for limited resources, including hot water, cooking space, and functional toilets. With many women sharing the same facilities, stress levels were heightened, and their ability to care for their families and maintain personal hygiene was compromised. One farm manager from the Western Cape candidly explained:

"We have 160 houses in all the various farms, and we don't really have new houses to give to new employees" (Interview, farm manager, 29 November 2024, Western Cape).

This statement revealed the insufficient supply of housing and the lack of new infrastructure for the growing workforce. The absence of a sense of ownership among women farm workers further complicated the entitlement to better living conditions. In many instances, women did not feel empowered to make changes to their living situations.

The findings reveal that seasonal workers do not reside in the farm's accommodations. Nevertheless, one seasonal worker who does not have permanent employment on the farm shared that despite her temporary status, the farm owner, in collaboration with Fairtrade International, took the initiative to repair her Wendy house,[1] providing her with a sense of comfort and security during her time on the farm. She explained as follows:

"I'm living in a Wendy house, and recently we had a Fairtrade[2] meeting where they asked what we needed. I told them about the roof, which was leaking, and how difficult it was to live like that, especially with the cold in the mornings. They accommodated not just me, but also our seasonal workers who don't live on the farm. They arranged for the necessary repairs, and we were asked to get the invoice for the costs. They paid for the repairs, and last week Friday, the staff came to fix it. I'm very grateful for that" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Organisations like Fairtrade International play a pivotal role in improving the living conditions of farm workers by ensuring fair wages, safe working environments, and community development. Fairtrade International's commitment to ensuring safe working conditions reduces the risk of injury and exposure to harmful chemicals, further enhancing workers' health and safety (Fairtrade International, 2023). The provision of resources to farm workers shows that the organisation is committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of farm workers.

1 A Wendy house is a small, often prefabricated wooden structure, typically used for storage, as a shed, or, in some cases, as temporary accommodation.

2 Fairtrade International is a global movement focused on ensuring that producers in developing countries, particularly in agriculture, receive fair wages and work under ethical conditions. Fairtrade International' system aims to create a more equitable trade environment by certifying products that meet specific social, environmental, and economic standards.

6.1.2 Access to basic services

Mosala (2020) emphasises that the fundamental responsibility for service delivery rests with the state, encompassing the provision of essential services such as clean water, sanitation, electricity, effective waste management, and well-maintained road infrastructure. However, within the context of agricultural labour, this responsibility often shifts to farm owners, who are expected to ensure their workers have access to these basic services.

From the employers' perspective, farms reportedly provide limited amenities, such as access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation facilities. However, a crucial gap emerges in the area of electricity provision. Farm workers are not provided with complimentary electricity and are instead required to purchase prepaid electricity from their own wages. As electricity costs continue to rise, often outpacing inflation, this financial burden disproportionately affects women farm workers, whose already limited wages are further eroded. A farm manager in the Western Cape noted:

"They get free access to drinking water. They do have paid electricity meters that they need to purchase pre-paid electricity themselves" (Interview, farm manager, 29 November 2024, Western Cape).

This account was echoed by female participants in a focus group discussion, who confirmed the absence of free electricity provision:

"No, only electricity. You buy your own electricity"(FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

These costs, compounded by stagnant wages, leave women with less disposable income for other essential needs such as food, transport, childcare, and healthcare. Moreover, the reliance on prepaid meters raises safety concerns. When electricity runs out unexpectedly, especially at night, women are left in the dark, poorly lit environments, increasing their vulnerability to accidents, theft, or GBV. Therefore, the lack of stable access to electricity imposes a financial strain and compromises the physical security and overall well-being of women farm workers.

In addition to safety and financial implications, inadequate access to electricity also limits women's ability to access information and communication platforms. Participants

explained that charging mobile phones or using electronic devices becomes a challenge without consistent electricity, cutting them off from digital services that are increasingly essential for health information, educational opportunities, government services, and emergency updates. Participants also mentioned that among them, women are studying through e-learning in hopes of advancing their careers on farms. Due to inadequate electricity, women may not be able to complete their course in time due to lack of connectivity. A participants shared in the focus group discussions that farm workers are exposed to free online course:

"We have free wi-fi in which employees can do their e-learning on their phone" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

6.1.3 Care roles and family life

The lives of women farm workers in South Africa, particularly in the vineyards and dairy subsectors, are shaped by the challenging balance between their work responsibilities and caregiving roles. The dual demands of fulfilling professional duties while also managing household responsibilities can take a heavy emotional and mental toll. Many women express the difficulties of working long hours in physically demanding jobs, often while raising children, which leads to emotional strain as they miss out on key moments in their children's lives. A participant shared the struggle of leaving her children in the care of others, saying:

"I have a childminder who looks after my two children from the early hours when I leave for work, as I don't live on the farm. This lady also prepares my children and takes them to daycare. It's heartbreaking that I only get to see them at night, and sometimes, I don't even get to talk to them because they are already asleep when I get home. This can go on for several days because I leave the house very early, around 3 am, to be at work by 5 am, and I often don't return until after 7 pm" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Another mother echoed this sentiment, describing the emotional conflict she felt when her children begged her not to leave for work. She spoke of the guilt she felt, knowing her children missed her but also recognising that she had no choice but to work to provide for them:

"I feel the same way. Sometimes, in the morning, my two daughters cry and beg me not to go to work. It breaks my heart because I know they miss me, and I miss them

too. But what can I do? I have to remind them that if I don't work, we won't have money for things like school clothes. It's hard, but as a mother, I just want to give them the best I can, even though I wish I could be with them more" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

These experiences reflect the emotional complexity of being a working mother on the farms. For many women, the burden of caregiving is physical and psychological. Their role as providers is often complicated by childcare demands, leaving them torn between family obligations and the need to meet work targets, which can often be unrealistic. One participant shared her frustration at being unable to see her children's milestones due to the long hours she spends working:

"As women, we have a big burden to carry, from carrying heavy boxes of grapes, trying to meet unrealistic targets, to our unpaid work of having to take care of our husbands and children. It never ends for us; it is tough. I never get to see my children go to school as I leave the house very early in the morning, and sometimes, I do not even see them go to bed as I usually come home late when they are already in bed" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

This narrative underscores the immense pressure these women face as they attempt to juggle heavy physical labour with the emotional weight of missing out on their children's lives. The compounded demands of both work and family life can lead to significant stress and feelings of inadequacy.

However, for those who are nursing, there is a small but important concession made by some farms, providing an hour of paid leave for breastfeeding. In the Western Cape, this arrangement allows women to nurse their children during the workday. One participant shared the following:

"For me, it's very difficult to be separated from my child because she is still so young. I am given one hour during the day to breastfeed, and thankfully, the farm owner doesn't deduct this time from my salary. I usually breastfeed my baby at noon for about 30 minutes, and then use the remaining time later. But honestly, it's not enough, especially for a newborn and a breastfeeding mother. There is a daycare nearby within the farm's radius, which helps a bit, but the emotional and physical strain is still very real" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Additionally, a farm manager in Western Cape vineyards confirmed the provision of paid breastfeeding time, which, while not legally required, reflects an attempt to support working mothers:

"We do, however, offer paid time for breastfeeding for the women that return to work. I know by law you don't have to pay that, but we do offer paid time for breastfeeding" (Interview, farm manager, 29 November 2024, Western Cape).

The findings further suggest that many women farm workers are single mothers, often without the social safety net of extended family or community support, leading to increased stress and emotional strain. The lack of a work- life balance can result in physical exhaustion and mental health concerns such as anxiety, postpartum depression, and burnout.

6.1.4 Evictions

Farm dwelling is a prevalent practice in the Western Cape, where farm workers and their families live on agricultural properties in return for their labour. This arrangement, while traditional, has faced significant criticism for reinforcing exploitative labour practices that can compromise the well-being of workers. Farm dwelling often curtails the autonomy and decision-making power of farm workers, particularly affecting women who may find themselves trapped in a cycle of dependency and limited opportunities for empowerment (Mather, 2002). The complex dynamics of this living arrangement highlight the challenges farm workers face as they navigate their roles within the agricultural landscape.

Evictions pose a significant and urgent challenge for women farm workers in South Africa's vineyard and dairy sectors. Many of these women find themselves uprooted due to shifting farm ownership, increasing mechanisation, and a growing emphasis on commercial agribusiness practices. Despite the legal safeguards put in place by the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA) of 1997, the reality remains grim, as evictions are often carried out in informal ways or through coercive tactics that thrust women and their families into precarious living conditions.

In focus group discussions, women working in the vineyards recounted harrowing tales of sudden evictions that occur with little to no warning. The women often receive no severance pay or viable alternative housing options, forcing them into homelessness or precarious informal settlements. Farm owners frequently exploit legal loopholes or

take advantage of the slow enforcement of tenure security laws, dismissing workers who are no longer considered 'useful' to the farm's operations. One poignant account came from a farm worker who had dedicated over twenty years of her life to a vineyard; her abrupt displacement stripped away not only her home but also her sense of stability and belonging:

"After my husband passed, they told me I had no right to stay. I worked there for 23 years, but they cut the water, stopped paying me, and forced me to leave. Where was I supposed to go?" (FGD participant, 12 December 2023, Western Cape).

In numerous instances, farm owners intentionally deteriorated living conditions to drive women away, a tactic referred to as constructive eviction. This insidious practice encompasses a range of cruel actions, such as severing access to vital resources like water and electricity, neglecting necessary maintenance of the housing, or even locking workers out of their own homes. One farm worker vividly recalled the harrowing experiences faced by many, illustrating the relentless struggle against such inhumane treatment:

"They stopped fixing our houses. When the roof leaked, they said it's not their problem. Then they locked the toilets, so we had to go outside. They wanted us to leave on our own" (FGD participant, 12 December 2023).

The mechanisation of agricultural production has significantly contributed to the displacement of women workers in rural communities. As vineyards and dairy farms increasingly adopt automated systems, the demand for manual labour diminishes, resulting in widespread layoffs and subsequent evictions. Often, it is women, particularly those who are widows, single mothers, or older workers, who bear the brunt of these changes. They are frequently the first to be let go, viewed through the lens of outdated perceptions that deem them less physically capable or economically essential to the evolving landscape of modern farming.

The fallout from these evictions extends far beyond mere economic hardship, presenting profound social and psychological ramifications. Many women find themselves cut off from vital resources such as education, healthcare, and supportive community networks, which only deepens their vulnerability and isolation. One account from a woman who was evicted with her children highlights this reality, illustrating the desperate circumstances that unfold when livelihoods are stripped away:

"My kids had to stop school because we had to move. Now we live in a shack with no water. I gave my life to that farm, and now we have nothing" (FGD participant, 12 December 2025, Western Cape).

Farm owners sometimes sell land for urban expansion or tourism ventures, leading to abrupt and large-scale evictions. Women farm workers who had lived on farms for generations suddenly become uprooted, with no alternative housing provided. The testimonies of evicted farm workers highlight systemic failures in enforcing land and labour protections, leaving women disproportionately vulnerable to displacement.

Additionally, the loss of their homes and livelihoods can lead to significant emotional and psychological trauma. In a focus group interview with the farm workers, researchers learned of a story of a constant eviction attempt on a young girl and her 70 yea -old grandmother by the farm owner, which has led to trauma. The farm owner has even refused to hire the young girl on the farm and uses it as grounds for his eviction attempts.

"I know of a young girl who was forcefully removed by the farm owner and her 70 year old grandmother but failed, she is now depressed, and she had also raised issues around abuse by the farmer" (FGD participant, 12 December 2023, Western Cape).

6.2 Working conditions

6.2.1 Employment contracts

Despite distinctions between seasonal and permanent contracts, both categories of women farm workers experience forms of job insecurity, albeit in various ways. Devereux (2020) points out that existing literature has long emphasised the precariousness of seasonal agricultural labour, particularly for women. However, the findings from this study reveal that even permanent employees face subtle and persistent job insecurities, stagnated career progression, and inadequate retirement protections.

Women on seasonal contracts remain the most vulnerable. Their employment is typically short-term and rarely includes written agreements. Women are frequently excluded from pension schemes, skills development programmes, or any opportunities

for promotion. As a result, these workers remain trapped in a cycle of low-wage, repetitive labour with no formal pathways toward stability. A participant shared the following:

"Every year, it's the same harvest time; we work for a few months, and then we go home and wait. No pension, no benefits. They say we're just seasonal, but for some of us, this has been life for ten years" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Permanent employees, while marginally better off in terms of access to the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), occasional paid leave, and a consistent income, still reported feelings of stagnation and exclusion from long-term benefits such as pension contributions and maternity benefits. Many noted that promotion opportunities were rare, and upward mobility was limited to men or long-serving employees in managerial favour. A participant said the following:

"I've worked here for 35 years, and I'm still doing the same job I started with. There is no growth, no retirement fund, nothing to show for the years I've put in" (FGD participant, 12 December 2024, Gauteng).

Promotion opportunities for women farm workers remain gendered and highly segmented, especially in roles perceived as technical or machinery-related. A recurring sentiment among women was that while they often performed more labour-intensive or time-consuming tasks in the fields, men were more frequently considered for promotions, particularly in roles involving machinery, such as truck driving and forklift operation.

"You only see men being promoted in certain roles such as truck driving, fork-lifting, and machinery-related jobs, even when women do more in the fields" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Despite this observation, some women workers also internalised these role divisions, expressing discomfort or hesitation toward operating machinery. There remains a deep-rooted belief among some women that heavy machinery is a 'man's job', limiting women's visibility and representation in higher-paying or promoted roles.

"I will not drive a truck as a woman; that is something the men should do" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

Interestingly, interviews with farm managers presented a contrasting narrative. Several employers stated that opportunities are open to all and that training and licensing are available for women who wish to enter such roles. However, they noted that only a few women showed interest. A farm manager said the following:

"We do encourage women to participate in any job they feel comfortable with. We even provide training and licensing for forklift and truck driving, but very few women come forward. Many still think driving is a male role"(Interview, farm manager, 29 November 2024, Western Cape).

This dynamic reveals a complex interplay between structural inequality and internalised gender roles. While the manager's claims point to open access, women's own experiences indicate that visible and invisible barriers, including limited mentorship, lack of role models, social expectations, and workplace culture, continue to hinder equitable access to promotions and non-traditional roles.

Furthermore, women permanent workers shared experiences of 'subtle insecurity' despite the appearance of job stability. They described how management discretion over duties, workloads, and renewals of contracts made them feel constantly evaluated and replaceable. Even long-serving employees lacked written confirmation of benefits or clear job grades, leaving them uncertain about their futures.

"Just because you're permanent doesn't mean you feel secure. You can be changed, shifted, or even dismissed" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

In sum, while employment contracts determine the degree of protection a woman farm worker receives, both seasonal and permanent workers experience career stagnation and inadequate social protection, often compounded by gendered biases in the workplace. These dynamics perpetuate cycles of vulnerability, particularly for women who carry the dual burden of labour and care work.

6.2.2 Maternity leave

Labour relations and maternity benefits in the vineyards and dairy sub-sectors play a crucial role in shaping the working conditions and overall well-being of women employed on farms. These sub-sectors often rely heavily on women's labour for tasks such as harvesting, milking, and packaging, yet women face precarious employment arrangements, including seasonal contracts and limited job security. In many cases, women lack access to formal labour protections, including maternity leave, job security during pregnancy and childcare support, which are often either inconsistently applied or entirely absent. This lack of support can lead to job loss or wage reductions during pregnancy, reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependence.

Moreover, limited union representation and weak enforcement of labour laws in rural areas further exacerbate women's vulnerability to exploitation and workplace discrimination. The absence of adequate maternity benefits not only compromises women's health and that of their children but also discourages long-term participation in the workforce.

The study revealed that farms do not provide in-house maternity benefits for female farm workers. Instead, they adhere to the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), which stipulates four months of unpaid maternity leave. However, the UIF makes payments of between 38% and 58% of the workers' monthly wages (DEL, 2024). As a result, female farm workers must rely on the UIF grant, which does not compensate them fully for their lost wages. A participant mentioned the following:

"They give you four months maternity leave, but it's unpaid, so you have to apply for UIF. The process is really not easy for us as farm workers. You have to start applying at least two months before your leave starts, and even then, the waiting is long and stressful. Sometimes UIF pays you for two months at once, or they give you all four months' money in one go, but it's never consistent. That makes it hard to manage the money properly. And the amount they give you isn't even half of your usual wage. Imagine trying to survive on that. We really wish our farm owner could pay us at least something during maternity, it would make a big difference" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

The presence of women in the agricultural labour force has played a vital role in bringing attention to crucial issues such as fair labour practices, maternity rights, and

workplace equity on farms. Through their lived experiences, women have exposed the gaps in labour protections, particularly around unpaid maternity leave, the complex UIF application process, and the lack of employer support during pregnancy. Their voices have highlighted how these challenges affect not only individual well-being but also the broader socio-economic stability of farm worker communities.

6.2.3 Employee relations

Participants revealed that they experience toxic, unfriendly, and unhealthy working environments. There are flawed work relationships between farm workers and farm owners and farm managers where women experience hostile treatment. Participants explained that it is difficult to communicate with managers on work-related issues without being chastised. A participant explained the following:

"I don't have a relationship with management. It is even difficult to go and ask for a leave day (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Westen Cape).

Another participant added that:

"*We cannot talk to our manager about work and when we do , they say that we are cheeky and if we do not want to work we can leave, which is a very rude tone" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).*

However, in Gauteng a participant pointed out the following:

"The working relationship with the manager is very good, and the manager is approachable and patient" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

In the Free State, family-owned farms often reinforce patriarchal norms through inheritance benefits, which undermines women's ownership and management roles. This dynamic leads to toxic relationships and power struggles among family members and farm employees, creating a challenging work environment. The division of farms and day-to-day management can intensify these issues, as patriarchal norms restrict women's roles and inheritance benefits tend to favour men. Ultimately, this situation impacts the overall productivity and harmony of the farm. A farm owner in Free State explained the following:

"Being a woman farm owner is not child's play. I get threats from my own family who at times can't wait for me to give up or fail and they use that against me. Some of the employees choose to listen or take directives from male owners, my brothers surpassing me because I am a woman. This affects the employer and employee work relationships. Numerous cases where my siblings who are male have tried going to court and the department of labour and agriculture to take over the farm owner role. This has brought inconsistencies in the work relationships and farm workers deem our farm unstable also affecting our productivity and profits as some suppliers and markets feel they can take advantage of me as a woman" (Interview, farm owner, 28 January 2025, Free State).

This experience shared by the farm owner sheds light on the deeply ingrained gender stereotypes present in societal norms regarding leadership. Women frequently find themselves perceived as unqualified to take on such roles. In her position of authority, the farm owner felt a considerable weight of challenge not only in her ability to manage the farm effectively but also in her role as a senior figure responsible for issuing instructions and fostering order and discipline among the workers. Throughout her leadership journey, she sensed a persistent undermining of her authority, a bias rooted in her gender that made her struggle to assert herself in an environment that often questioned her competence.

6.2.4 Working hours, remuneration, and pay gaps

The findings revealed that the participants endured some of the most gruelling working conditions in the agricultural sector. These conditions are shaped by long working hours, physically taxing labour, gendered wage disparities, and inconsistent pay structures. These factors converge to produce an environment of persistent financial insecurity and job-related fatigue, particularly for women employed under seasonal contracts.

In both subsectors, women frequently work extended hours that far exceed the standard eight-hour workday, often under harsh weather conditions such as intense heat or biting cold. In the vineyards, this is exacerbated during peak harvest periods, when shifts stretch to 10–12 hours a day, sometimes including weekends. A participant pointed out the following:

"We work almost close to ten hours in a day, but the employer does not consider that we have to leave home around 3h00 to make it to the pick-up point and begin work by 5h00. We often leave the farm after 17h00 when the tasks are done, not when the clock says we should" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng.

Although the national minimum wage during the 2024/25 financial year was set at R27.58 per hour, translating to R4,412.80 monthly, this statutory rate is not applied equitably. Permanent workers are generally paid a fixed monthly salary, whereas seasonal workers are paid weekly or per day, with their total remuneration often determined by the type of tasks they perform and whether work is available. This structure has created entrenched inequalities in earnings, despite similar workloads.

"We are paid by the day and sometimes if there's no work, there's no pay. The permanent workers have it better, but even they don't earn enough" (FGD participant, 12 December 2023, Western Cape).

In many instances, women reported that wages varied inexplicably even within similar roles, such as harvesting or sorting, raising concerns about transparency and fairness. This variability in wages led to a general reluctance among workers to discuss their pay openly, even among peers, for fear of workplace tension.

"We don't talk about our wages, because someone next to you might be earning more for doing the same work. Then what?" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

These discrepancies are even more evident when comparing the wages of women in fieldwork with those of men who occupy machine operating roles. Women consistently stated that they earned less than men, despite performing physically intensive tasks such as planting, picking, and carrying heavy produce.

"We are the ones who pick the grapes, sort them, carry heavy boxes, but we are paid less than the men who just sit in trucks or drive tractors" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Interviews with farm managers confirmed that remuneration structures differ by contract type and task complexity. While permanent workers are paid monthly and

receive some benefits, seasonal workers are often left out of such provisions, even when working under similar time demands and pressures.

"We pay our regular workers monthly, it's not based on an hourly rate. For seasonal workers, they get paid weekly since they're only here temporarily. There's one worker who's still new, she needs to complete three months before she's fully on board. If any of them work overtime, we pay for that, though the rules can differ depending on the situation."(Interview, farm manager, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

Despite years of service, many women reported no meaningful wage progression, promotions, or role development. The lack of upward mobility, particularly for long-serving workers, further entrenches economic stagnation and undermines morale. A participant said the following:

"I've worked here for over 15 years and my pay is still the same. No growth, no increase, and they don't even consider the years we've given them" (FGD participant, 12 December 2024, Gauteng).

Overtime work is especially common during the high seasons. However, overtime work is also inconsistently compensated. Workers cited undocumented or unpaid overtime, contributing to burnout and dissatisfaction. A participant in the focus group said the following:

"We work very long hours during harvest, but they only pay for the normal time. If you ask about overtime, they say it's part of the job" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

The findings reveal a structurally inequitable work environment in which contract type, gender, and task roles significantly influence wages and access to benefits, fair working hours, and overall job security. However, there is no evidence of formal gender-based discrimination in the vineyard or dairy sectors when it comes to task allocation. Both women and men reportedly have the autonomy to choose their preferred tasks. Many women tend to opt for manual labour-intensive roles such as picking, harvesting, sorting, or milking cows, while men are often found operating tractors or heavy machinery.

This pattern appears to be shaped less by explicit exclusion and more by health and safety concerns, particularly among women, especially those who are pregnant. In the dairy sector, for instance, some machines and equipment are perceived to pose significant physical risks. A participant said the following:

"You cannot hide your pregnancy when working with machinery. You could fall or slip on the stairs, and that puts your unborn child in danger" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

Such concerns highlight how the intersection of gender, occupational safety, and reproductive health influences task choices, often steering women toward lower-paying, more physically demanding roles. While task selection may appear voluntary, it is shaped by underlying risks and constraints that reinforce gendered divisions of labour in more subtle but consequential ways.

6.2.5 Access to water and ablution facilities

Access to clean water and adequate ablution facilities is a significant challenge for many women farm workers. Inadequate access to these necessities can lead to dehydration, waterborne diseases, and poor personal hygiene, ultimately affecting their health, productivity, and overall well-being. For women farm workers, this issue is further complicated by the lack of facilities to manage menstruation, making it difficult to maintain dignity and hygiene during their menstrual cycles.

Participants working in vineyards in the Western Cape raised serious concerns about health hazards stemming from poor sanitation infrastructure, particularly the absence of accessible toilets during working hours. The lack of toilets was especially distressing for women, whose unique health and hygiene needs are often overlooked in farm environments. A participant shared the following:

"We work in the fields for hours and there are no toilets nearby. Sometimes you have to hold it in the whole day. It's not right, especially for us as women" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

The lack of toilet facilities not only poses immediate physical discomfort but also increases health risks such as urinary tract infections, dehydration, and reproductive health complications. These conditions can be worsened during menstruation or

pregnancy and contribute to a broader pattern of disregard for the basic dignity and well-being of women farm workers. Another participant said the following:

"The absence of ablution facilities creates uncomfortable situations for us as women, which forces us to risk our safety and dignity by using isolated areas on farms to relieve ourselves, we are vulnerable to sexual harassment, snake bites and other dangers" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Access to clean drinking water while working on farms emerged as a significant concern among participants, particularly in the context of long working hours and extreme weather conditions. While some employers provide water, workers noted that the quantities are often insufficient for an entire shift spent under the scorching sun. As a result, many women are forced to bring their own water, which adds to their daily burden and expense. Participants also highlighted the health implications of inadequate hydration, especially when performing strenuous physical tasks. In addition to limited drinking water, the absence of accessible toilet facilities creates a distressing environment for workers. One participant recounted how the pressure to meet daily targets discourages them from taking breaks, even for essential bodily needs:

"They do bring water, but it's not enough. Sometimes it's just a small container for so many people, and we are working the whole day in the sun. You have to bring your own. And when you need to use the toilet, it's far away, so you end up using the fields because you don't want to waste time walking. That time affects your work" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

These conditions not only pose serious health risks such as dehydration, infections, and heat exhaustion but also reflect deeper structural issues related to worker dignity and basic rights.

6.3 Violence and exploitation

6.3.1 Gender-based violence and sexual harassment

The lived experiences of women farm workers reveal a deeply troubling reality in which harassment and GBV are persistent threats, particularly in and around the areas where they live and work. Participants in the vineyards and dairy sectors, especially in the Western Cape, recounted distressing incidents that underscored their vulnerability in the workplace and during their daily commutes. A harrowing case was shared by one participant mentioning that:

"I am a victim of rape…" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng – the participant shed tears and left the focus group).

The participant received ongoing psychosocial support facilitated by the employer, and protective measures were implemented to ensure her safety and well-being. As the case was relatively recent, further follow-up and support were needed.

Incidents of GBV remain a deeply troubling aspect of the lived experiences of women in the vineyards and dairy sectors. These women often navigate unsafe routes to work in the early morning hours due to the absence of employer-provided transport and are further endangered by a lack of basic safety infrastructure on the farms themselves. Concerning the experience where a woman was sexually violated while en route to work, a fellow participant, visibly shaken, shared:

"Her case is a sad and emotional one. It's not the only case in these farms, but hers is hectic... She experienced rape on the outskirts of the farm while she was coming to work" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Many women must walk from informal settlements to the farms, distances that may appear short but are fraught with risk, especially in areas known for previous incidents of violence. The lack of employer provided transportation represents a serious gap in safeguarding workers, particularly in sectors where early morning and late after work reporting times often require women to walk alone in the dark.

In addition to threats during their commute, women also face exposure within the farm environment due to the lack of basic sanitation facilities. With no accessible toilets provided in the fields, women are forced to use nearby bushes, placing them in

further danger. One participant described how unsafe she felt even among the men they work alongside:

"No, because when we go to the bushes to relieve ourselves, they can also come and look at us. There is no security and safety, making us more vulnerable to either rape or any assaults" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

This absence of privacy not only degrades their dignity but also exposes them to sexual violation, particularly when there is no oversight or protective presence in these areas. While some of the risks come from outsiders to the farm, participants also expressed unease around male colleagues, reflecting the gendered power dynamics and lack of reporting mechanisms that further silence victims.

Rotcha and Sexsmith (2024) argue that GBV and sexual harassment are disturbingly prevalent on farms, posing a particular threat to immigrant workers who often find themselves vulnerable due to their immigration status. The recent incident of rape, though occurring outside the confines of the farm, underscores a much larger and more pervasive issue within the agricultural sector. Women are frequently forced to navigate substantial distances to reach their workplaces, exposing them to heightened risks of sexual violence and even femicide.

6.3.2 Migrant labour

The exploitation of migrant labourers in the agricultural sector, particularly in the vineyards and dairy farms, emerged as a key concern raised by union representatives and sector stakeholders. Migrant workers, many of whom are undocumented or hold precarious legal status, are frequently employed under exploitative conditions, often receiving wages below the legal minimum. Their vulnerability is further compounded by their exclusion from formal labour protections and union representation. As one union representative put it:

"*And now they get the foreign nationals, that they stay on the farms, the employer pays them, but they are so afraid to join a union, they don't want to speak to us" (Interview, trade union, 16 July 2024, Western Cape).*

Another echoed this concern, highlighting how fear of deportation or retaliation silences many:

"And these people are afraid, they will tell you that we can't join because we are not legally from here and so forth" (Interview, trade union, 16 July 2024, Western Cape).

This silence and invisibility render migrant workers easy targets for employers seeking cheap labour, particularly in peak seasons when the demand for labour surges. Within this exploitative arrangement, gender plays a significant role. Women migrant workers are especially at risk, not only of wage exploitation but also of gender-based discrimination and violence. Their marginalisation is layered not only as migrants and undocumented individuals but also as women in a male-dominated labour environment. Many are assigned the most physically taxing and least paid tasks, such as harvesting, packing, or milking, often without access to complaint mechanisms or occupational protections. They are also less likely to report abuse or harassment due to fear of job loss or legal repercussions.

The findings revealed that farm owners often justify the employment of migrant workers by citing labour shortages or the reliability and 'obedience' of foreign nationals. This narrative perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and invisibility, effectively bypassing labour regulations and undermining the rights of local and foreign workers alike.

6.4 Health and safety

Access to reliable transportation, healthcare, and security is essential for women working in vineyards and dairy farms, directly impacting their safety, well-being, and economic participation in the agricultural workforce. However, many women farm workers face significant barriers in these areas, particularly in remote rural locations where infrastructure is poor, public transport is scarce, and workplace protections are minimal. Without reliable transportation, women struggle to reach farms safely, often relying on unsafe or costly alternatives, which can deter their participation in the workforce. The lack of accessible transport also limits their ability to seek medical care for work-related health risks, such as pesticide exposure, musculoskeletal strain, and reproductive health concerns. These challenges are not just logistical but deeply embedded in gendered inequalities, where rural women's access to essential services remains limited, reinforcing their vulnerability and economic dependence.

Beyond transportation and healthcare, safety and security remain crucial concerns for women in agriculture. Many face heightened risks of GBV while commuting or

within their workplaces, particularly in environments lacking proper supervision, anti-harassment policies, or secure facilities. Poorly lit pathways, unsafe transport, and male-dominated workspaces can leave women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, further discouraging their full participation in the sector. Moreover, the absence of proper workplace protections such as grievance mechanisms, secure housing for live-in workers, and gender-sensitive labour policies aggravate these risks.

6.4.1 Transport facilities

Women working in the vineyards and dairy sectors in South Africa face unique transport challenges that directly impact their safety, work hours, and overall well-being. Since their work starts very early in the morning, they require reliable transport from their homes or city centres to the farms. Some farms provide transport from central locations to and from work, while others only transport workers between farm offices and various work sites. Given that their wages depend on the hours they work, arriving late due to transport difficulties can result in financial losses. Moreover, leaving work at 17h00, especially during certain seasons when it gets dark early, poses significant safety risks, making transport to bus or taxi stations crucial for their protection against GBV and crime.

Transport insecurity can lead to job instability and economic hardships for women farm workers, predominantly in the vineyards where employment is mostly seasonal. In the dairy sector, where both seasonal and permanent employment exists, permanent workers often struggle to access transport for essential services such as clinics, churches, shopping centres, banks, and visits to their family homes. Many farms are in remote areas with limited public transport, leaving women vulnerable to isolation and difficulty meeting their personal and family needs.

Participants in the vineyards sector, Western Cape, mentioned that women working on farms in the vineyards and dairy sectors face transportation challenges, which impact their ability to access work and essential services and return home safely. Some farms provide transport through farm drivers, offering workers the option to travel to nearby towns or facilities such as police stations, hospitals, churches, and shopping centres for a nominal fee. As one participant explained,

"The farm owners provide transport for us with the farm driver. We pay R5 when we need to use the transport, especially when we have to go to town or to access nearby

facilities such as the police station, hospital, church, and shopping centres" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

However, this service is not available to all farm workers, leaving many without reliable transportation. In addition, workers on some farms reported that they have no transport services and are forced to walk long distances, sometimes up to 30 minutes, to reach the main road where they can access taxis. One participant highlighted the difficulty of commuting to work, stating:

"This is a challenge as I do not reside on the farm. From my place of residence, I have to leave the house at around 4h00 and get to the taxi rank by 5h00 to reach the farm offices at 5h30. Our in-house check-in or clock-in is at 6h00 before we are transported to our various field stations, which is another administrative challenge. We start work at 8h00, but there are logistical issues we experience before then" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

The challenges persist at the end of the workday, with workers leaving the farm at 5 pm, often in darkness during certain seasons and facing unsafe conditions on their walk to taxi stops. Another participant noted:

"The challenge is both in the morning and afternoon. When we knock off, it is usually dark, and we walk to the main road to access taxis. We get to our homes very late and tired, as there are delays and traffic as well" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

These transport difficulties pose safety risks and contribute to worker fatigue, reduced productivity, and limited access to essential services. Unfortunately, some farm workers reported that when they require medical attention, farm owners expect them to return to work immediately after their clinic visits. This expectation is particularly unfair, as workers are usually given a maximum of two hours for medical visits, despite having to walk long distances to healthcare facilities. As a result, many workers choose not to return to work, forfeiting their wages for the day because they are too unwell or exhausted from walking. This situation could be significantly improved if adequate transport were available, allowing workers to receive medical care without the added burden of long commutes and lost income.

Participants highlighted the adverse effects of inadequate transport on their health. Many reported walking long distances in extreme weather conditions, whether in heavy rain, intense heat, or cold, which often results in illnesses such as headaches, fever, and fatigue. Beyond health concerns, workers also face safety risks, particularly when they are late and must walk alone through insecure and unsafe areas. Women are vulnerable to these threats. However, participants expressed reluctance to report these issues to their employers because they feared losing their jobs. This fear is heightened because many of them are seasonal workers and live off the farm, whereas those residing on the farm are often given preference in terms of job security.

In the dairy sector, the working conditions and challenges women face are similar to those in the vineyard sector. During focus group discussions, participants noted that while most women in this sector are seasonal workers, there is a notable presence of women in management and administrative roles within farm offices, where they often take the lead over their male counterparts. Additionally, women in the dairy sector actively seek opportunities for growth and professional development. The nature of work in this sector includes both lightweight and heavy-duty tasks, with most women assigned to less labour-intensive roles. Participants also indicated that the majority of women workers reside on the farm, and those who live off the farm typically have their vehicles, having worked there for more than ten years.

However, transportation remains a challenge, particularly for those who do not have personal vehicles. While some workers coordinate with colleagues to secure lifts when travelling outside the farm, this option is not available to everyone. Several women reported having to walk between 12 and 15 km to reach the nearest main road to access taxis. Participants emphasised that having a reliable transport service that picks up and drops off workers at the farm, designated taxi ranks, or bus stations would greatly improve their commuting experience. Given their relatively low wages, many workers struggle with transportation costs, significantly impacting their earnings.

6.4.2 Safety and security

During the group discussions, participants raised concerns about their persistent challenges while working on farms. Women who have worked in the vineyards for over 20 years expressed frustration over the lack of progress in addressing crucial health, safety, and security issues. Despite their long tenure, they observed that farm systems remain static, with minimal improvements for women workers. In the vineyards, farms that were interviewed confirmed the availability of ablution facilities for workers. However, these facilities are often located far from the fields, causing inconvenience and reducing productivity as workers lose valuable time walking to and from these facilities. As a result, some women resort to relieving themselves in nearby bushes, which poses both health and safety risks. On the other hand, for those residing on the farms, well-maintained bathrooms are available, with cleaners ensuring their upkeep.

One major concern highlighted by vineyard workers was the limited clinic hours, which operate only from Monday to Wednesday between 8h00and 11h00. Workers pay a nominal fee of R5 to access the clinic, but medication is provided free of charge. In severe cases, they are referred to nearby hospitals, with a driver available for transportation to close-proximity facilities. A participant noted:

"One thing that we are grateful for is that if you are referred to a doctor or hospital, the owner covers the cost for up to two visits per year. However, the amount is deducted from our salaries over a certain period" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

In contrast, workers in another area reported that they do not have a clinic nearby, requiring them to consult private doctors. In these cases, the employer covers half of the consultation fee while the worker pays the remaining half. Additionally, even though mobile clinics occasionally visit certain farms, employers only grant a maximum of two hours for medical visits. This timeframe is often insufficient for women seeking chronic medication, family planning services, vaccinations, child check-ups, or treatment for minor work-related injuries.

In the dairy sector, the situation is even more challenging, as none of the farms in the study had on-site or nearby clinic facilities. Most clinics are located over 30 km away, making access to healthcare extremely difficult. The only available health support is a designated first aider and a basic first aid kit, which workers feel is inadequate.

In cases of work-related injuries or sudden illnesses, the management either calls an ambulance or takes the worker to the nearest hospital, covering the costs. One participant shared a positive experience:

"One thing we are grateful for in this sector is the flexibility in job assignments. A few years ago, I injured my leg, but instead of firing me or reducing my wages, the owner reassigned me to a lighter duty while maintaining my salary" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

However, cultural and traditional beliefs sometimes prevent women from disclosing health conditions, such as pregnancy, for fear of job loss. Some pregnant workers continue performing heavy-duty tasks because they believe pregnancy should not be disclosed before a certain period, putting both their health and their babies at risk. Employers do not provide paid maternity leave, and workers must claim benefits through the UIF, a lengthy and often delayed process that requires filing at least a month before taking leave. Payments are sometimes made in full or split into two instalments, causing financial strain.

Extreme weather conditions further aggravate health-related challenges. Many participants reported suffering from heat-related illnesses, fever, and colds due to prolonged exposure to harsh outdoor environments. During menstruation, women also face difficulties, as they require access to mobile ablution facilities closer to the fields rather than having to walk long distances to the main farm bathrooms. One vineyard worker expressed frustration, stating:

"The crazy thing is that we don't have maternity leave, but the owner provides breastfeeding breaks—one hour in total during a nine-hour shift, taken in two 30-minute intervals, especially for those who live on the farm" (FGD participant, 14 July 2024, Western Cape).

Despite these challenges, some farms engage with stakeholders such as Fairtrade International to offer awareness and training programmes, including cancer screenings, HIV/AIDS and TB education, and wellness sessions through initiatives like the Kenner Club, which also teaches soft skills like knitting, nutrition, and others. Employers also provide protective gear, including hats, to shield women from the sun while working in the fields annually.

Women farm workers face significant safety challenges when travelling between their homes and workplaces. Participants in the discussions highlighted the risks they encounter, particularly in the early morning hours when they must wake up as early as 4h00 to walk to taxi ranks or bus stations to reach work on time. Similarly, when they finish their shifts, they must walk long distances to the main road to find transport home. These safety concerns are primarily related to the lack of reliable and secure transportation.

Some of the vineyard workers and some participants expressed gratitude for the availability of transport, even though it comes at a fee. However, a major concern remains the safety of their children, as they often leave home very early and return home late at night, with only one day off per week, typically Sunday. As a result, their children spend most of their time alone, under the care of neighbours or extended family members, which raises concerns about their well-being and security.

On some farms, security personnel patrol the premises 24/7, providing workers with a sense of safety while on-site. However, once they leave the farm, particularly if they are permanent employees who occasionally need to travel during the day, they feel extremely vulnerable, especially when walking alone. Despite security measures within the farm, women in the discussions reported instances of rape, violence, and pickpocketing on their way to bus stations. One participant shared:

"Just around the corner, as we walk to the main road, there are informal settlements, and we suspect that some criminals reside there. We feel unsafe and threatened, especially when walking alone or taking chances" (FGD participant, 14 November 2024, Gauteng).

A participant also recounted being a victim of rape outside the farm. In response, farm management took precautionary measures and provided all necessary assistance. While safety remains a crucial concern, participants acknowledged that they generally feel secure on the farm premises. They noted that sexual harassment awareness programmes are conducted among male counterparts, fostering a culture of respect. As a result, no internal cases of sexual harassment were reported.

Both vineyard and dairy farm workers raised concerns about the absence of mobile ablution facilities, further exacerbating safety risks. Women who have to relieve themselves in nearby bushes become highly vulnerable to potential threats, increasing

their exposure to harm. Addressing these safety concerns both in terms of transport and on-site facilities, remains crucial for ensuring the well-being of women working in the agricultural sector.

6.5 Organised labour and representation

According to Budeli (2012), a trade union is defined as a continuous association of wage earners that aims to maintain or improve the wage earners' working conditions. For this project, interviews were conducted with the FAWU and the Abantu trade unions in the Western Cape, representing the wine sector. The primary goal of these unions is to advocate for employees during disputes at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), in labour court cases, and during wage negotiations. The trade unions represent permanent workers employed on wine farms and closely collaborate with the Department of Labour in the province to conduct routine visits to these farms.

The participants from trade unions prided themselves on their work to better the lives of their members, such as negotiating the minimum wage within the sector. A participant said the following:

"*But one more major issue that the trade unions have played, they've set a map where it never happened in this industry. Most especially in the agricultural sector, where today there is a minimum wage. Unions have set that footprint in the tutorials" (Interview, trade union, 16 July, 2024, Western Cape)*.

Another one said the following:

"*We were heavily involved. So, there is no one that is getting paid better than the other one now. As unions we've played that role and make sure that every farmer complies with the law" (Interview, Abantu trade union, 16 July 2024, Western Cape)*.

While the trade union members recognised trade union progress and acknowledged that their members have a better economic outlook, they are now facing secondary issues due to the implementation of the minimum wage. A participant from the trade union pointed out that the minimum wage has had unintended consequences for their members. Furthermore, the minimum wage does not equate to a living wage, which means that farm workers are still experiencing economic hardship. The participant said the following:

"We believe that because of the minimum wage, we deal with consultants in the agricultural sector. But nevertheless it makes it difficult for the unions because since the minimum wage is there, some of the benefits they took away. Because we had some of the farms, they got transport, bread, flour, all those small things. And they didn't pay electricity, but now they must pay electricity"(Interview, trade union, 16 July 2024, Western Cape).

Following the implementation of the minimum wage, many farm workers experienced the withdrawal of various unofficial benefits that had previously been part of their compensation. These included essentials like bread and flour, as well as contributions towards their electricity bills for housing provided on the farm. From a union perspective, this change was perceived as a retaliatory manoeuvre by employers who were reluctant to comply with the new minimum wage requirements. By stripping away these supports, they aimed to offset the costs associated with fairly compensating their workforce, effectively diminishing the overall employment value for the workers.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the issues surrounding migrant and foreign workers have made it challenging for unions to operate effectively. The challenge regarding the migrant and foreign workers is largely due to employers choosing to work with labour brokers who hire undocumented migrant workers for wages that are often below the minimum wage. A participant said the following:

"The other disadvantage that we are sitting with in this matter is the so-called foreigners that the business is bringing in. And it's a real knock off for us as trade unions, because you can't organise them up and say, if I can put it in that fashion or whatever, and

6.6 Access to land and resources

6.6.1 Barriers to land access for ownership and access to credit

Women working in the vineyard sector face a myriad of formidable challenges, particularly concerning land ownership and access. Many find themselves employed as seasonal or low-wage workers in the lush vineyards, a situation that significantly stifles their ability to accumulate the capital necessary for land acquisition. The historical and structural barriers surrounding land ownership continue to pose significant obstacles, with ownership often concentrated among very few individuals. This concentration frequently excludes women who have historically faced dispossession and systemic inequalities.

For those women aspiring to lease land for viticulture and viniculture, the path is fraught with difficulties, including exorbitantly high rental costs and restrictive lease agreements that offer little in the way of long-term security or stability. Despite government land reform initiatives addressing these inequities, many women struggle to navigate these programmes due to bureaucratic red tape, a lack of awareness, and insufficient legal or financial support systems.

This complex web of challenges creates a landscape where women's aspirations for ownership and autonomy in the vineyard sector remain a distant dream, underscoring the crucial need for comprehensive support and reform. Women involved in dairy farming, especially in the provinces of Gauteng and the Free State, also encounter substantial challenges related to land access that hinder their potential in this vital agricultural sector. Both customary practices and legal frameworks impose significant barriers, making it exceedingly difficult for women to own and manage land independently, particularly in rural areas where traditional land tenure systems are heavily skewed in favour of male ownership.

Consequently, many women find themselves reliant on male family members to gain access to farming opportunities, which sharply limits their autonomy and decision-making power. This dependency stifles their contributions and perpetuates inequality within the agricultural landscape (Walker & Dubb, 2021). Moreover, deeply ingrained traditional and societal norms further entrench these obstacles. The perception of commercial farming as a predominantly male domain creates an environment

where women, even those who manage farms, struggle to gain recognition as equal participants. Women often face significant challenges in establishing business partnerships and accessing crucial resources needed for production, undermining their potential to thrive in this sector. One participant shared her experience as follows:

"As a woman, owning land is very problematic. You either face challenges or discouragement from your own family, as they don't believe a woman can own hectares of land and run a farm. I struggle as a woman who inherited land from my grandfather. As an unmarried woman passionate about agriculture and responsible for my family, my grandfather entrusted the land to me. However, I constantly receive negative comments from my brothers, who often make decisions that override my authority. They believe they are the rightful heirs, and therefore, all major decisions should revolve around them" (Interview, farm owner, 28 January 2025. Free State).

Another participant highlighted additional barriers:

"In my area, it seems almost taboo for a woman to own farmland. Even after overcoming the challenge of acquiring land, we still face difficulties in securing financial support from various institutions. Access to markets where we can sell our produce is also a challenge. I don't understand why crops grown by men would be considered different from those grown by women. Discrimination is also evident in farmers' predominantly male-dominated meetings, making it difficult for women's voices to be heard" (Interview, farm owner, 28 January 2025. Free State).

These testimonies highlight the systemic gender inequalities within the agricultural sector, emphasising the need for interventions that promote equitable land access, financial support, and market inclusion for women in farming.

7. OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on the lived experiences of women farm workers in the vineyards and dairy sectors across the Western Cape, Gauteng, and Free State provinces. The study uncovers significant and deeply ingrained gendered inequalities that continue to influence the agricultural labour landscape. These disparities are rooted in enduring patriarchal systems, restrictive socio-cultural norms, and crucial policy and legislative gaps that limit women's access to decent work opportunities, land ownership, social protections, and avenues for meaningful empowerment.

The findings revealed that women often find themselves relegated to low-wage, informal employment with minimal job security and benefits. This precarious labour situation is exacerbated by societal norms that prioritise male authority in decision-making processes related to agricultural production and resource allocation. Despite national efforts to foster transformation and inclusion within the agricultural sector, these endeavours have not yet translated into tangible improvements in the economic participation and social well-being of women farm workers. As a result, women remain disproportionately affected by the socio-economic inequalities that persist within this crucial industry.

The working conditions for women are characterised by severe physical exhaustion, extended hours, and inadequate workplace protections. Women are frequently assigned to labour-intensive and repetitive tasks, including picking fruits and vegetables, milking livestock, and processing raw materials. These demanding roles are often carried out in extreme weather conditions, from sweltering heat to bitter cold, with little to no opportunity for rest or recuperation. During peak agricultural seasons, the intensity of their workload escalates dramatically, with many women forced to work over 10 to 12 hours a day, often without a structured schedule or payment for overtime. The lack of breaks compounds their fatigue and increases the risk of injury. Furthermore, the work environments are typically unsafe, as many participants highlighted the inadequate access to basic amenities such as potable water and sanitary facilities, which are crucial for maintaining health and hygiene.

This systemic neglect of their fundamental labour rights underscores the physical toll of their work and a profound disregard for their overall well-being. The absence of ergonomic tools exacerbates the strain on their bodies, leading to long-term health

issues that are frequently overlooked. Consequently, the conditions in which these women toil illuminate a crucial need for improved labour advocacy and protections that honour their contributions and dignity.

In addition to the challenging working environments, the women farm workers endure devastatingly poor and precarious living conditions that further exacerbate their struggles. Accommodation on farms is frequently overcrowded, housing multiple families in cramped quarters that lack privacy and basic amenities. These living spaces are often poorly maintained, with inadequate ventilation and sanitation facilities. Essential infrastructure, such as clean and functional ablution facilities, is typically absent, forcing women to confront indignities that affect their daily lives.

Evictions are a harsh and daily reality for women farm workers, who frequently face the dire consequence of finding themselves homeless. With limited resources and few options available, they often have no choice but to seek shelter in informal settlements characterised by overcrowded conditions and a lack of basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation facilities, and reliable electricity. This transition to precarious living environments only exacerbated their already vulnerable situation, leading to increased stress and uncertainty as they struggled to support themselves and their families amid the challenges of insufficient social services and economic instability.

These harsh realities are emblematic of a broader systemic failure to uphold even the most basic standards of care and safety for farm workers, reflecting an environment where exploitation is rampant, and the rights of these women are overlooked. Without improvements in living conditions and support systems, the cycle of vulnerability and hardship will persist, leaving many women trapped in a cycle of poverty and marginalisation.

The findings reveal that the burden of care work, which often includes managing household responsibilities and child-rearing duties, significantly impacts women farm workers. Care work is in addition to the challenging working conditions characterised by long hours in physically demanding roles that they face, often with minimal safety measures in place. Compounding these difficulties are persistent pay gaps that disproportionately affect women, perpetuating economic inequalities within the agricultural sector. Additionally, the limited opportunities for professional growth, alongside a lack of access to essential resources such as training and support services,

further exacerbate the challenges faced by these women. This multifaceted situation highlighted the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these systemic issues and promote equity and empowerment in the workforce.

The study further highlights the persistence of violence and exploitation experienced by women in agricultural settings. Many participants reported feeling unsafe in their work environments, particularly when forced to navigate isolated areas (such as fields) and to access sanitation facilities. Long commutes on foot exacerbated the challenges, as inadequate transport infrastructure left them vulnerable during these journeys, especially in low-light conditions or during inclement weather.

The lack of effective grievance mechanisms that could provide recourse and support intensifies these emotional and physical vulnerabilities. Many women expressed fear of potential job loss, which significantly discourages them from reporting instances of harassment or abuse. As a result, this pervasive atmosphere of silence and impunity not only normalises such exploitation but also fosters a widespread erosion of trust in the systems that are ostensibly designed to protect vulnerable workers. The absence of accountability creates a cycle of victimisation that is difficult to break, ultimately undermining both the safety and dignity of women in these crucial labour roles.

Women employed in seasonal or informal labour positions are often systematically excluded from essential social protection mechanisms, such as the UIF and pension plans. This exclusion exacerbates their financial insecurity, leaving them vulnerable to economic instability.

Access to land and credit also emerged as a significant structural barrier for women seeking to transition from wage labour to ownership or entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector. Participants in various discussions have underscored the formidable challenges they face in acquiring land, largely due to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural customs that prioritise male ownership. In many communities, women are systematically excluded from inheritance rights, land reform initiatives, and key decision-making processes regarding land use and agricultural practices. This exclusion limits their ability to own property and restricts their access to credit, as financial institutions often require land ownership as collateral for loans. Consequently, without the means to secure financial resources or establish ownership rights, women remain dependent on male-dominated economic structures. This dependency

stifles their ability to exercise agency, pursue entrepreneurial ventures, and achieve economic independence, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality within the agricultural sector.

Despite the country's adoption of gender mainstreaming frameworks, transformation policies, and comprehensive social protection frameworks, there remains a significant disconnect between these policies and their practical application in agricultural settings. Farm owners frequently acknowledged their compliance with these requirements on paper; however, the participants questioned the tangible benefits of such frameworks for women farm workers. Participants perceived many programmes that promote women's empowerment as irrelevant or inaccessible to the workers who need them most. These sentiments illustrate that addressing gaps highlighted in this report is crucial to ensure that the policies intended to empower women are not just theoretical concepts but effective tools that enhance their livelihoods and well-being.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, including the research conducted in 2024, the CGE offers the following recommendations, many of which reiterate those from the previous report:

8.1 Transformation and upward mobility

Gender transformation in farm work requires careful planning and support, as farmers face pressure to be productive and sustainable. Transitioning women from general workers to supervisory roles necessitates time, funding, and training, which many farmers currently lack in their business plans. To address this, the government should foster partnerships by offering grants and subsidies for training women in agriculture through relevant ministries, including the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development. AgriSETA must play a key role in coordinating these efforts through its training programmes.

Farm owners, however, cannot absolve themselves of responsibility. They are called to fully embrace the constitutional imperative of gender equality and actively implement the essential frameworks established to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly in the workplace. Achieving gender equality is a collective responsibility that extends to every member of society, including farm owners. Therefore, as employers, farm owners must take proactive steps to design and execute comprehensive workplace skills plans that prioritise gender mainstreaming and promote gender equity to create inclusive and equitable work environments.

8.2 Upskilling and education for women farmers

Bridging the education gap is vital for empowering women farmers and enabling them to flourish in an ever-evolving agricultural landscape. Access to modern, labour-saving technologies is crucial, as agricultural machinery is indispensable in sustaining global food production.

Technology should be considered, and the modification and enhancement of existing machinery should be done with the goal of alleviating the physical burdens that women often face in agricultural work. Such innovations increase productivity and promote improved health outcomes, transforming the farming experience for women.

Women are uniquely positioned to offer valuable insights on how to adapt the tools they utilise daily in their farming practices. As agricultural machinery continues to embrace automation and digital advancements, it becomes essential for women to acquire skills in operating sophisticated digital equipment and robotics. Thus, targeted training in new technologies is imperative for women in farming, as it equips them with the resilience needed to navigate various challenges, including those posed by climate change.

Efforts must also focus on reaching women in remote areas, ensuring that training and education serve as a lasting foundation for improved farms and enriched livelihoods. Farm owners and the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development must bear the responsibility in this regard.

8.3 Aligning working conditions to legislation

Conditions of employment, including wages, working hours, and various types of leave, should be strictly governed by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. This legislation mandates that all benefits offered to workers must be clearly defined and codified in a written contract. The Act ensures that employees are fully informed about their rights, entitlements, and the specific conditions under which these benefits are provided. Where there are infringements in labour practices, particularly the contravention of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, the Department of Employment and Labour must take a proactive role in ensuring both compliance and enforcement of labour laws, including the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

Specifically, the CGE recommends that the Department of Labour conducts comprehensive investigations to evaluate the level of compliance among agricultural operations with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. These investigations should include a meticulous examination of employment contracts to ensure they adhere to the stipulations of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, including aspects such as working hours, wages, overtime pay, and leave entitlements. Furthermore, the department should carry out thorough farm inspections that assess compliance with employment conditions, workplace safety standards, and workers' rights.

If discrepancies or misalignments are identified during these assessments, the Department of Labour must take appropriate further action. The department may

use compliance orders, fines, or legal proceedings within the framework of its legal powers and obligations. Such actions are essential to uphold the integrity of labour practices and to protect the rights of women farm workers.

Furthermore, it is essential that any complaints filed by women farm workers with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration are addressed promptly and effectively. Timely responses to these complaints can significantly impact the well-being of women farm workers, allowing them to voice concerns regarding unfair treatment and discrimination. Addressing these issues head-on is vital for upholding labour standards and promoting social justice within the agricultural sector.

8.4 Ablution facilities

There is an urgent need to develop innovative solutions to improve ablution facilities on farms, particularly in remote and rural areas. The challenges associated with providing adequate and accessible ablution facilities in agricultural fields are significant, yet they must be addressed to ensure the safety, dignity, and health of women farm workers. Solutions should prioritise privacy and hygiene, incorporating environmentally sustainable practices where possible.

Collaboration between farm owners and relevant stakeholders, including the Department of Water and Sanitation, is essential to effectively tackle this issue. Additionally, engaging with workers to understand their specific needs and experiences will help create tailored, practical designs that can be implemented in varying agricultural contexts.

8.5 Worker transport

Although employers are under no legal obligation to provide transport for their workers, the unique challenges associated with the remote location of farms, the limited availability of public transportation options, safety risks for women, and the high levels of poverty experienced in many rural areas create a strong case for farmers to offer this crucial support. Ensuring safe transport for workers should take precedence over considerations of productivity and profit margins, as the well-being of workers is paramount.

Typically, the modes of transport currently utilised, such as trucks and tractors, are ill-suited and inherently unsafe for transporting human passengers. This becomes particularly evident in the unfortunate event of an accident, where the risks involved can lead to severe injuries or fatalities. To mitigate these dangers, it is essential for farmers to collaborate with provincial departments of transport to develop strategies that ensure the safe and cost-effective transportation of workers.

Incorporating a thorough transport risk assessment should be an integral part of the overall health and safety risk assessment for any agricultural business. By identifying potential hazards and implementing appropriate safety measures, employers can significantly lower the risks associated with worker transportation. When managed effectively, this proactive approach not only reduces the likelihood of injury but also reduces the likelihood of injury and minimises financial losses related to accidents.

8.6 Adequate housing

Despite its intention to protect farm workers, the Extension of Security of Tenure Act has led to more evictions as some farmers prefer employing off-farm residents. This increase in evictions has resulted in pressure exerted on nearby rural townships and informal settlements. This situation has implications for local municipalities regarding housing infrastructure and services, which are not adequately addressed in practice.

Additionally, the findings revealed that on-site accommodation for farm workers was often in deplorable conditions, characterised by structural disrepair and inadequate amenities. Many accommodations lack proper sanitation facilities and heating and are overcrowded, which poses serious health risks. In addition, the scarcity of available accommodation on farms has led to significant overcrowding, forcing many workers to share cramped living quarters. This situation often results in fewer workers being able to live on-site. Moreover, the practice of constructive eviction has become a troubling trend among farm owners. This tactic deliberately forces tenants out of their homes, undermining their rights and well-being. Actions such as cutting off essential services like water and electricity, subjecting tenants to harassment, and creating unbearably poor living conditions are seen as attempts to drive tenants away.

Given these dire circumstances, it is crucial for the Department of Human Settlements, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, and the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development to thoroughly

investigate and address the housing conditions and municipal service provisions available to agricultural workers. Collaborative efforts are needed to ensure that safe, adequate, and dignified living arrangements are established for those who work the land, ultimately contributing to their welfare and enhancing agricultural productivity.

Furthermore, it is crucial to incorporate the specific needs, including gendered needs, of farm workers into planning and policy processes. This integration should focus on ensuring their access to secure land tenure, which protects their rights to occupy and cultivate land without fear of eviction. Furthermore, creating healthy living environments is crucial, including providing access to clean water, adequate sanitation, and safe housing that meets health and safety standards. Fostering the active participation of farm workers in developing and implementing housing solutions not only empowers them but also ensures that the solutions are tailored to their specific circumstances and challenges.

8.7 Land use and customary practices

Land is an essential socio-economic resource that underpins the fabric of rural livelihoods, where women constitute a significant segment of the agricultural labour force. Despite their crucial role, women confront numerous barriers to accessing and owning land, largely due to entrenched conservative customs and prevailing power dynamics that favour men. This systemic inequality often relegates women to the status of subservient farm workers, undermining their contributions and aspirations. Moreover, the interplay between statutory and customary land laws adds another layer of complexity, severely hindering women's ability to secure land-based livelihoods and achieve food security.

The National Development Plan (NDP) underscores the pressing need to address the shortcomings of current land use frameworks, which are both ineffective and discriminatory, particularly against women. To create a more equitable system, it is essential to transform customary practices that obstruct women's access to land ownership. Furthermore, land ownership mechanisms must be restructured to become more responsive to the needs of women.

Enhancing land cultivation in rural areas is crucial, alongside initiatives that empower women farm workers to transition into landowners. Women's land ownership can be

achieved through targeted skills training programmes and improved access to funding opportunities. Furthermore, a comprehensive discussion is warranted to reconcile existing legal frameworks with the aim of establishing a fair and inclusive system that recognises and supports women as rightful landowners.

To advance these initiatives, the CGE recommends that the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, along with the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, assume a leading role in implementing these vital proposals.

8.8 Information, awareness of farm workers' rights

Women farm workers need clear information and awareness about their rights, protections, benefits, and the parameters of their job responsibilities. This information must include understanding acceptable working conditions that meet established standards. It is essential that this information is provided in languages that farm workers can understand and in formats that consider their diverse literacy levels.

The Department of Employment and Labour, with the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the Commission for Gender Equality, and the Human Rights Commission of South Africa, can collaborate with various civil society organisations, including those specialising in legal matters. By leveraging their public education and information departments, they can design and implement comprehensive programmes specifically aimed at bridging existing educational gaps in the farming communities.

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INSIDE BACK (BLANK)

OFFICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

HEAD OFFICE
2 Kotze Street Women's Jail,
East Wing Constitution Hill
Braamfontein, 2017
Tel: +27 11 403 7182

GAUTENG
267 Lillian Ngoyi Street
Praetor Forum Pretoria, 0001
Tel: +27 12 341 6090

EASTERN CAPE
3-33 Phillip Frame Road
Waverly Office Park Chiselhurst
East London, 5247
Tel: +27 43 722 3489

LIMPOPO
Cnr Grobler & Schoeman Street
106 Library Gardens Square,
1st Floor Polokwane, 0700
Tel: +27 15 291 3070

KWAZULU-NATAL
40 Dr A.B Xuma Road
Commercial City, Suite 1219
Durban, 4000
Tel: +27 31 305 2105

FREE STATE
49 Charlotte Maxeke Street
Fedsure Building, 2nd Floor
Bloemfontein, 9300
Tel: +27 51 430 9348

NORTHERN CAPE
143 Du Toitspan Road
NPO Building
Kimberley, 8300
Tel: +27 53 832 0477

NORTH-WEST
38 Molopo Road
Mahikeng, 2745
Tel: +27 18 381 1505

@CGE_ZA
Commission for Gender Equality
@CommissionForGenderEquality
cgelive

General Enquiries – info@cge.org.za
Media Enquiries – media@cge.org.za
Legal Complaints: Gender – Enquiries@cge.org.za

www.cge.org.za