

Women in agriculture: Unsung heroes around the globe

 By [Konanani Liphadzi](#)

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Let's move away from treating gender issues as "something at the end-of-the-day" business. This sage advice is contained in our Presidency's Gender Policy Framework and it certainly resonates with our fruit industry's transformation strategy.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

In this vein, the transformation theme of International Day of Rural Women commands a rethink of how we view the most unsung heroes of agriculture: women.

Transformation – a strategic matter

Transformation forms part of the three-pronged fruit industry growth agenda, alongside market access and strengthened ties with government. To us, it just makes sense to have a robust strategy around empowering women, if we take into account their critical role in the development of our industry – not to mention their contribution to helping to improve food security.

In fact, by 2028 the fruit industry aims to have achieved for black women, in particular, a sustainable increase in their ownership and participation of production means in fruit production, as well as across the industry value chain. It's an investment that stands to yield substantial dividends, into the future.

Our Constitution endorses non-sexism and non-racism in the Bill of Rights, recognising primarily that human rights are indisputable. Therefore, our government's commitment to establishing gender equity in the allocation of land is heartening. However, our patriarchal legacy, on the back of pervading unequal gender relations, continues to hamper in a number of ways women's access to land and their control over resources.

It stands to reason then, why we prioritise strengthened ties with government as a critical indicator of success on our transformation journey, particularly when it comes to the successful integration of women into the industry.

In the way of women

Among the hindrances to women's gainful participation in our fruit industry and the greater global agricultural landscape are: (a) women's mostly insufficient access to agricultural resources such as land, credit, technology and marketing, which hampers their contribution to agricultural production, (b) limited knowledge about land rights and the resultant proportionate access to land, (c) insufficient capacity building targeted at women to help boost their participation in land reform programmes and projects, (d) the fact that their roles in agriculture are mostly restricted to labourer and subsistence farmer (rather than that of commercial farmer), and (e) women are often overlooked in the inheritance of land from their fathers.

The Gender Policy Framework sets clear guidelines for actively rectifying historical legacy issues. It also advocates, at an institutional level, equal access to goods and services for both women and men. But this document fingers macro-economic policy for failing to deal effectively with issues of women empowerment and gender inequality in our country.

A case in point is the current view of economic growth as a significant component of improved quality of life for all, when in fact, GDP growth per capita income is usually an unreliable indication of change in the lives of poor people (especially women).

It's a food issue

Focussed integration of women into the agricultural sector can help augment food security in line with the rising demand for food. Our SA population is growing annually at an approximate rate of 2% and it's expected to reach 82 million by 2035 (WWF South African Agricultural Facts & Trends Report).

This will more than double the current demand on food production or imports. World Food Day (commemorated annually on 16 October) is a stark reminder of the plight of more than 800 million undernourished people around the world. Most of them live in rural areas where agriculture is their main source of income.

The United Nations (UN) confirms that 33% of employed women around the globe work in agriculture. The onus is on governments around the world, including our own, to put policies in place to steadily increase this number. But, importantly, they also need to ensure that those women who are already making their contribution within this economically significant sector are duly recognised and compensated.

Our Presidency's Gender Policy Framework highlights what should qualify as a clarion call: to commit to prioritising gender issues. Achieving gender equality in our industry is no mean feat, but we owe it to our legacy to 'jump in with all fours'.

ABOUT KONANANI LIPHADZI

Dr Konanani Liphadzi is the CEO of Fruit SA, a non-profit organisation that represents the voice of SA's fresh fruit industry.

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