



CASE STUDY

# Afrifresh – Fresh produce (export), South Africa

September 2016

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## Company Background

Afrifresh is a leading South African producer and exporter of fresh fruit. The company specializes in table grapes and citrus (grapefruits, oranges, soft citrus, and lemons), with buyers in over 50 countries. It is a vertically integrated business, with activities spanning the whole agricultural value chain, incorporating farming, processing, marketing, and distribution. In 2015, the company had combined global sales of 44,978 tons of table grapes and citrus, and its total turnover was R245 million (\$16 million).

Afrifresh is representative of a new generation of large-scale, corporatized farming operations in South Africa that are emerging as smaller farms are absorbed by larger producers (DAFF, 2014). Prior to 2009, the company operated as an export agent only, buying fruit from local producers and selling it on to overseas buyers. From 2009 onward, the company embarked on an ambitious strategy to expand its operations and move into production, so that it could better control the supply and quality of its fruit. The company bought a number of citrus and table grape farms across South Africa, many of which were 'in distress' and required significant capital investment to renew and expand their production capacity.

At the beginning of 2016, some 43% of the company's crop capacity was still immature, but will reach full production by 2017, meaning that Afrifresh will nearly double its export volumes in the next two years. The company's expansion has, so far, had dramatic consequences for its workforce size and composition: the number of permanent workers increased fivefold in just over 12 months, from December 2010 to January 2011, and the profile changed from a predominantly office-based environment to a majority of unskilled farm workers, many of whom live in employer-provided accommodation on its 12 rural farms. By the end of 2015, Afrifresh provided employment for 1,220 permanent workers on 10 sites across South Africa, up from 151 in 2009, and 4,144 seasonal workers. Once the company's new plantings reach full maturity, the workforce will grow even further.

This case study focuses on four Afrifresh sites: River Fresh (Western Cape – citrus and table grapes), Berekisanang (Northern Cape – citrus and table grapes), Fruit Star (KwaZulu Natal – citrus) and the company's head office (Cape Town).



Photo © Afrifresh

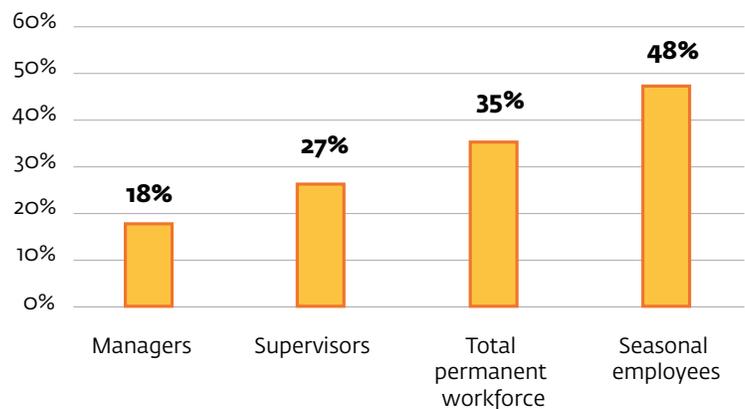
# HOW AFRIFRESH SUPPORTS WOMEN WORKERS

*Women are an important part of the workforce at Afrifresh, comprising 35% of the permanent workforce and 48.5% of the seasonal workforce. At head office, women are present in administrative, quality-assurance, and management roles, while on farms women tend to be concentrated in operational roles that require high levels of attention to detail, such as vine development, picking table grapes and smaller citrus, and grading and packing fruit (both table grapes and citrus). They are also present in farm administration. Men are more likely to occupy jobs that require greater physical strength – such as picking larger citrus, heavy pruning of vines and trees, and palletization – and those with higher skill profiles and correspondingly higher pay grades, including farm managers, supervisors, truck and tractor drivers, and machine operators. These gender-based occupational patterns are consistent with norms in the broader industry.*

Women workers at Afrifresh benefit from the company’s objectives to be a responsible employer and establish an efficient HR management framework that supports growth and competitiveness in global markets. Afrifresh’s approach is informed by three main business drivers:

- Buyers in high-value markets expect strict compliance with national labor laws and international ethical standards;
- Managers understand that a loyal and motivated workforce is good for productivity; and
- A strong policy on equal opportunity and anti-harassment helps the company draw on the talents of all workers (regardless of gender or race) and develop more diverse teams and management.

**WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE AT AFRIFRESH, 2016**



## A FAIRER, MORE TRANSPARENT APPROACH TO HR MANAGEMENT

Following its move into farm production, Afrifresh has devoted considerable time and effort to developing and implementing a clear framework of standardized HR management policies across its production sites. This has been no small task, as each site had previously operated as a discrete entity with its own independent approach to worker relations. While there are challenges associated with managing multiple of sites, it offers important opportunities to share knowledge and good practices across farms, including on women's employment, and pilot innovative practices on individual sites before rolling out across the company.

Afrifresh emphasizes transparent and equitable labor practices that are consistently applied across sites. This is not just a question of business efficiency; it is a critical tool for transforming worker-management relations on Afrifresh farms in the context of post-apartheid agriculture in South Africa. Under apartheid, farm workers had few legally recognized rights, as agriculture was exempted from most forms of labor regulation (Barrientos & Visser, 2012). Women (colored and black) were particularly vulnerable; male farm workers were employed on a permanent basis on the condition that their spouse or female relative worked seasonally (Barrientos & Visser, 2012). Employment in the sector has undergone important changes since this time, including the introduction of a number of protective laws. However, the industry as a whole is still grappling with the legacy of racial segregation on farms and historically entrenched mistrust between farmers and workers.

In this setting, the new Afrifresh structure signals a concrete change for the better: a transition from the management structure of smaller (sometimes family-run) farms without a dedicated HR function, to a larger corporate entity with the resources to think more strategically about HR management and implement new, standardized systems. This includes, for example, putting in place and communicating a transparent wage structure, so that workers with low levels of literacy and numeracy understand what their pay slip means and how wages are set within the company. A number of women farm workers said that they appreciated the new HR systems introduced by Afrifresh, noting that the approach was "fairer."

Complementing its HR policy, the company has developed its own company-specific social standard called 'AfriAgri', which it uses to benchmark the performance of individual farms on social and labor standards. AfriAgri covers a range of matters, including safeguards for women workers, such as requirements on non-discrimination and anti-harassment. AfriAgri is principally based on the requirements of Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA), a comprehensive ethical-trading standard developed by the fruit industry in South Africa to respond to growing demand from international buyers of fresh produce for increased attention to working conditions. Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, explained that the farm pays very close attention to labor standards so that it can meet SIZA requirements: "Any day of the year, anyone can walk onto this farm and do a social audit at any time, and we can pass."

"The farm rules here are strict. There is respect and discipline – I like this. Everyone has to follow the rules."

Paulina, farm worker, Berekisanang

"At Afrifresh, you always know where you stand. Afrifresh is strict on this with bonuses and wages. It's fairer here than on other farms."

Lena, supervisor, River Fresh



Photo © Afrifresh

## WORKER–MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

An important part of the HR framework is building and maintaining effective worker–management communication systems on all farms, through the establishment and capacity-building of elected worker committees and effective grievance mechanisms. Women actively participate in these committees, which meet regularly to discuss a range of issues with management, including occupational health and safety, housing, and general working conditions. The committees also provide a mechanism for managers to disseminate information back to workers.

Some farms have sought to create additional channels to listen to women’s views: for example, women committee members at River Fresh now have a separate meeting with a management representative to provide space for discussion of women’s perspectives on workplace issues. This could potentially include, for instance, concerns regarding childcare, harassment, or training opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

## ZERO TOLERANCE FOR DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

Afrifresh’s HR framework includes a strong policy on equal opportunity and anti-harassment, with a zero-tolerance stance on discrimination and harassment of any form (including domestic violence against workers living on farms). These policies – as well as information on working hours, wages, OHS, and other aspects of working conditions – are communicated to all managers, supervisors, and workers during their induction training, helping ensure that policies are consistently applied and workers are aware of their rights. On farms, all seasonal and permanent workers receive induction training on Afrifresh policies at the beginning of the picking season, regardless of whether they have previously attended training sessions. Afrifresh varies the format to keep the message fresh and stimulate discussion afterwards. Effective worker representation and individual grievance mechanisms are also important safeguards.

“Being part of the Afrifresh Group means that we are more corporate than other farms. It also means that we pay a lot of attention to harassment – any kind of harassment. The whole policy is communicated very clearly during induction training... Also, the worker committee is our eyes and ears. Anyone can come in and complain about anything.”

Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator, Berekisanang

Afrifresh’s proactive training and awareness-raising on harassment and discrimination provides an important protective mechanism for workers. Women farm workers tend to be most vulnerable to harassment (particularly seasonal workers), due to lower levels of education and the scarcity of jobs in rural areas, making them less aware of their rights and more reluctant to report problems for

<sup>1</sup> European supermarkets started introducing individual standards on working conditions in the 1990s, with greater emphasis on compliance in South Africa from 2007. This has resulted, in great part, from local and international civil society campaigns for improved working conditions on farms, particularly for women workers. Afrifresh has participated actively in the development and implementation of SIZA, which is based on South African legislative requirements and benchmarked against the international Global Social Compliance Programme (GSCP). See: <http://www.siza.co.za>. Other key standards in South Africa include GlobalG.A.P. and the ETI Base Code.

## THE BEREKISANANG EMPOWERMENT FARM

Berekisanang is an ambitious flagship program for Afrifresh: a 400-hectare, greenfield, citrus and table grapes operation in South Africa's Orange River region that supports local job creation and skills transfer for previously disadvantaged populations. It is one of the largest Black Economic Empowerment projects in South African agriculture.

Berekisanang ("Let's work together," in Tswana) is jointly owned by Afrifresh (39.1%), a workers' trust (17.01%), and South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation (43.89%). The workers' trust gained equity in the project by contributing 500 ha. of water rights, which it received via government grant in 2012, awarded on the basis of the historic disadvantage of the black and coloured workers in the trust. These water rights have been vital for the establishment and ongoing sustainability of the project.

As a greenfield project, Berekisanang has created new jobs for 228 permanent workers (27% women) and 270 seasonal workers (35% women), as of 2016. When the farm reaches full production, it will have created over 1,100 new jobs, as well as indirect employment in the local community.

The trust beneficiaries – comprised of 21 black and coloured Afrifresh workers (33.3% women) with more than 10 years of service – will receive dividends from the project when it reaches full production.



Photo © Afrifresh

fear of losing their job (e.g. Jacobs et al, 2015). One survey of low-wage women workers in South Africa found that 40% had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, with the figure increasing for those in majority-male workplaces (cited in Budlender, 2011).

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women represent 18% of managers and 27% of supervisors at Afrifresh. Although Afrifresh does not have a dedicated program to increase gender diversity in management, its focus on equal opportunity and identifying the best person for the job, regardless of gender, means that women have made their way into a number of key leadership and non-traditional roles in the company. These women act as important role models for others at all levels of the company, and the industry more broadly.

- Women have made some inroads into farm management. Women farm managers are still a rare sight in the industry, but some progress has been made at Afrifresh. At Berekisanang, the company's flagship site, Adri van Niekerk is one of two top-level managers and was the driving force in setting up the Berekisanang site. At Fruit Star, Anne-Marie Bartels was General Manager from 2008-2012, taking on a role that is almost exclusively occupied by men elsewhere in the industry. (Anne-Marie has subsequently moved into a corporate role to oversee systems management across Afrifresh farms.) Following in Anne-Marie's footsteps at Fruit Star is Winile Khumalo, a young black woman, who has recently been appointed as the company's first woman junior farm manager.
- Women hold influential positions in corporate management and standard-setting at Afrifresh. At head office, food scientist Susanne de Waal is part of the company's senior management team, leading Afrifresh's program on quality assurance and compliance, with more than 20 years' experience in agribusiness. Her team includes Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator, and together Susanne and Melinda oversee the company's performance on social compliance, ensuring that all production sites meet buyer requirements on working conditions. (Across the industry, quality assurance and social compliance are areas that tend to be dominated by women.)
- Women have gained board-level representation: At the beginning of 2016, Afrifresh appointed Lynne Davis to its seven-member board as its first woman non-executive director.



"It's difficult being a woman. Men sometimes say, 'she can't tell me', but they have to listen, because I'm the manager. Now it works okay, but at the beginning it was hard. But part of this is also that you are new to the job and you have to learn how to work with people."

Winile Khumalo, Junior Farm Manager,  
Fruit Star

## WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL POSITIONS

Managers reported that women farm workers are starting to express interest in moving into occupations that have been dominated by men. For instance, tractor driving is a typically male role; this is often attributed to prevailing gender norms and the fact that women farm workers are less

“Women and men work together well because we have the right systems in place. Afrifresh doesn’t allow any form of harassment. When you sign the employment contract, it includes everything: no drugs, no headphones, no harassment.

I tell the women on my team, ‘if you have a problem, you can tell me and I can take it forward’. If they feel uncomfortable, there is also a policy that they can write an anonymous letter to management.

You hear a lot about harassment on other farms, but not here. Maybe it’s because they have a strict policy and everyone knows about it.”

Sylvia, supervisor, Berekisanang

likely to hold their driver’s license. However, over the last couple of years, women farm workers have started proactively expressing an interest in undertaking company-sponsored training to obtain licenses for driving tractors, trucks, and pick-up trucks.

Women’s interest in tractor driving is partly motivated by the fact that it attracts a higher hourly wage (approximately a 14% increase for general workers), along with transferable skills, workplace status, and opportunities for greater responsibility, but is also sparked by a recognition that modern tractors can be just as easily driven by women as men. Sylvia, a supervisor at Berekisanang, explained, “We want to do what men do ... At the end of the day, we already do all of the hard work on the farm – there’s no reason we can’t do this, too. We want to get our tractor licenses.”

Afrifresh now has one female tractor driver at Fruit Star, out of 16 in total (with more women lined up for training), and there are plans to roll this out across all of their other farms, including Berekisanang and River Fresh.



Photo © Afrifresh



Photo © Afrifresh

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN ACCESS TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Afrifresh encourages all employees – women and men alike – to participate in training and professional development activities. This approach often benefits women in particular, providing a stepping-stone to positions of greater responsibility and higher wages that have traditionally been held by men, such as driving. This emphasis on equal opportunity is also important given that some research suggests that men are still the primary beneficiaries of training in South African horticulture, particularly production-oriented training (Barrientos & Visser, 2012).

Since 2012, Afrifresh has provided support for 86 ‘learnerships’, national vocational training accreditation courses that involve on-the-job training and classroom learning, and result in a formal qualification. These are funded partly by Afrifresh, partly by government subsidies. Women have significantly benefited from this training, which has mostly focused on fruit grading and packing (a typically female-dominated area in the industry). So far, 46% of learnerships have been taken up by women. These qualifications enable workers to enhance their skills in relation to their current jobs and increase their prospects of future career progression, particularly in light of Afrifresh’s expansion plans.

Women have also been exposed to unique on-the-job training opportunities, including at Berekisanang and Fruit Star. In 2015, Afrifresh flew in a team of skilled citrus grafters from Spain to employ a new grafting technique (patch grafting) to promote faster productive growth of citrus trees. The grafters provided highly specialized training on these grafting techniques to predominantly female teams, making them among the first in South Africa to obtain these skills. Sylvie, a supervisor at Berekisanang, said that women were very positive about the experience: “We feel great about learning the grafting techniques. We can now go to other farms and teach people how to graft.”

Some Afrifresh farms support basic literacy and numeracy courses for workers, which are attended by a significant number of women. At Berekisanang, the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) program is run by Sylvie and Anna (see photo page 14), two women supervisors who attended Afrifresh-sponsored training in order to teach the class. Since the ABET program began in 2011, women have accounted for 84% of beneficiaries. Fruit Star also has a dedicated adult education center for workers, where government teachers provide classes in the evenings after work.

In a number of cases, the company has provided workers with loans to alleviate financial pressures so they can finish their training. For instance, Afrifresh provided Winile Khumalo –



Photo © Afrifresh

“I like that everything here is a challenge. I’m learning new things all the time... I like that there is a variety of tasks. It never gets boring.”

Lena, general farm worker, Berekisanang

“They give us so many learning opportunities here... [and] the General Manager gives us a chance and listens to us. This is different from other farms.”

Christa van Rooi, Administrative Assistant and Director of the Workers’ Trust, Berekisanang

Fruit Star's Junior Farm Manager – with a loan based on a formal training contract, so that she could finish her professional diploma in agricultural management through distance learning while working on the farm.

Some training also provides an opportunity for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their leadership potential. In February 2016, workers from Berekisanang are participating in an industry-run Leadership and Mentorship program that aims to provide opportunities for individuals from historically disadvantaged groups, including women, to gain the skills they need to be promoted into positions of leadership. Berekisanang has consciously made a decision to include general farm workers in the program, as well as supervisors, to provide opportunities for individuals with potential at all levels of the organization.

## SUPPORT FOR WORKING PARENTS

Afrifresh provides a range of benefits to support workers who are balancing paid work with unpaid care responsibilities. In South Africa, women tend to be the primary care-givers (Statistics SA, 2013).

Support for working parents includes:

- **On-farm childcare:** Afrifresh runs kindergartens for workers' children at no or very low cost at three sites: River Fresh, Berekisanang, and Galactic Deals. Kindergartens are provided on farms where it is a local industry norm, such as at River Fresh in the Western Cape, or in regions such as the Northern Cape, where workers are more likely to have young children living with them on farms.
- **Flexible working arrangements:** At head office, employees can choose staggered starting and finishing times for their working days. This flexibility is available to all staff, but is particularly valued by parents who need to coordinate school and/or childcare drop-offs and pick-ups.
- **Additional maternity payments for professional staff:** Under South African law, workers are entitled to 16 weeks' unpaid maternity leave, during which time they are eligible for benefits under the national Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). These payments are made on a sliding scale and capped for top income earners. For professional staff with more than five years' service, Afrifresh tops up the UIF maternity payments with 50% of their salary while on maternity leave.



Photo © Afrifresh

"I wanted to teach ABET [basic literacy and numeracy] because I wanted to learn more. It's a nice thing if you can learn something and give it back to others: there are a lot of people here who can't read and write. It also helps me to teach my kids at home."

Sylvie, ABET teacher and supervisor, Berekisanang (pictured right, with Anna, ABET teacher and supervisor (left)

# THE BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY

## SOUND EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES HELP SECURE ACCESS TO HIGH-VALUE MARKETS

Afrifresh targets high-value export markets for its products: over 80% of its table grapes and 27% of its citrus are sold to the UK and other EU countries. Buyer standards in these markets are demanding, not only with respect to product quality and tight schedules, but also scrutiny of working conditions on farms. This has been a major development in food retail over the past ten years, with international buyers in high-value markets increasingly requiring fresh-produce suppliers to demonstrate compliance with international codes of conduct on labor and working conditions. This means that Afrifresh and other suppliers are required to submit to regular and rigorous workplace audits that cover a range of ethical issues, including non-discrimination and anti-harassment.

For Afrifresh, the management time and resources that it dedicates to ensure compliance with ethical standards across its operations – including non-discrimination and anti-harassment – are a prerequisite for ongoing access to EU markets: “Any non-compliance issue with workers can damage our potential to export to these markets”, said Colette Hugo, Compliance Coordinator at River Fresh. As a result, the company takes compliance with social standards, including those that relate to women’s employment, extremely seriously.

Maintaining best practice is particularly important given that some of Afrifresh’s buyers in high-value markets are looking to consolidate their supplier base; i.e. source higher volumes from a smaller number of suppliers. In this context, individual farms work hard to make sure that working conditions are compliant. According to Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator at Berekisanang, “If you got into a social audit, you know you have to walk out with a ‘gold’. You have to keep the standards as high as possible.”

In this context, Afrifresh sees a clear business case in going beyond strict compliance with social standards and investing in best practice. This helps the company stay ahead of its competitors and anticipate shifts in buyer requirements. According to Charl du Bois, Marketing Manager, there is an increasing focus on ethical compliance, including proactive initiatives to promote better working conditions, particularly in the UK: “We get asked about labor a lot ... This is really important in the UK, where buyers have big expectations of their suppliers. However, given that it wasn’t really expected ten years ago anywhere, we expect that this could increase in importance in other markets, as well”.

Even if other markets do not adopt the same high requirements, Afrifresh’s status as a supplier to EU markets can be used as part of its sales pitch to customers in other markets, where it is recognized that sophisticated management systems and quality assurance are needed to succeed in EU markets.

There is also a cost saving attached to strong performance on social audits. Suppliers have to bear the cost of social audits, which can cost up to ZAR 35,000 (\$2,430) per farm, depending on its size, and take up management time. If social auditors find that a farm has serious non-compliance issues

“Everyone is asking about what we do to uplift women workers. When a supermarket comes to visit, they will ask about this. We need to work on this so as not to be behind [our competitors].”

Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator,  
Berekisanang

around working conditions (e.g. endemic harassment), companies have to pay for more frequent audits compared to those farms who pass audits with good grades. According to Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator: “We try to stay half a step in front of the industry. That way, when ethical standards are upgraded (e.g. to include additional requirements on labor), it’s a breeze for us.”

Recruiting and promoting women can help Afrifresh meet its targets under national legislation, which requires businesses to submit annual reports on racial and gender diversity, and demonstrate efforts to increase gender and racial diversity.

## TESCO: WOMEN WORKERS AND SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAINS

Tesco is one of the world’s largest supermarket retailers, serving millions of customers each week across 11 countries. In financial year 2015/16, its annual sales reached £46 billion (\$67 billion). Tesco is an important buyer for Afrifresh.

Tesco aims to work with suppliers who provide good jobs to workers and uphold international labor standards, including non-discrimination: “By protecting human rights, we give customers confidence, as well as ensuring we are a good neighbor wherever we operate. This isn’t just the right thing to do: we also know that suppliers that invest in their workforce and create good places to work prove to be the most innovative and effective partners for our business for the long-term.”

For Tesco, women’s employment is an important dimension of sustainability. Tania Moodley, Tesco’s Responsible Sourcing Manager for Africa, says that, “As a global business, it matters to us that we have a positive impact wherever we work. Therefore, we have partnered with industries and suppliers across our global supply chains to firstly understand the challenges that women face in agriculture and [determine] how best to respond to these as part of our responsible-sourcing agenda.”

Source: material provided by Tesco, 2016.

## LOYAL AND MOTIVATED WORKFORCE SUPPORTS THE COMPANY’S GROWTH STRATEGY

Afrifresh knows that it needs to maintain a reliable core of loyal, motivated managers and workers to underpin the company’s expansion in the next few years, both in terms of permanent and regular seasonal workers. The company’s workforce is projected to grow to 2,000 permanent workers and 6,000 seasonal workers by 2020. This will create a number of additional management challenges, particularly regarding recruitment and training, which should be mitigated where there is already a strong Afrifresh ‘people culture’, underpinned by the HR framework and sound relations between management and workers. Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, explained, “We are going to be growing vast volumes of fruit here. We need to have the right teams in place by the time the big volumes come in. That is why we need to be so serious about this.”

In this context, the company will benefit from retaining employees in order to maintain institutional know-how and long-term sustainability. According to Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, this logic applies at all levels: “We want to create a culture where people want to work for us and want to stay ... Even losing a tractor driver who knows

how to spray the vines, this creates a gap”. Existing workers can help train and provide oversight of new workers. This means providing the right working conditions for women (and men), as well as opening up new career pathways for women farm workers – such as tractor-driving and management – that encourage employees to stay and strive for promotion.

Afrifresh managers identify a number of business benefits associated with providing the right working conditions that enable them to retain the best workers, permanent and seasonal alike. This includes providing a supportive environment for women that is harassment-free and gives women a voice in the workplace. Sexual harassment is not only illegal and distressing for victims, but can also be costly for business, with a detrimental impact on productivity, retention, attendance, and workplace communication (Hersch, 2015). Afrifresh’s efforts to put strong protective safeguards in place – in terms of policies, training, and consistent enforcement – are important, as sexual harassment can be difficult to detect. Limited awareness and social norms often make women (and men) reluctant to discuss experiences of a sexual nature in the workplace.

According to Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator at Berekisanang, maintaining a stable workforce generally leads to a more harmonious, cohesive, and productive workplace, with fewer problems, less conflict, and less likelihood of harassment. This means that workers are less likely to be distracted by interpersonal disputes and less management time is spent helping workers resolve the issues. In addition, permanent employees help manage the seasonal workforce, according to Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang: “We need a rock-solid core of permanent workers here, so that they create the right culture when seasonal workers come in.”

There is also a recognition that women are good workers who help the company meet its production and quality targets. According to Dirk Lategan, General Manager at River Fresh: “We like to use women workers because they are simply better with the grapes, which are delicate fruit that need careful handling. Women are more detail-oriented.” This is one of the reasons why women represent the vast majority of workers in packhouses, where fruit is graded and weighed. Increasingly, producers in the industry need more productive and skilled workers in packhouses to manage the complex quality requirements of different supermarkets and improve efficiency (Barrientos & Visser, 2012). Buyers have low error margins regarding many aspects of product quality, so attention to detail is critical. For example, whole batches of table grape shipments can be rejected if the weight of individual plastic punnets does not meet the buyer’s required measurements.

Women’s sense of responsibility and care for equipment is one of the reasons why managers are listening carefully to women’s requests to start driving tractors. As observed by Colette Hugo, Compliance Coordinator at River Fresh, “We think that they will probably take better care of the equipment [than men]. Tractors typically cost between 700,000 and 1,000,000 ZAR (\$49,000-70,000), so it’s definitely worth taking a look at”.

“My blood and sweat is in the ground here. It’s like it’s my own farm. I can’t see myself working elsewhere. These people are like a family to me.”

Lena, supervisor, River Fresh

## MORE DIVERSE MANAGEMENT LEADS TO BETTER DECISION-MAKING AND MORE INNOVATION

Large agribusiness companies like Afrifresh increasingly need more skilled people and cannot afford to overlook the talents of half of the workforce; i.e. women. Historically, farming in South Africa has been a male-dominated industry, with farm ownership based on patrilineal inheritance structures. However, modern agriculture operates in a very different world and, in order to be competitive, farms need to increase in size and draw on more diverse skill sets, including business management and scientific knowledge. As agribusiness companies grow, there is increasing competition among producers for the most capable managers who can deliver the best results. Furthermore, many of the farms are based in remote areas where it is difficult to attract the right people, providing yet another reason for broadening the talent pool and ensuring that women can advance at all levels of farm management.

By including women's voices in management discussions, Afrifresh benefits from new perspectives that strengthen company systems and practices. A number of women managers at Afrifresh said that their curiosity and persistent willingness to ask questions are some of their key strengths. As observed by Melinda Dolby, Afrifresh's Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator: "We are not afraid to ask questions. We bring the 'Why?' to the table." Similarly, Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator at Bere किसानang said: "Sometimes male egos get in the way of asking questions: they feel like they should know the answers already and will look stupid if they don't. Women are less concerned by this." Having more female voices in management can also help broaden the scope of discussions, raising issues like work-life balance that affect all workers, but which men are typically less likely to raise (also see IFC, 2013).

As Afrifresh continues to expand its operations and workforce, it intends to adopt a more proactive approach to developing its internal management pipeline, providing an important opportunity to support historically disadvantaged groups, including women, and introduce more diverse voices in management. This means identifying talented individuals in the workforce and providing the training and mentoring support they need to step into new leadership roles as the company grows. In addition to the benefits associated with greater diversity, there will be other advantages: internally recruited supervisors and managers will be equipped with valuable company know-how from their first day on the job and the existing workforce is more motivated if they see opportunities for future career progression. To date, the company has been growing too fast to develop talent internally and has relied more on external recruitment. This has led to large recruitment costs: over the period 2013-2015, Afrifresh spent R1,958,544 (\$133,398) on external recruitment, a figure that it hopes to reduce in the future by developing a stronger internal pipeline.

## A REGULAR SEASONAL WORKFORCE UNDERPINS HIGHER PRODUCTIVITY AND LOWER COSTS

To remain competitive in global fruit markets, Afrifresh strives to deliver the greatest possible volume of fruit, at the highest possible quality and the lowest cost. Labor is one of the company's major costs, so in order to be as competitive as possible, the company needs to operate on the basis of a lean, decentralized structure, with high levels of efficiency and productivity on all farms. While Afrifresh benefits from economies of scale, it still faces a number of cost pressures, including inflation, a severe drought in South Africa, and competition from other growers, both within and outside South Africa.

Afrifresh aims to take on the same seasonal workers each year, providing some certainty of income for these workers and their families. For Afrifresh, there are clear productivity gains attached to ensuring that its best seasonal workers return each year to pick and pack fruit during peak season. Experienced seasonal workers can work faster and require less oversight from supervisors. High labor productivity is particularly critical for table grapes, a more labor-intensive crop than citrus, that needs to be picked and packed within a short time frame (six to eight weeks). The seasonal workforce is critical for making sure that this work is achieved within the shortest possible time frame at the lowest possible cost.

Afrifresh managers say that it takes a whole season for workers to achieve optimum productivity, as this is the time it takes to gain the experience of the full harvest cycle. At the beginning of the season, many new seasonal workers will already have some experience from previous work on other table grape or citrus farms in the region, but each farm has its own practices that workers need to learn. For instance, Berekeisanang packs table grapes in the vineyards, rather than in packhouses, an unusual practice that requires a different way of working.

Afrifresh's River Fresh farm, in the Western Cape, has direct experience of the business case for retaining the best seasonal workers. In 2014, River Fresh suffered a poor harvest as a result of a severe hail storm that damaged almost all its fruit. Consequently, as a result of extremely low volumes, River Fresh was not able to offer work to many of its regular seasonal workers, who went on to seek work elsewhere. In the following season, when River Fresh had returned to regular production, it struggled to attract back many of its previously regular seasonal workers and had to hire a new cohort of seasonal workers. This led to a significant drop in productivity, with the new workers picking and packing fruit at a slower rate. As a result, the farm had to hire 150 additional seasonal workers to compensate, adding to the wage bill for that season and taking up additional management time for training and supervision.

"It's very important to get the same seasonal workers coming back. We lose production time and training time. Also, you can give experienced seasonal workers more responsibility and let them grow more... You can find labor easily, but you have to work harder to keep on attracting them back."

Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

While there are new opportunities opening up for women in the South African fruit industry, gender norms in the sector will take some time and effort to shift. Although Afrifresh has had some important successes in encouraging women's participation in leadership and non-traditional roles, managers recognize there is still considerable scope for further progress within Afrifresh operations and a number of challenges remain that will require proactive effort and creative thinking.

One of the challenges is finding women with the right qualifications and skills. South Africa has a comparatively high rate of women in agricultural research and higher education, with women accounting for 62% of graduates in the field (Beintema & Marcantonio, 2009). The problem is that these women are not using their qualifications

“When I was growing up, I said I wanted to be a farmer and my dad said that I couldn’t, because I was a girl. But I found my own way of being in the industry...

Being a woman is hard in agriculture. It’s hard to convince men to listen. It took a long time... Your first year is the most difficult, then people start to listen more. Once you have earned that respect, it’s okay.”

Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator

“My dad used to think that I wouldn’t make it, but he’s really pleased now that I can do what I say I can. My mum believes in me, that I can do whatever.”

Winile Khumalo, Assistant Junior Manager, Fruit Star

to apply for management positions on farms. According to Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, Afrifresh has not received a single application from a woman for a general manager position. Instead, it is thought that women prefer to use these qualifications to apply for positions in government or other office-based jobs. At lower levels, there are similar challenges: women farm workers are more likely to lack certain basic qualifications (such as driver’s licenses) that they might need to take up non-traditional roles.

Overcoming the qualifications gap may require some creativity in approaches to recruitment, but also proactive investment in skills development for women (and men). In some instances, it may be possible for Afrifresh to think more flexibly about the requirements of the job. Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, observed that men tend to get appointed to farm management positions because of their technical knowledge and experience, but this is not insurmountable: “You can learn [these skills]. If you get the right technical advisers, this can help bypass this requirement.” Additionally, Afrifresh may benefit from replicating its assistance to Winile Khumalo at Fruit Star, by identifying motivated women within its workforce and providing financial

support and/or encouragement to individuals. It may also involve greater participation in industry training schemes, such as the Leadership and Mentorship program.

Another challenge is to shift mind-sets. Often it takes time to persuade women that they should enter the industry or try to take up new roles, partly because of widespread social norms about the respective roles of women and men in agriculture. Colette Hugo at River Fresh said that it took time for women to start speaking up about driving tractors, “Because they were initially embarrassed to express an interest.” Colette said that women were concerned about whether their male colleagues would listen to them and take them seriously. Other women in the business testified that it can take time and perseverance for women to be accepted in new roles, but it does happen eventually.

So far, the company has made significant capital investments to get distressed farms up and running. However, the challenge for the company in its next phase of growth will be to invest more in its workforce, including women, despite ongoing cost pressures. This may, for instance, involve investment in training, worker health and social infrastructure, such as worker accommodation and communal areas. Some of these investments may require considerable outlay (such as upgrading accommodation), but other, smaller investments (such as targeted

investment in training) can potentially make a vast difference. Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, observed that: “We have come a long way, but it’s a continuous process. We know that we still have challenges and need to keep improving.”

## CONCLUSIONS

The face of fruit production in South Africa is changing, with new doors opening for businesses and the women in their workforce. The industry is increasingly competitive, with pressure to increase productivity and efficiency and control costs. There is a trend toward fewer, larger farms and production has shifted to high-value export commodities, including table grapes. Export producers like Afrifresh need to demonstrate good employment practices in order to sell to high-value markets, such as the EU, but also need to have a highly effective approach to HR management to get the very best out of their workforce at all levels of the organization. The Afrifresh experience shows that being a good employer has a positive impact on its bottom line, helping the company meet its objectives on quality, cost, and volume of produce.

“There is a huge opportunity for us to do more to empower women. They are the breadwinners in families in many cases. Can we create more opportunities for women to enter the business? With our existing women, how can we support them more? These are strategic questions for us. I’d love to see us giving more opportunities to women.”

Roy Fine, Development Director, Afrifresh



Photo © Afrifresh

Women workers at Afrifresh value the support that the company provides for those with childcare responsibilities, but women at all levels benefit primarily from its efforts to be a fair employer that emphasizes transparency, consistency, and equality of opportunity, and that provides a workplace that is free of any form of harassment. The company's focus on transparent employment decisions provides access to wider opportunities for women workers in an industry where employment options can be restricted by traditional gender roles. Afrifresh's emphasis on equality of opportunity is laying the foundations for the development of a motivated and qualified workforce for its future expansion.

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