

Driving transformation: The role of women in SA agriculture should be prioritised

Addressing gender disparities in the agricultural sector is a prerequisite to increasing women and youth participation in the sector, creating much-needed employment opportunities and ensuring food security, says agricultural economist Wandile Sihlobo.



Kate Holt via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Despite the changes in the gender composition in other industries, Sihlobo notes that the share of women's contribution in South Africa's agricultural labour market has been hampered by legal and cultural constraints which manifest themselves in unequal land inheritance, ownership and usage. In addition, women receive less than 10% of available credit and 7% of extension services. This is similar to the fate of women in the developing world and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

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"If anything, women's participation in the agricultural sector has been volatile. In the quest to grow the sector and unlock employment generation, it is critical to explore ways of tackling gender disparity and improve the proportion of women in the agricultural labour market in the next few years," says Sihlobo.

He continues to say that women constitute between 60% and 80% of smallholder farmers but make up only 15% to 20% of landholders in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sihlobo says the legal and cultural barriers that impede women from fully participating in agriculture need to be tackled head on in order to unlock the latent potential of this sector. "It is also important to note that women's incomes make a larger impact on food security compared to that of men. Studies have shown that every Rand in income earned by women achieves the same impact as R11 earned by men. Therefore, increasing the effective participation of women in commercial agriculture will significantly increase the potential to address food insecurity."

Despite disproportionate representation as landholders, Sihlobo concedes that the industry is making encouraging progress in increasing the number of women participating in leadership positions. Several national agricultural associations and organisations, such as the African Farmers Association (AFASA), the Produce Marketing Association (PMA), Fruit South Africa, Grain South Africa's farmer development programme and the Agricultural Business Chamber's Grain Unit, amongst others, have prominent women at the helm.



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"The contribution of women should not only be limited to the labour market and farms, but should also extend to management positions that can influence public forums and policy discussion. Given women's contribution in these roles, their inclusion in agricultural public policy engagements would potentially add a rich diversity of views that would address fundamental gender gaps. This desired outcome would, in all likelihood, not materialise if women are left out in the cold and if their valuable contribution in addressing these issues is not adopted."

Peter Setou, chief executive of the Vumelana Advisory Fund, concurs about the importance of increasing women inclusion in the agricultural sector and more so within the Communal Property Institutions (CPI) structures: "There is a need for adequate representation of women within the CPI structure to ensure that women who have been recipients of the land reform programme play decision making roles within the CPI structures on their Communal Property Association (CPA)."

The Vumelana Advisory Fund is a non-profit organisation that was established in 2012 to help beneficiaries of the land reform programme put their land to profitable use by establishing commercially viable partnerships between communities and investors.

"We need to recognise and acknowledge the impact that women can make in these structures in addressing some of the challenges being experienced by land reform beneficiaries on the ground."



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"We need to foster an environment within the land reform setting to drive the equal participation of women and empower them for their voice to be heard within the CPA structure on what should be done within the entire CPA value chain. Where women want to participate in traditionally male roles, they should be encouraged to do so, to chair CPAs and serve in various roles including treasury, governance and other areas within the structure of the CPA, and to drive initiatives for community development and other decision making roles."

He adds that women must be capacitated through training to enable them to participate in projects where a lack of capacity has been identified to ensure that any challenges are dealt with through an effective process.

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"From a policy perspective, government has done quite a lot of work in this area through broad-based black economic empowerment, which stipulates the equal need for women participation across sectors. The Department of Rural Development and Land Reform has also put in place a policy framework to enable women to meaningfully participate in the land reform programme, and government in this regard should be commended.

"However, a lot of work needs to be done on the ground to translate these policies into tangible outcomes for women since implementation has not been effective.

"Our biggest concern is that if we continue with the current trajectory, we will not ever get to a point where we meet our transformation goals. As we make progress towards land reform, we must also make progress towards addressing gender issues and ensuring a balance within the gender structure. Whilst we welcome increased focus on land reform, gender transformation and inclusivity must be an integral part of this process," concludes Setou.

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