

Celebrating women in agriculture

By Brian Makhele, transformation specialist, Potatoes SA

South Africa's agricultural sector, long overshadowed by historical injustices and systemic exclusion, is witnessing a transformative wave driven by the increased involvement of women. As potato production emerges as a pivotal segment of this industry, the contributions of women are not only reshaping the agricultural landscape but also challenging the vestiges of the past and patriarchal policies that once marginalised them.

During the apartheid era, South African agriculture was characterised by profound inequalities and racial segregation. Land ownership and agricultural opportunities were predominantly reserved for white males, effectively sidelining women and black South Africans from meaningful participation. Policies such as the *Natives Land Act, 1913 (Act 27 of 1913)* and the *Native Trust and Land Act, 1936 (Act 18 of 1936)* restricted black ownership of land to designated reserves, comprising just 13% of South Africa's land area. This not only limited agricultural production capacity but also entrenched socio-economic disparities.

Challenge before change

Women, particularly black women, bore the brunt of these policies. Patriarchal norms confined them to subsistence farming and labour-intensive tasks on white-owned farms, with little to no access to resources, training, or land ownership. The socio-economic fabric of rural communities was thus woven with threads of inequality, limiting the potential for agricultural innovation and growth.

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked the beginning of slow but deliberate transformation within South African agriculture. The new democratic government introduced land reform programmes aimed at

redistributing land and resources to historically disadvantaged communities. Policies such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme and later the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development, sought to redress past injustices and create opportunities for black producers, including women.

These reforms laid the groundwork for greater inclusivity. However, challenges persisted. Access to finance, training, and markets remained significant barriers for women aspiring to enter commercial agriculture. Nonetheless, the seeds of change had been sown, and women's involvement in agriculture began to gain momentum.

A new landscape

Today, the landscape of South African agriculture, and potato production in particular, reflects significant progress. Women are increasingly taking on leadership roles, from smallholder producers to agribusiness entrepreneurs. Their involvement is bolstered by initiatives from both government and non-government organisations aimed at empowering female producers and agripreneurs.

The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) has been instrumental in promoting gender equality through programmes that provide training, resources, and support specifically tailored for women. Strategic partnerships with commodity organisations such as Potatoes SA have further strengthened these efforts, creating networks and platforms for women to share knowledge and access markets.

A game changer

Over the years DALRRD has increased the involvement of women in agriculture, specifically in potato production through its transformation

mandate and support programmes. One example is Cecilia Mamabolo from Bela Bela. She started producing cabbage, butternut and peppadew in 1990 after she retired from her work



Cecilia Mamabolo attending the 2023 Potatoes SA Transformation Symposium at Birchwood Hotel.



Mamabolo adopted new agricultural practices on her farm using drone technology.

as a teacher. The support of DALRRD with land and grant funds under their Land Development Support programme has seen her become one of a number of women involved in potato cultivation.

Moreover, some of Mamabolo's achievements include being named Female Entrepreneur of the Year in the commercial sector as well as being named Female Entrepreneur of the Year by the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Land Reform.

Potatoes SA supports the farm as part of their enterprise development. Since Potatoes SA got involved, this producer has been very confident that she will become a commercial potato producer. Mamabolo will be planting potatoes for the open market for the very first time on 10 ha in July 2024 with the support of a mentor appointed by Potatoes SA. Another 10 ha will be planted in January 2025. According to Mamabolo, women should not view farming as a man's job only but, with women being the nurturers of life, as a job aimed at feeding the nation.

Another success story

One other notable example of women excelling in agriculture is the rise of female-led co-operatives. These co-operatives pool resources, knowledge and labour, enabling women to scale up production, improve quality, and negotiate better prices. The success stories of young women like Cynthia Mokgobu, who transformed her small-scale plot into a thriving agricultural enterprise, serve as powerful testimony to the potential of women in agriculture.

Mokgobu started farming in 2016 after quitting her internship and deciding to create a job for herself. She started planting cash crops such as cabbage on a small backyard plot and was allocated 2.5 ha by the Tribal Authority through a permission-to-occupy arrangement. Upon learning of the Potatoes SA support programme, she took an interest in potato production. Through the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Land Reform and

Potatoes SA, she managed to plant 0.25 ha of potatoes. This is where her potato journey began.

Currently, she produces on 19 ha of land, and aspires to plant more hectares and become part of Potatoes SA's Enterprise Development Programme. Mokgobu is appreciative of the support she continues to receive from both the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Potatoes SA. She would like to see more young women getting involved in agriculture, especially potato production, since potatoes are a significant staple in food security.

Challenges and opportunities

Despite the progress, challenges remain. Access to land continues to be a significant hurdle, compounded by traditional inheritance practices and ongoing socio-economic inequalities. Additionally, climate change poses a new set of threats, demanding adaptive strategies and resilient farming practices.

However, the future holds promise. Technological advancements and increased access to information are empowering female producers with new tools and knowledge. Mobile technology, for instance, provides real-time market data and weather forecasts, enhancing decision-making and productivity. Furthermore, the growing recognition of women's contributions to food security and economic development is driving policy reforms and investment in gender-sensitive agricultural programmes.

The involvement of women in South Africa's potato production is not just a story of agricultural development but a testament to resilience and empowerment. Overcoming historical injustices and systemic barriers, women are now at the forefront of transforming the agricultural landscape.

Their contributions are vital not only for the growth of the sector but also for the broader socio-economic progress of South Africa. As the country continues to address its past



Cynthia Mokgobu during potato harvesting on her farm.



Mokgobu is a hands-on producer who is very involved in the daily operations of the farm.

and build a more inclusive future, the role of women in agriculture will undoubtedly remain central to this ongoing transformation. 🌱

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