

Not in Our Name:

Women Farm Workers and Land Redistribution in Zimbabwe¹

There is no doubt in any thinking black Zimbabwean's mind that land redistribution was and still is necessary. Our war of liberation was all about redistributing productive resources that had been taken from us by the colonial settlers. However, as has already been articulated by most progressive civil society groups, the land reform programme should be transparent, equitable and benefit those (mostly black), people who needed it most.

A lot has been said about how chaotic, opaque and problematic the land reform project has been. The Zimbabwean government claims that the current problems the country is facing are all a

product of its land reform exercise. In the name of land reform many ordinary black Zimbabweans have been violently assaulted, tortured, sexually violated, or imprisoned. The irony is that those who were the most marginalized, the most in need of land, have been at the receiving end of these violations. Those in whose name the 3rd Chimurenga has been waged are yet to taste the fruits of "liberation". Women are among those who are yet to see the benefits of land reform.

This presentation focuses on one group of women who should have been part of the beneficiaries of land redistribution. Women farm workers.

The situation of women farm workers before *jambanja*

Women farm workers are one of the most exploited, and vulnerable social group among other workers. Their situation was bad even before the land reform programme and has been worsened by the current crisis. Statistics and research show that:

- Women are the bulk of non-permanent workers on farms. This is because women are not normally seen as workers in their own right. They are considered as part of a male-headed household and so their rights are often ignored.

- Women account for less than 10 per cent of the permanent labour force in commercial farming. According to the Central Statistical Office (CSO), in 1999 the sector had 152,790 permanent male employees (90.3 per cent) and 16,460 permanent female employees (9.7 per cent).
- Female employees are mostly casual workers, constituting 55 per cent of casual labour. Female casual labour tends to be concentrated in the horticulture sector.

1 Most of the statistics quoted in this paper were taken from: *The situation of commercial farm workers after land reform in Zimbabwe*, A paper prepared by Lloyd M. Sachikonye March 2003.

- Women farm workers tend to be single heads of households. At national level, women head one in three households.
- Wages for women in this sector are below those of their male counterpart, and are very very low. For example the average wage in 2001 was Z\$ 4 500 gross per month for female casual workers.
- Although low, these wages made all the difference between starvation and survival, between extreme poverty and access to the basic things of life. According to the Poverty Assessment Study Survey (PASS) of the mid-1990s, the incomes that farm workers received enabled them to escape becoming the 'poorest of the poor.'
- Many women often supplemented their income through activities such as beer brewing and prostitution.
- Housing, education, and access to health were, even before *jambanja*, very problematic for women. Farm workers suffer disproportionately higher levels of malnutrition, infant mortality, and HIV/AIDS infection.
- Like their male colleagues, women only accessed small pieces of land given to them by commercial farm owners for their personal/household use.
- There is a general xenophobic attitude towards farm workers in some circles. Farm workers are often called names such as **MaNyasaland**, - people from former Nyasaland/Malawi, **maBhurandayi** – from Blantyre/Malawi, **maMosken** – Mozambicans. This is despite the fact that statistics show that workers of foreign descent now account for less than 20% of the total work-force.
- The citizenship rights of farm workers have always been precarious. This is again built on the xenophobic attitude of decision makers. Particular problems facing women include: access and rights to get the ever elusive long birth certificates for their children; access to national registration documents; access to marriage certificates which protect their rights in cases of inheritance and divorce; and the right to vote – which was denied to many of them

The Impact of *Jambanja* on the rights of women farm workers

The following findings from recent research carried out by L. Sachikonye highlight not only the negative impact but also the short-falls of the land reform exercise.

- Less than 5 per cent of farm workers were given land under the fast-track programme. Because

the workers were seen as extensions of their 'white bosses', they were not seen as deserving of any benefits from this exercise.

- In comparison with organised interest groups such as war veterans, women have not been allocated a fair share of land. They

appear to have received less than 20 per cent of the land nationally.

- About 70 per cent of the original farm work-force are estimated to have lost their jobs.
- It is also estimated that more than 50 per cent of permanent female workers and nearly 60 per cent of seasonal female workers lost their jobs. This compares with 30 and 33 per cent respectively for permanent and seasonal male workers.
- About 42% of the female seasonal workers have also lost their employment.
- There has been a decline of 63 per cent and 42 per cent respectively in numbers of permanent and seasonal women workers living on farms. This shows the higher job losses among them. It is not clear where these women have gone and how they are living. However the current economic crisis can only make one assume that wherever they are, they are living in the worst economic and social conditions.
- Only about a quarter of the farm workers who lost jobs received severance packages by the end of 2002. The packages would have cushioned them against loss of income, at least for a few months. Because women were not permanent employees it is clear that they did not get any severance packages.
- An unfortunate development is farm workers' diminishing access to crucial resources and services. Change in farm ownership has restricted access to housing, schools, clinics and safe water.

Where a farm owner has been evicted, the running and maintenance of the school and payment of the teaching staff often cease, leading to the school's closure. Most early child education centres (ECECs) have also been closed down, as have farm clinics.

- For jobless farm workers, access to food has been difficult and irregular. Food aid has been made available to some of those without a livelihood, and to children under five and those of school age. Some NGOs and churches have played a key role in this.
- Despite these efforts, malnutrition is increasing among farm workers' children on farms and in informal settlements, and as usual it is the mothers who have to find ways to cope.
- Like other social groups, farm workers have been vulnerable to the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Resources and home-based care institutions for the sick are very limited. Constant food shortages mean poor nutrition for AIDS patients, among others.
- The political violence that has ravaged Zimbabwe has also affected women farm workers. Scores were beaten up, raped, thrown out of their homes, and in some cases forced into economic activities not of their choice.

Our vision of the future: protecting and promoting the rights of women

1. Any land or resource redistribution exercise must be built on the need to eradicate poverty among the poor black people – women in particular
2. Women living on farms have an immediate need for food supplies. Food distribution must be non political, non-partisan, transparent and fair.
3. Food handouts are not a sustainable way to ensure long-term food security. Farm workers should be provided with the means to produce food for themselves, i.e. land. If government is really serious about righting the wrongs of the past, and ensuring that poor and marginalized citizens get what is rightfully theirs, then there must be a clear process to give land to those who need it most. Farm workers, and more precisely women farm workers are one such group.
4. There is need for support to farm workers who have been or will be given land. There is need for an extensive programme to provide inputs, particularly seed, fertiliser, draught-power and an extension service to those workers with land on which to grow food.
5. The criteria used for land allocation must be revisited to ensure that the landless, women and farm workers receive preference. Land that had been allocated for prospective black commercial farmers remains unoccupied: of the projected 51,000 “new farmers,” about 30,000 have taken up land. The remaining land should be allocated equitably to the priority groups
6. Land that was allegedly taken up as second or third farms by some members of the elite must be given to those who deserve and need it.
7. Also, there is little or no infrastructure or services in most newly settled areas: no roads, electricity, protected water supplies, schools or clinics. While previous resettlement schemes included systematic planning for and investment in such infrastructure and services, this was absent in the current schemes. There is a danger of the spread of disease and prolonged disruption of children’s schooling, unless infrastructure and services are put in place. But this will require holistic planning and very substantial resources. These facilities would serve the needs not only of farm workers, but also of newly settled small farmers.
8. There should be a special effort to ensure that women farm workers do indeed secure full citizenship rights. Their access to birth certificates, (for themselves and their children), national identity documents and passports should be facilitated.

Conclusion

At all levels of change, women in general and women farm workers in particular must be allowed space to participate in the search for solutions to their problems and to the serious crisis in our country. For too long women, especially those on farms have been treated as second and even third class citizens, silenced, marginalized and spoken for by others. This change will only come and be sustainable if as part of the change process, some fundamental cultural, and political shifts take place among whites and white farmers, men in general, and more importantly the black male political leadership in our country and in our region. The starting point is acknowledging that women's rights are human rights.

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