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# Global markets, employment restructuring and female labourers on Western Cape fruit farms

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The expansion of the South African deciduous fruit export sector in the context of globalisation in the early 1990s has led to changing patterns of employment on fruit farms. Producers have downsized their permanent on-farm labour forces and begun to employ various categories of flexible off-farm labour, particularly contract labour. This discussion examines the implications of this restructuring of employment for two groups of women working on Western Cape fruit farms — those still working and living on the farms and those who have recently been transformed into off-farm contract labourers. The research findings on which this discussion is based suggest that, while the consequences are contradictory for both groups of women, female contract workers are particularly vulnerable to risk and livelihood deprivation while having very limited access to institutional social protection.

## Globale markte, herstrukturering van indiensneming en vroue-arbeid op Wes-Kaapse vrugteplase

Die uitbreiding van die Suid-Afrikaanse sagtevrugte-uitvoerbedryf in die konteks van globalisering in die vroeë 1990's het 'n verandering in indiensnemingspatrone op vrugteplase tot gevolg gehad. Die verandering behels die afskaling deur produsente van hul permanent werknemers wat op die plaas woon en 'n toename in die indiensneming van verskillende kategorieë van fleksitydwerkers wat nie op die plaas woon nie — spesifiek kontrakwerkers. Die artikel ondersoek die implikasies van die herstrukturering van indiensneming vir twee groepe vroue wat op Wes-Kaapse vrugteplase werk — dié wat nog op die plase werk en bly en dié vroue wat onlangs na kontrakwerk verskuif het. Die navorsingbevindings suggereer dat, alhoewel die implikasies vir beide groepe vroue teenstrydig is, vrouekontrakwerkers veral kwesbaar is vir risiko en ontbering en beperkte toegang tot institusionele beskerming geniet.

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Global integration is leading to changing patterns of employment, with a decline in secure, permanent work and an increase in informal, insecure work linked to the global economy. This trend also characterises the South African deciduous fruit sector for export. The expansion of fruit exports in the context of globalisation in the 1990s has led to both the “modernisation” and the transformation of employment on farms. This has involved a shift away from permanently employed, on-farm labour towards various categories of temporary, flexible, off-farm labour, particularly contract labour. A number of factors underlie the restructuring of the South African fruit labour market. Within the sector, changes following global integration have been experienced by means of the change in the global horticultural value chain linking the sector to British and European supermarkets, the deregulation of domestic agriculture and export markets, and the increase in state regulation of employment. These have affected the linkages through which fruit producers access the global economy as well as their employment strategies.

An important theme in debates on labour market restructuring in agri-food exports within the broader context of globalisation and trade liberalisation has been the gender dimension of the informalisation of employment. Given the seasonal nature of agri-industries, female workers tend to be concentrated in informal, flexible employment. While recent labour market restructuring in the South African fruit export sector has meant that significant numbers of male and female workers previously employed on farms have been moved to more insecure forms of off-farm work, this form of insecure work has had particularly significant implications for women, not only in terms of how they engage with and experience the labour market, but also in terms of how it affects their livelihoods and well-being, as well as their access to social protection.

In the wake of the reintegration of the South African deciduous fruit sector into global markets this paper wishes to examine the implications of the restructuring of employment for two groups of women in particular — those who work and live on fruit farms and those who have been shifted into off-farm contract labour. The discussion comprises six parts. The first explores labour market restructuring in agri-food sectors and important themes emanating from women’s in-

corporation as informal, flexible workers within the export processing sectors of producer countries. The second contextualises the restructuring of the South African fruit labour market by reviewing some of the major changes by means of which fruit producers have had access to global markets and by examining fruit producers' employment strategies in the context of these changes. Following a review of the methodology used to obtain the data on which the discussion is based, the fourth and main part examines some of the implications of employment restructuring for female on-farm workers as well as for those women who have shifted to off-farm contract work. The discussion highlights the contradictory effects of restructuring for both groups of women and how gender relations frame these women's labour market involvement. The fifth part of the paper focuses on female farm workers' access to social protection and emphasises the role of informal social protection for female contract workers. The main conclusions are presented in part six.

## 1. Agri-food globalisation, flexible employment and female workers

The literature on the restructuring of work and employment over the past two to three decades has emphasised the world-wide growth of "atypical" or flexible employment of labour, both in export-orientated manufacturing sectors and in the agri-food export sectors of producer countries (cf Valodia 2001; Standing 1999). While farming has always required flexible labour inputs, there appears to have been an increased demand for labour flexibility in agriculture in recent years (cf Errington & Gasson 1996). It has been suggested that the use of flexible labour has been most pronounced in fruit and vegetable production. Technological developments have not overcome the need for large quantities of relatively intensive, "careful" labour and these sectors require more intensive investment of labour than other sub-sectors of the industry. Thus agri-food firms involved in fruit and vegetable production have been more active in experimenting with new forms of labour recruitment, most notably through the casualisation of employment relations. They have also adopted the "dispersed and less highly regulated forms of subcontracting associated with flexible production strategies in the industrial sector" (Collins 1993: 57).

A dominant theme in debates on the restructuring of labour markets in agri-food exports within the broader context of globalisation and trade liberalisation has been the gender dimension of the increasing flexibilisation of employment. Debates on the so-called “feminisation” of labour in the agri-food export sector have tended to emphasise the increase in the employment of women as informal, flexible workers within export processing sectors.<sup>1</sup> Given the seasonal nature of such agri-industries, women are seen as part of the reserve army of labour that can be resorted to at the height of the season. Recent studies have explored the different ways in which women are incorporated into export-oriented production, the distinctiveness of their labour market participation and the implications of such involvement for women’s lives and well-being (cf Razavi 1999).

From a value chain perspective, flexible employment is seen to facilitate the operation of labour-intensive buyer-driven value chains in a global economy with high levels of uncertainty and risk.<sup>2</sup> The increased use of flexible employment has led to the increasing feminisation of the labour force in horticultural value chains in both Chile and South Africa. In Chile, for example, women constitute 52% of temporary, seasonal and casual jobs, while in South African deciduous fruit farming they represented 69% of the flexible farm labour force in the mid-1990s (cf Barrientos *et al* 1999; Kritzinger *et al* 1995).

Employers’ preference for female workers has also been shown to relate to their perceptions of women as having certain skills (“nimble fingers”) and being more docile and compliant as well as more accepting of poorer employment conditions than male workers. This enables producers to drive down both wage and non-wage labour costs within

- 1 Barrientos *et al* (1999) provide an overview of case study research illustrative of this trend. Women, for example, account for half of the rural labour force involved in fruit and vegetable production in Mexico and for 70% of the grape labour force in Brazil. In Ecuador the participation of women is estimated at approximately 70%, while research indicates a 50% rate in Guatemala and Costa Rica. Within the Chilean fruit export sector women represent half of the total labour force.
- 2 The “[g]lobal value chain describes the full range of activities that are required to bring a product or service from conception through the different phases of production [and] delivery to final customers and final disposal after use” (Kaplinsky & Morris 2001:4).

a competitive global export environment. However, Raynolds (2001: 24-5) cautions against any overly simplistic link between processes of feminisation and informalisation by arguing that gendered processes of labour force construction are potentially variable. In a study of the gendered nature of production and labour force restructuring involving a corporate pineapple plantation in the Dominican Republic, she demonstrates how large numbers of women were initially hired because local men refused the poorly paid contract work. Later, men appropriated this work when their alternatives deteriorated. Thus, workers' gender identities and strategies are negotiated in the workplace and in local communities.

Women's concentration in flexible employment within the agri-food sector has given rise to a number of themes. The first relates to the precarious, insecure nature of this type of employment and, in view of this, to the role played by the state in providing employment and social protection for vulnerable female (and male) agricultural workers. Seasonal, temporary farm workers do not enjoy the regular wages, benefits or job protection usually associated with more stable forms of employment. Their temporary employment status often excludes them from the legal right to organise and can affect their pension and social security payments, contracts and job security guarantees, while giving employers total freedom to set wages and dismiss workers (cf Barrientos *et al* 1999). While state policies have been shown to mediate the context for rural action, it has been suggested that within neo-liberal economies, the state no longer plays such a significant role in conditioning labour relations as it once did (cf Marsden 1992: 222; Acre & Marsden 1993). Thus the state does not necessarily act in the interests of agricultural workers in securing good employment conditions and sustainable livelihoods.

A second theme concerns the conceptual models utilised in analysing the implications of women's integration into agri-food exports for their lives and well-being. There is no automatic link between women's integration into global export markets and their experiences either of subordination and exclusion from workers' rights or of empowerment, independence and autonomy (cf Razavi 1999: 665-7; Bee & Vogel 1997). The consequences of women's integration into such markets are usually contradictory and their experiences of both gains

and losses are mediated by gender, race and class. Thus the consequences for particular women need to be socially contextualised and empirically investigated.

A third theme, closely linked to the above, is that workers participate in the labour market as gendered beings and that gendered social relations frame employment. Sen (1996: 821-3), for example, suggests that the globalisation of production processes and distribution channels requires a “fresh look” at the relationship between women and markets. Neo-liberal politics often fails to take into account the asymmetry of gender relations and, as such, to ignore the implications of the gender division of labour, women’s unpaid domestic labour as well as intra-household gender relations. Thus, existing gender relations which allocate domestic and childcare activities to women and being the primary “breadwinner” to men shape the nature of women’s labour market integration, the ways in which they manage their integration and the ways in which they access social protection against risk and insecurity.

The final theme concerns the choices and trade-offs that women (and men) have to make, which need to be examined within different socio-cultural and historical contexts. In localities characterised by high levels of unemployment, the choice is often between insecure and unprotected employment and no employment at all. This highlights the need to examine how restructuring processes are experienced in particular localities and how globalisation and markets take on a fragmented and heterogeneous character within different social settings (cf Acre & Marsden 1993; Ward & Almås 1997). Empirical studies at the local and regional levels, for example, have revealed “the importance of social categories such as race, class, ethnicity and gender in understanding how globalised agriculture shapes and is shaped by the social relations of production” (Jarosz 1996: 45). Crucial to understanding the embeddedness of the global in the local is the awareness that women, or even third-world women, do not constitute a homogenous category. We need to examine how particular groups of women in particular localities experience the changes generated in their lives, in terms of life-long earning prospects, well-being, relationships with family and co-workers, and issues related to autonomy and self-worth (Razavi 1999: 678).

## 2. Changing patterns of employment on Western Cape fruit farms

### 2.1 Global value chains, markets and the state

The South African export fruit sector is highly labour-intensive and has always been one of the largest employers of black people in the Western Cape. It is estimated that it provides approximately 104 500 permanent-equivalent direct job opportunities on farms producing deciduous fruit (cf Louw 2003). The fruit sector experienced radical changes in the 1990s following political democratisation and its re-integration into the global economy. At the retail end of the global value chain within countries to which South Africa exports fresh fruit, large supermarkets are increasing their control along the supply chain (cf Barrientos *et al* 1999). Supermarkets act as dominant, powerful buyers and are making increasing demands on fruit growers to meet tight production schedules and to comply with high standards. Their dominant position allows them to govern their agents and suppliers within the chain. Producers have to meet increasingly stringent technical and environmental standards, as more supermarkets require them to comply with external certification of standards, particularly EURE-GAP<sup>3</sup> and HACCP.<sup>4</sup> Producers are also under pressure to comply with social and labour standards such as the UK Ethical Trade Initiative Baseline Code. However, while supermarkets dictate standards the prices they pay are subject to fluctuation on the open market. Thus any risks are ultimately passed on to growers within the value chain.

The second link between growers and the global economy is through the market and trade channel. There is increased competition within South Africa itself as well as from the growing supply of fruit from Chile, New Zealand and now also China putting pressure on global prices.<sup>5</sup>

3 The Euro-Retailer Fresh Produce Working Group's protocol on Good Agricultural Practices.

4 Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points — a system for food safety.

5 For example, while in 1980 South Africa and Chile both exported 178 000 metric tons of apples, by 2000 Chile had increased this figure to 415 000 compared to 255 000 for South Africa (DFPT 2001).

The third channel affecting growers' linkages to global markets is via the state — particularly by means of legislation aimed at the transformation of South Africa within the global context. One aspect involves the deregulation of the single market export channel Unifruco (now Capespan) in 1997. With deregulation, fruit is now sold to Europe and the UK largely on a consignment basis and prices are not agreed until very close to the point of final delivery. This has made competition much more intense within SA and led to rapid expansion in the number of exporters operating out of the country (*Abstract of Agricultural Statistics* 1998 & 2000), thus putting further pressure on prices.

The second aspect involves the extension of employment legislation to agricultural workers since 1994 and the effect of this on fruit growers. The following legislation is particularly relevant to this discussion: the Unemployment Insurance Act (1993) provides farm workers with an unemployment insurance fund; the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1993 and 1998) stipulates basic conditions of employment and determines the length of working week, maternity leave, sick leave and overtime pay, and the Labour Relations Act (1995) extends the right to strike action and protection against unfair dismissals to agricultural workers. Until 1997 farm workers had no protection against unfair arbitrary eviction from farms but the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (1997) now provides them with a basic level of tenure to protect them from unlawful evictions. The Employment Equity Act (1998) stipulates the implementation of affirmative action programmes for particular categories of employees, including women. The Minimum Wage Act (2002) also has implications for producers' labour costs.

Employment legislation has not only been a significant factor in producers' efforts to "formalise" employment relations with their workers in order to raise productivity, but has also contributed significantly to broader changes in their employment strategies.

## 2.2 Fruit producers' employment strategies

The Western Cape fruit producers' employment strategies in response to political and economic changes cannot be disinterred from the local cultural context of paternalism. Paternalistic employment relations between farmers and workers date back to the days of slavery and the Masters and Servants Act of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



According to Du Toit (1992) traditional paternalism has been characterised by a “organic” view of labour relations and the absolute power of the farmer. Within this highly personalised relationship, workers have often been treated as minors who need protection and to be looked after by the farmer. However, on most fruit farms traditional paternalism has since the beginning of the 1980s been increasingly “modernised”, bringing about a reduction in the unilateral power and authority of the farmer as well as a greater emphasis on human resource management and the social “development” of workers through programmes and projects. The latter have often been earmarked for on-farm women workers and have included crèches, after school care, literacy classes, choirs, bible study groups, and so on.

Within the context of paternalistic employment relations, labour regimes on Western Cape fruit farms have until recently exhibited a number of important features. One of the most significant is that, in contrast to farm employment in most other producer countries, the vast majority of permanently and seasonally employed workers have been housed on farms. Secondly, the farm labour force has always been structured along racial and gender lines, with women concentrated in temporary, casual and seasonal jobs.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, the unit of employment has traditionally been a family and not an individual worker. Thus women accessed farm employment by virtue of being linked to a male partner/spouse or a male family member.

Fruit producers’ responses to deregulation, increased global competition, far-reaching legislative intervention by the state and downward pressure on prices have varied. However, a dominant trend has been for growers to downsize their on-farm permanent work force (including seasonally-employed women), retain a core of permanently employed on-farm workers, and increase their employment of various categories of flexible off-farm labour — particularly contract labour (cf Du Toit & Ally 2001; Barrientos *et al* 2002). Contract work can be interpreted as one type of informal work and is part of the “externalisation” of employment, whereby work is put out to a third party

6 Until recently the vast majority of on-farm workers were so-called “Coloureds”. However, the employment of African contract workers in certain fruit regions is increasing significantly.

— a contractor or agent who hires and pays workers. Thus no direct employment relationship exists between producers and their contract workers.

Errington & Gasson (1996) identify a number of factors, common to a wide range of industries, that have tended to increase the demand for labour flexibility in agriculture. Three of these are particularly significant in interpreting Western Cape fruit producers' employment strategies. Firstly, more flexible labour reduces production costs as its use ensures that the permanent work force is used to full capacity, with minimum slack. Secondly, flexible labour can be obtained at lower wages than permanent workers. Not only are pay rates usually lower, but employers also save on non-wage labour costs. On-farm workers enjoy benefits that flexible workers are denied, the most significant of which is on-farm housing. Such benefits are estimated to be equivalent to an additional 30% of on-farm workers' monetary income. Thirdly, given the volatility of fruit export markets and an increasingly competitive environment, fruit producers have been reluctant to establish long-term agreements with relatively large numbers of workers.

Downsizing on-farm permanent and seasonal labour and increasing flexible off-farm labour has thus become an attractive option for fruit growers. The advantage for producers using contract labour is that they are able to meet the flexible production schedules set by global buyers while minimizing the costs and contractual commitments of employment. However, the employment of contract labour also involves risks as producers are less able to control the skills, commitment or employment conditions of workers in order to meet the standards of quality set by global buyers.

### 3. Research methodology

The discussion is based on research conducted within the deciduous fruit export sector during 1994/5 (Kritzinger *et al* 1995), 1998/9 (Kritzinger & Vorster 1990) and 2001/3 (Barrientos *et al* 2002; Kritzinger 2003). The first of these studies involved a survey of the labour situation on deciduous fruit farms and was conducted within the nine deciduous fruit-growing regions of the Western Cape Province and one

region in the Northern Cape Province.<sup>7</sup> The follow-up study conducted in 1998/9 included 50% of the producers involved in the first study, all farming in the Western Cape.<sup>8</sup> The aim of this study was to explore whether and to what extent changes in the labour arrangements of fruit producers had taken place over the five-year period. These two surveys form the basis of the discussion of the restructuring of employment and its implications for female on-farm workers.

This examination of how recent restructuring of employment has affected women who have moved to off-farm contract labour is based on two qualitative studies involving case studies in two important fruit-growing regions of the Western Cape — Ceres and Grabouw.<sup>9</sup> In the first of these case studies, staff at two large packhouses and 18 fruit producers linked to the global export chain underwent semi-structured interviews on the effects of global market pressures on their employment strategies. Interviews were also carried out with 40 of their workers in various employment categories, with eight contractors employed by these producers and with 16 contract workers employed by these contractors.<sup>10</sup> In the second case study 14 women doing contract work on various export fruit farms in the Ceres and Grabouw regions were traced through labour contractors and interviewed.<sup>11</sup> Most of the interviews were in Afrikaans, and a few in Xhosa. Interview material was transcribed, thematically analysed and translated into English. While not representative of the South African fruit sector as a whole, these case studies explore in more depth the linkages between pressures along the global value chain and their effects on producers' employment strategies as well as on the livelihood and well-being of their workers.

7 This study, which involved 105 fruit producers and more than 600 male and female farm workers, was funded by Unifruco (now Capespan).

8 The follow-up study was undertaken for the Centre for Rural Legal Studies, Stellenbosch, and partly funded by Capespan.

9 I would like to express my appreciation of Hester Rossouw's valuable contribution to these projects.

10 This study was undertaken as part of the Globalisation and Poverty Programme and funded by the Department for International Development of the UK Government.

11 The project was funded by the Department of Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch.

#### 4. Women working on fruit farms

Unlike most other producer countries, for example Chile, and due to historical developments, in South Africa, women working on fruit farms have been integrated into agricultural wage labour since the inception of the industry. However, as is the case with growers elsewhere, South African fruit producers have viewed women as a cheap and compliant work force that can merely be drawn into work at the height of each season. Orton *et al* (2001) have argued that women's labour became an integral part of Western Cape fruit farmers' efforts to secure access to cheap labour after the abolition of slavery in the 1800s. Farmers expected to have access to the labour of the male farm worker's wife and family in exchange for providing them with accommodation on farm property.

Given their secondary employment status, women have always been excluded from certain rights and employment benefits, for example, written contracts of employment and unemployment insurance. Gender relations have also structured women's paid work by means of recruitment practices, wages, division of labour, opportunities for training or promotion, and appointment to more skilled positions (cf Kritzinger *et al* 1995). Like their counterparts in many other producer countries, women workers on Western Cape fruit farms have also had to carry a double burden as their paid farm employment does not mean they can relinquish their domestic and household responsibilities. Women's paid agricultural employment does not necessarily undermine the traditional links of personal dependence and subordination based on gender (cf Wilson 1985). As in the Chilean fruit sector, for example, the division of labour within farm workers' households follows the traditional pattern, with women assuming responsibility for household tasks and childcare.

The outcome of the retrenchment of permanent labour and the increased use of flexible off-farm workers on Western Cape fruit farms has been the creation of an employment hierarchy with lower incomes and less secure employment conditions at the lower levels characterising seasonal and temporary workers (usually women) and, in particular, off-farm contract labour (cf Barrientos & Kritzinger 2003). The next two subsections of this paper will explore how recent restructuring of employment has affected two groups of female farm workers — those who still work and live on farms and those who have recently moved to off-farm contract labour.

#### 4.1 Female on-farm workers: gains and losses

In an effort to enhance skills levels and to make better use of their on-farm workforce in the wake of increasing pressure to raise productivity and in anticipation of the extension of labour legislation to agriculture, fruit producers began in the early 1990s to appoint women as permanent workers and to use them for tasks traditionally defined as male, especially pruning, general orchard work and driving. The greater utilisation of on-farm women and the change in their employment status have been accompanied by gains in formal employment rights. By the late 1990s there had been a major improvement in women workers' basic conditions of employment. More farmers were making provision for paid holiday leave, paid sick leave, paid maternity leave and a work pension scheme for women. As "permanent" workers, women had become entitled to the benefits stipulated by employment legislation. More producers were also willing to secure financial loans to women, contribute towards a burial scheme and provide women with work-clothes (cf Kritzinger & Vorster 2001). However, there had been virtually no improvement in women's position as "independent" workers with a personal claim to farm employment or on-farm housing. Thus, for most producers, the worker family remained the unit of employment, suggesting that, while on-farm women were increasingly being recognised as permanent workers, most producers were still perceiving them as associated with a male worker.

With the restructuring of employment, permanently (and seasonally) employed female on-farm workers have had to sacrifice a range of benefits and services not linked to formal employment regulation. By the late 1990s, for example, there had been a substantial decrease in the percentage of fruit producers in the Western Cape who continued to offer women workers benefits such as production bonuses, bonuses for length of service, or financial support for household purchases like stoves or furniture (cf Kritzinger & Vorster 2001). The withdrawal of these more institutionalised and paternalistic benefits may be interpreted as an effort on the part of producers to scale down non-wage labour costs and to formalise the employment relationship. However, most women did gain in one important respect, that is, on-farm day care for their children. This relates to the increasing employ-

ment of women as permanent workers as well as to their greater utilisation, as described above.

With the exception of day-care facilities, a growing percentage of farmers/producers have come to limit the availability of a range of other social benefits and facilities that were provided for female on-farm workers in the past. This trend has been especially notable with regard to subsidised transport of women to church, shops and doctors, subsidy on the medical expenses of workers, the provision of literacy classes and the training of women in labour legislation. Furthermore, although perhaps less significantly, there has also been a decrease in the provision of farm stores, library facilities and on-farm women's clubs. All of these changes have significant consequences for women. Two on-farm women explained how such changes have impacted on their lives:

It is women who have to buy the food. It is they who have the responsibility to hold things together for the sake of the children. It is women who look after other women. Men are not worried by all of this — they depend on women for help. For women even the garden is important — the availability of a vegetable garden used to be of help to women.

We could talk to the old man (farmer) and he really cared for us. Nowadays, when we are ill, we have to arrange our own transport. There is no transport to funerals, meetings or social gatherings.

Of course, not all on-farm women have gained permanent employment status, and the position of those who have retained their seasonal/temporary status has essentially remained unchanged. They work for only a few months per year, are not utilised for traditionally male-defined tasks, tend to identify with a clear gender division of labour, and earn a lower weekly wage than women who now have permanent employment. As in the past, they are also less likely to enjoy employment security or employment benefits stipulated by legislation. Their sense of security hinges on the employment status of other household members. A seasonal on-farm female worker commented as follows:

Since I stay in the house that is linked to my brother's employment on this farm (he is a permanent worker), I am dependent on his employment on the farm. Up to now things have worked out just fine; I don't foresee any problems in future.

#### 4.2 Female off-farm contract workers: insecurity and risks

Informal workers in agriculture are subject to a range of risks, including job insecurity, income poverty and variability of earnings, poor knowledge of rights and entitlements, general health risks, disability, longevity risks, homelessness or poor housing conditions, and social or political exclusion (cf Lund & Nicholson 2003). Unlike permanent (and seasonal) on-farm workers with relatively secure work for fixed periods of time, contract workers do not have job security. A contractor may select workers at a street corner or a bus stop on a particular working day, or workers may manage to develop a personal relationship with a particular contractor, enabling him or her to become a “fixed” member of a contract team. Contract workers do not have signed agreements with contractors. Nor can contractors ensure long-term agreements with contract workers, given the reluctance of producers to negotiate long-term agreements. While most contract workers acquired their skills as on-farm workers prior to entering contract work, many female workers claim to be insecure and anxious about securing employment. The recent retrenchments of both male and female on-farm workers mean that men have now also been drawn into this type of employment. Thus women have no monopoly over contract work and have to compete with men in this market.

The shift from on-farm to contract labour has also had significant implications for the way in which women with children manage the double burden of paid farm work and childcare. As has been noted, “modernisation” of employment relations has resulted in a significant increase in the availability of crèche and childcare facilities for all female on-farm workers since the mid-1990s (cf Kritzinger & Vorster 2001). However, the shift to contract labour has meant that many women no longer have access to such facilities and have to manage childcare by alternative methods.

Monetary income from wages, usually calculated according to a piece-rate, is crucial to the livelihood of contract workers as they usually possess few assets other than their skills. Gender relations structure the wage levels of contract workers. Although wages vary, women have been found to earn between R30 and R37 a day during harvesting time, R24 during pruning time and R30 during thinning time in the spring, with some women earning as little as R20 a day. Men, on the other

hand, can earn R60 a day during harvesting time and R50 a day during pruning or thinning time.

Although no employment-related deductions are made from wages and the weekly wages earned by female (and male) contract workers may exceed those of on-farm seasonal workers, contract workers are not eligible for the benefits stipulated by legislation, most notably unemployment insurance. Weather conditions are crucial in determining weekly earnings, given that workers are often able to work for only two or three days a week in a rainy period. Gender relations structure the creation of working days as women usually work for fewer months a year than men do. Like seasonal on-farm women in the past, most women work for 6 to 8 months of the year, while men usually work between 11 and 12. This relates to the traditional exclusion of women from certain tasks, for example, pruning during the winter months. The precariousness of these women's work significantly undermines the security of their livelihood.

Women's childcare responsibilities also impact on their ability to create working days. When their children are ill and need medical attention, women have to arrange transport and accompany them to a day hospital or a doctor in town, thereby losing a day's wages. As far as household income is concerned, the total income earned by contract workers varies in relation to the number of members earning, any state grants and pensions received, other remittances and the time of year. Within households the income of members who are permanently employed or who do contract work of up to 11-12 months per year (usually men) is seen as much more secure than that of those members (usually women and children) who do seasonal or contract work for fewer months per year.

While the period of work and the wage income from contract work determine the income of an individual contract worker, the total income of a worker's household also needs to be considered. Women contract workers, especially single mothers, are particularly active in trying to supplement their household income. They apply their skills to making doilies, knitting garments and baking *vetkoek*, to be sold to friends and neighbours. Women also supplement their household income by traveling with male workers to farms and cooking for them for the duration of a contract. Other strategies include doing domestic work during the off-



season or over weekends, cleaning the church/community hall and modifying household patterns of consumption.

Overall, women contract workers tend to associate security of employment with on-farm employment. The following comment illustrates the concerns of some women:

One is better off on a farm. My children would be happy on a farm; they would have a good life and they would attend school every day because I would be there to check up on them. On a farm one gets fruit, vegetables and meat. I wish I were back on the farm with all the benefits and facilities. Farmers help you with many things. As a permanent worker I used to get a bonus, I had a savings account and there was a crèche.

Despite the loss of benefits, some women nevertheless express a preference for contract work. For some, earning a higher wage without deductions is paramount, while for others contract work provides greater independence and the opportunity to escape the “control” of the farm owner and the farm worker community. The following comment by a woman contract worker expresses these sentiments:

Yes, permanent workers receive many benefits that contract workers don't, but the best for me is that the contractor leaves you to do your own thing.

For many women who have been recently retrenched from positions as on-farm workers, contract labour involves moving from relatively permanent employment with secure on-farm housing, free electricity, water and maintained dwellings to informal settlements in peri-urban areas with minimal infrastructure and sanitation. Those living in shacks in settlements do not usually have access to electricity, indoor running water or outside flush toilets. In the case of government-subsidised housing, circumstances are marginally better in that it provides electricity, outside running water and outside flush toilets. Some producers provide on-farm accommodation for contract workers, either during the week or for the duration of the contract. Women tend to describe this type of accommodation as dismal, noting that it usually lacks hot water, outside lights, clean toilets, bath facilities and storage space:

We're staying in a hostel-type of place — it basically consists of two rooms with built-in cement beds. We bring our own mattresses, but I tell you, those beds are freezing cold in winter. There isn't any hot water and we have to wash outside; there aren't any toilet facilities either.

Poor accommodation can also lead to harassment of women by on-farm male workers, as is evident from the following comment:

Accommodation is inconvenient; there is no privacy, it's cold and dirty. We also experience problems with permanent men on the farm — since the door lock is broken, they always come into our rooms during weekends and take our stuff, e.g. pots, because they go to our rooms to drink in peace — at home they [would] have to share their drinks with their wives.

Of course not all contract workers live in towns or informal settlements. Women (and men) who have been retrenched from positions as on-farm workers are often allowed by producers to live with family members who are still working and living on the farm. This gives them housing which is free, relatively good and more secure.

Apart from the widely recognised hazards of farm work, such as pesticides and agricultural machinery, farm workers are also exposed to severe climatic conditions, physical fatigue and stress, parasites, infectious diseases, toxic plants and chemicals (cf Baxter 1992; Fragar 1996). Research suggests that on fruit farms in particular the increased use of informal workers at peak seasons tends to increase the problems associated with safety, accident prevention, health education and training (cf Bamford 1985). In the case of Western Cape farm workers alcohol dependency is a significant health hazard. While the vast majority of fruit producers have done away with the *dop* system, past experience of it has had an impact on farm workers' drinking patterns, posing serious challenges to health services (London 2000: 199).

## 5. Female farm workers' access to social protection

The precarious position of female farm workers raises an important question, that is, to what extent do women enjoy social protection against insecurity and risk? Broadly, social protection is seen to consist of “public actions in response to levels of vulnerability, risk, and deprivation which are deemed unacceptable within a given polity or society” (Barrientos & Barrientos 2002: 5) and involves a number of strands. It emphasises the need to provide support for the poorest and acknowledges the multidimensional nature of poverty; it emphasises risk and vulnerability and draws attention to a range of programmes and institutions providing social protection, from formal social insurance

programmes and universal provision of health and education to informal social networks, micro-insurance and intra-household support (cf Barrientos & Barrientos 2002: 5-6).

Current notions of social protection acknowledge the limited provision of public social protection and the absence of the welfare state, especially in developing countries. Current notions also address the consequences of globalisation for the supply and demand of social protection, as globalisation is seen to generate informal work, risk and uncertainty, particularly among the poor. It also involves a shift from government as the primary instrument to a wider range of programmes, entitlements and stakeholders as providers of social protection. In a country like South Africa, the state's role in providing social protection for agricultural workers, especially informal workers, is relatively limited in scope and implementation capacity.

### 5.1 Formal institutional protection

The main formal institutions involved in the protection of informal workers can be mapped along two dimensions (Barrientos & Barrientos 2002: 8-9). The first dimension categorises institutions as state, market, community or household, while the second refers to the level at which these institutions operate, that is, global or local. As far as employment protection is concerned, International Labour Organisation (ILO) core and non-core labour standards at the global level apply to all workers, including informal workers in the agricultural sector. At the local level the South African government has implemented these ILO standards by extending labour legislation to agricultural workers in South Africa in the early 1990s.

While permanent and seasonal on-farm workers have been relatively successful in accessing employment rights and have formal social protection through legislation, state legislation has not succeeded in protecting contract and other informal workers. Despite legislation requiring written contracts and associated information on workers' rights, most contractors are not officially registered with the Department of Labour and do not comply with these stipulations. Furthermore, while the right to organise and strike collectively has been extended to agricultural and domestic workers in South Africa, contract workers have had limited, if any, access to labour unions. Their mobi-

lity and lack of “a workplace” seriously militate against collective organisation (cf Theron 2000). Moreover, like farmers in the past, many contractors do not support union activity within the labour contracting sector. Thus, while contract workers are formally entitled to employment protection, the nature of contract work and the lack of mechanisms to ensure the implementation of legislation usually prevent workers from accessing such benefits.

In the case of market-based institutional protection at the global level, it has been noted that private sector codes of conduct are increasingly being applied by British and European supermarkets. Again, while codes of conduct have reached some on-farm workers, it is doubtful whether such codes can actually extend social protection to vulnerable workers. While some observers have argued that such codes could complement other mechanisms of social protection, particularly labour legislation, it is increasingly being recognised that codes need to be extended to the employment conditions of labour contractors if flexible workers are to benefit from them. It has also been argued that private sector codes have not benefited flexible workers; in fact they are seen to encourage outsourcing of labour, compromising the livelihoods of such workers and exacerbating the unequal North-South power relations in agri-food networks (cf Du Toit & Ewert 2002).

## 5.2 Informal social protection

Given the limitations of market and state-based institutional protection for women, informal relations and social networks often play a crucial role in providing social protection for female agricultural workers. Informal protection is particularly important within the domains of employment, the community and the household. Within the employment realm, informal relations and social networks are essential to women’s access to contract employment. Their ability to utilise such networks, to establish a “good” relationship with their contractor and to qualify as a member of the contractor’s team is paramount in securing an “on-going” contract. Through the establishment of a relationship of “trust” with their contractor, workers aim to minimise job insecurity. The following comment by a female contract worker demonstrates this trust:

Although I only have a verbal agreement with him [the contractor], I feel confident that he will look after me in the future. We have a

good understanding. I can feel it in my heart that he will take care of me. Until now he has never dropped or disappointed us.

However, the relationship between female contract workers and their contractor extends beyond considerations of employment. It often evolves into a personalised relationship, with the contractor assisting the women with financial, personal or domestic problems. For most women contract workers the contractor is their primary source of financial assistance as they borrow money to buy food and clothes, pay medical accounts, cover funeral expenses and cope financially with serious illness. The relationship often involves women sharing their personal and family-related problems with the contractor, whose role is to provide guidance and advice. One contractor, for example, claims to have a “welfare relationship” with most of his workers: “I am their employer, but at the same time I am much more; I also help with socio-economic problems”. A woman contractor in the Grabouw area describes her role as follows:

I have learned through the years to listen to each person's story and to try and help wherever I can because I am their 'mother'. Some of the workers as well as their partners discuss their personal problems with me, for example, about alcohol abuse in the home. I am their 'mother', their nurse and their employer.

Within the employment sphere the contractor's team also plays a significant role in the lives of women. Such teams provide women with a social context within which they can generate social support and develop close relationships and friendships. The relationship between team members is often typified as one of “give and take”.

Institutional protection may be extended to female contract workers via the communities in which they live, for example, community organizations, NGOs, and political parties. Given informal workers' lack of attachment to a particular employer, such organisations may be seen to act as potential avenues for improving social protection. However, there is little evidence of this happening in the case of female contract workers in Western Cape fruit farming.

Regardless of their place of residence, most of these women comment on the lack of formal community organisations. According to those who live on farms, “there isn't much happening”, while women living in informal settlements tend to emphasise the remoteness of residents, the abuse of alcohol by members of the community, and the

dangers and violence they have to deal with on a daily basis. These settlements usually lack both infrastructure and associational life, and they fail to provide a context in which women can develop a sense of community and “belonging”. It would appear that women have little to draw on in their communities and that, for many, the church constitutes the only avenue for accessing social protection. In an important sense, participation in church activities comes to represent community participation. A divorced mother, for example, living in an informal settlement in Ceres, explains her involvement with the church:

I regularly attend church services and join outreach trips organised by the church. I am very close to one of the church sisters and I share my problems with her. I enjoy serving the Lord. I don't feel at home in this world [Ek voel nie tuis in hierdie wêreld nie].

Those women who are members of households on farms or who have access to farm communities while doing contract work seem to experience and articulate a much clearer sense of belonging to a community.

Within the reproductive and household sphere, women are essential to a household's survival and usually carry the burden of sustaining its informal inter-generational support networks. The support provided by family members is crucial to women's efforts to make a living and to manage the double burden of paid work and unpaid reproductive work, especially for women who are single mothers. Family members contribute to the household income primarily through food, clothes and money. Again, for some women the contractor plays a significant role in creating opportunities to generate income and access credit facilities. The social protection provided by family members or contractors often manifests itself in the context of particularly childcare. Family circumstances and the lack of infrastructure often also mean that women have to send their children away to live with family members elsewhere. One woman who sent her children to live with their grandmother in another town is very sad about this arrangement, saying: “I would have preferred them living with me. If only I had a big house and enough money to raise them myself!”. Having family members to assist with childcare and a contractor who provides transport to health care facilities, when necessary, enables women to take up contract employment and to meet their domestic and childcare responsibilities.

But informal social protection also comes at a price. The shift from on-farm employment to off-farm contract employment, for example, has not resulted in the demise of paternalistic relationships. Paternalism has reinvented itself in new and different forms. In the case of female contract workers, a household's survival often depends on their ability to form alliances with more powerful protectors, their contractor being one. This means that women are often locked into obligations and dependencies, thereby reinforcing the asymmetrical power relations associated with the traditional paternalistic employment relations that existed between fruit farmers and their on-farm workforce in the past.

## 6. Concluding comments

This paper set out to examine the consequences of global integration and the restructuring of employment for two groups of women working on Western Cape fruit farms. For both groups of women the consequences were found to be contradictory. Many women working and living on fruit farms have gained in terms of employment status and employment rights, and now have formal social protection through labour legislation and (to a lesser extent) private sector codes. However, they have also lost the benefits that were once available to them under a more paternalistic dispensation. The withdrawal of these benefits is becoming integral to the increasing "formalisation" of employment relations and producers' efforts to reduce both labour and non-labour costs in order to remain competitive in a global export environment. Despite being integrated into paid employment, on-farm female workers remain primarily responsible for childcare and domestic activities. The withdrawal of transport to shops, doctors, social meetings and schools, as well as other social benefits, has significant implications in terms of women's ability to perform their reproductive and domestic roles, and affects their well-being.

The restructuring of employment has had equally significant consequences for those women who have been drawn into contract labour. Compared to permanent and (to a lesser extent) seasonal on-farm women, female contract workers experience very little job security. They are particularly vulnerable to poverty and livelihood deprivation, given that they often have a poor infrastructure, few assets of their own and limited alternative forms of income generation. However, some of them

manage to offset risk by means of supplementary alternative sources of income and diversification in household strategies. Female contract workers' ability to sustain family and community relations depends largely on their place of residence. Those living in shacks and government-subsidised housing in informal settlements often struggle to establish meaningful relations within their communities, while those who live with their immediate families on farms appear to experience a much stronger sense of community and belonging. However, attending church services and participating in church activities represent an important source of strength and social protection for female contract workers, irrespective of where they live. Contract work impacts on women's household and family relations. Its nature often constrains women's ability to take on child-care responsibilities, resulting in some women having to send their children to live with family members elsewhere.

When assessing the consequences of the restructuring of employment for women one needs, as suggested earlier, to examine the choices and trade-offs that women have to make in particular localities. Given the current high levels of unemployment in the South African agricultural sector, many women's "choice" of employment often means a choice between insecure, unprotected employment and no employment at all. Contract work in particular implies trade-offs for women. While they generally tend to prefer on-farm employment because it promises safety, access to housing, employment benefits and a sense of community, some women claim to prefer doing contract work. For them, greater independence and control over their working lives, along with the ability to access employment and housing independently, outweigh the loss of job security and benefits, a relatively safe farm environment and the support that a farm community may provide. As Razavi (1999: 66) suggests, to be "excluded" from more permanent, secure labour market niches "may also carry some advantages, giving the worker greater independence, autonomy and space for resistance". However, even if contract work implies greater independence and control, childcare remains a major source of concern for women drawn into contract labour.

Finally, the implications of global integration for women working on Western Cape fruit farms demonstrate the need to problematise economic globalisation and to examine how agri-food restructuring processes "condition the options faced by particular communities and regions" (McMichael 1996: 50-1). While global integration might benefit some, it also reinforces marginalisation and social exclusion for others.



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