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# Women and land fight food, water insecurity, poverty

By **Makhotso Sotyū**

Women, as traditional and modern tillers of the soil, are the backbone of many rural villages in SA. Besides being mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, nurturers and leaders, many also work the land to feed their direct and extended families. To succeed they need healthy soil, land that does not need to be constantly fed with chemicals to produce a successful harvest, and soil that absorbs water without causing erosion.

The World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, a United Nations (UN) observance is celebrated annually on June 17.

The theme this year was "Her Land, Her Rights" about the critical issue of women's land rights and the importance of placing women at the centre of land degradation neutrality and other international goals.

Land degradation neutrality is a concept to intensify food production, for example, without further degrading the land resource. This means working towards a world where our activity has no negative impact on the land. Our impact must either be neutral or positive.

The degradation of land, desertification and drought have far-reaching consequences, especially for vulnerable populations. Their impact is not gender-neutral. A recent study by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification revealed that women are affected twice as much as men.

This increases the already heavy load of unpaid care and domestic work by women and girls.

Land is not merely a physical asset; it is a source of food, shelter, income and social identity. It plays a vital role in reducing food and water insecurity, and poverty, especially in rural areas.

During the devastating floods in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape in 2022, it became painfully evident how women and young children were disproportionately affected. They faced displacement and the destruction of their land for both living and subsistence farming.

To ensure that women's access to land and finance for land-based economic activities happens, SA has taken a number of steps. The 65% female participation in projects focused on drought, water crisis, biodiversity loss, including wetland loss, demonstrates the commitment to gender equality.

Initiatives like the Jobs Fund, which allocates over R500m to Groen Sebenza projects, provide employment opportunities with 60% of beneficiaries being women.

SA is one of the few countries in the world where gender parity in the workplace, job creation, and

sustainable growth, specifically for women in rural areas, is law.

Through the Expanded Public Works Programme, the environment sector actively supports projects that promote environmental conservation and sustainable use while empowering women through skills development. Projects like Working for Water, Working on Fire, Working for Waste and the Land Care Programme provide thousands of women and youth with both short-term and full-time employment.

We remain committed to accelerating progress on gender equality and women's empowerment. This is underpinned by policy reforms including social security, food security for all, land and agricultural reform, national health insurance and improvements in basic education.

■ Sotyū is deputy minister of forestry, fisheries and environment