



Taking a feminist approach to organising women workers in South Africa

A Power Up! Story

Part I

“We are a channel for the stories of real people who lead us and show us how best to represent them”





As told to, and written by **Michal Friedman**

with

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PLANTING A SEED: HOW AND WHY THIS WORK BEGINS

**“Each seed sets in motion a myriad of events, some predictable and some unknowable. But each seed is a lever that can move a mountain, start a family, make a new path, bring new hope, and change a world.”
(Shulman, 2016:107)**

Members of the gender team at the Labour Research Service (LRS) a labour support non-governmental organisation (NGO) in South Africa, have long been concerned about the shifting sands of the South African economy and the extent to which many women are either in casualised labour or working in the informal, rather than formal, economy. The latter is where trade unions have historically been more active, thereby excluding many working women from the formal labour movement.

Back in 2017, the LRS gender team got to meet with twelve women to explore how this ongoing economic and social crisis could be addressed by organising workers in casual and precarious workspaces. They met in Evaton, a Vaal township, a one and half-hour drive from Johannesburg, in a relatively dark, rudimentarily equipped hall known as the Vukani space. Filled with love and care, this space has been used by LRS for many years. A daughter of a former LRS colleague introduced the LRS team to a category of worker they have never before encountered, one the State calls ‘voluntary food handlers’ (VFHs).

Unemployed parents of learners in local communities, mostly women, are recruited and appointed by the School Governing Body to become ‘voluntary food handlers’. They are hired to cook meals provided by the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). Their food preparation work includes cooking, cleaning, managing provisions, and modelling and encouraging cleanliness. The workers hired by the NSNP fall under the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), designed to address unemployment and enable poor people to contribute to society. The LRS gender team was intrigued to discover VFHs, and a powerful seed was planted. They set out to develop a contextual reading of the multiple perspectives shaping the lived experience of VFHs, as well as the concrete workings of the NSNP. However, lack of resources seemed to signal the end of the story beyond this initial introduction.

Four years later, in 2021, the [Power UP!](#) (PU!)¹ consortium provides the water needed for the first sprouts to be nourished. LRS becomes one of ten sub-grantees that PU! consortium member, [Gender at Work](#), invites to use PU! financial resources to support transformation, equity, and justice. PU! offers LRS their 'dream project': a long-awaited opportunity to organise the VFHs in a feminist way that contributes towards greater social equality in a highly unequal environment. As Nosipho, lead facilitator in the LRS team puts it:

“Our intention is to ensure that these women are valued and recognised, not because of us, but because they have discovered it for themselves and have gained the power and the strength to speak and share their stories and their own realities.”

By offering resources in a way that no other donor has before², PU! enables the LRS gender team to uniquely construct a point of intersection between:

- **Feminist movement building:** taking advantage of a government initiative to bring African women into paid work by organising many previously unemployed women and mothers of school children as one strategy for achieving greater gender equality.
- **Labour rights organising** in the State Public Works Programme, one of the most precarious sectors of work.
- **Food as a social justice issue**, linked to the need to address hunger and malnutrition amongst school learners.

The team starts by focusing on the Gauteng Province where they are physically based. They rely on mobilisation through focus groups with VFHs and the broader community to build mutual understanding and relationships. The picture painted by early conversations between the LRS, VFHs and other stakeholders is both muddled and grim. VFHs report feeling intimidated, disrespected, and sometimes even fearful of being attacked by learners, staff, and members of the community. Food and insults are thrown at them, and they experience more

¹ Power Up! was a feminist consortium (2021-2025) led by JASS (Just Associates) in partnership with Gender at Work and Yayasan Pemberdayaan Perempuan Kepala Keluarga (PEKKA). LRS was one of the 10 Gender at Work partners implementing projects under the auspices of Power Up!. The funding was provided by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the [2021-2025 Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society](#).

² The LRS gender team described the funding as 'unencumbered' because they were able to take an emergent approach to their work with VFHs in ways that donor funding – which tends to be overly prescriptive – does not usually make possible.

insidious forms of violence, including being forced to collect dirty dishes left on the playground intentionally to undermine their work. Much of this happens with a teacher present and doing little or nothing to help.

With high levels of unemployment in South Africa, being a VFH is considered a privilege, and VFHs are often met with 'jealousy' from other unemployed parents. This leads to bullying and harassment, including accusations of stealing food and poisoning the learners. Some VFHs use their own pots and stoves from home, and working conditions are often unsafe - there are kitchens with ceilings that are unstable and crumbling. With storage a rarity, food is vulnerable to rodents. There is no administrative structure or support, no-one to report to when something goes wrong, no payslips or formal recognition of certification. VFH workers are extremely vulnerable and fearful that becoming organised will threaten their jobs and livelihoods. New VFHs are instructed to follow their contracts and avoid speaking to former VFHs - anything else, such as any sign of asserting their rights as workers or even asking for basic rights like access to payslips, will result in their replacement.

Later, as the contracts across the different two-year periods and across provinces are analysed by the LRS team, it emerges that the contracts drafted by the Department of Education did not specify an hourly wage rate or standard work hours. This allows principals at different schools to set their own rates, leading to inconsistencies. Without understanding their rights in relation to the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) sectoral determination on minimum wages and other conditions, and by being designated 'volunteers' instead of workers, the VFHs are unable to challenge these disparities or claim protection under the Labour Relations Act.

THE INITIAL GARDENERS: WHO ARE THE LRS GENDER TEAM – AND WHAT INFLUENCES THEM?

This is the story of the LRS team's approach and its evolution, and how they were able to support the food handlers to embark on a life-changing journey. The LRS team sees itself as walking alongside the groups they work with, supporting them to do the work that they need to do. All team members are committed to labour rights struggles and activism. They agree that the work with the VFHs focuses on shifting the economic and social value of women's labour. The team reflects a diverse intersectional experience of identity and expertise across gender, class, race, age, sexuality, religion, and education. The unique contribution of each member is explicitly valued, while recognising that everyone is at a different point

in their personal journey. Making visible a few of the elements that influence each team member provides helpful context for the team's philosophical approach, practice, and methods.

Nancy supports the LRS team in her capacity as an LRS Associate. She describes her role as architect or overall design thinker, system manager, and process facilitator. As a radical feminist, she values centring the woman, emphasising and reclaiming women's inherent value and power, and valuing care and reproductive work. She understands that strong individuals make up strong collectives and stresses the importance of speaking with authenticity rather than 'shouting'.

“If I feel pride in and believe in what I know, in what I can do, that I need to know more, that people need to respect me because I AM - then when I join in a collective, we will have a power that can transform.”

For Nancy, movement building is the process of accompanying people she's working with to find a life pathway in which they are happier with themselves and feel embodied in their value and power.

On every step of the movement building path are members who are walking, discovering what they want, finding others to walk with and support them, all with the greater visibility provided 'by glasses they didn't have before'; they are not following the organiser who knows the answer. She draws extensively on her prior experience in Colombia, working in feminist ways with informal women workers. From living and working with Indigenous communities. Nancy brings a prioritisation of spiritual essence - a sense of the interconnectedness of all life, including a connection to Pachamama³ and to the ancestors (anything that has come before now – people as well as rivers, mountains, and rocks) - and how to listen for what is needed at any point in time. From this essence follows what people will think (head), feel/value (heart), and have the will (feet) to act. Nancy's starting point is always to understand the context, culture, needs, unique characteristics, and challenges of the specific group being engaged, with a broader focus on genuine and pressing societal need (in this context the need for better learner nutrition). Her longer-term north star is to promote a feminist political economy that centres care, community, and collective wellbeing.

³ [Pachamama](#), known as Mother Earth, is one of the most revered deities in the Andean worldview. This ancient figure embodies the fertility and abundance of the earth as well as the intrinsic connection between humans and nature.

Many equivalents exist in other parts of the world. Odudua for the Yoruba, Ncambici for the Bakongo, Asase Yaa for the Akan. [Nomkhubulwane](#) or Mbaba Mwana Waresa, is a highly revered goddess in Zulu mythology, representing fertility. A western equivalent is [Gaia](#) - the name of the Greek goddess who personifies Earth in its primordial form and symbolises the interconnectedness of all life on Earth.

Nina sees her role as that of process manager, maintaining structure and disciplined reflection and record keeping. She draws on years of experience as a South African community activist, and popular educator skilled at developing more reflective, action-learning, and emergent ways of working. Outside of her work in the formal labour movement, her process is influenced by participation in transformational leadership work and collective impact initiatives with [Letsema](#) and [Meadowlands](#). Thinking systemically and working with multiple stakeholders in relational and connecting ways, making links between formal and informal economies/spaces, creating a more caring economy, and navigating the privilege and power of her class and educational background are central to her approach. Nina enjoys learning what it means to innovate organisational forms that meet the needs of a precarious women dominated workforce.

Nosipho is the lead facilitator in the work with VFHs. She is deeply connected to the life-worlds of the VFHs as a mother who also has teachers in her family. She lives in one of the communities where the VFHs focus groups meet and spent six weeks as a VFH while doing participant observation research for a Masters' degree. Nosipho brings a feminist consciousness, exceptional facilitation skills and experience, a passion for storytelling, which she shares through her own writing⁴, and a trauma-aware and embodied approach. She is committed to centring participants' existing knowledge and experience, holding equal space for all participants, trusting the process, and being open to learning alongside the group. Nosipho knows that whomever she's working with, whether they be a VFH or government official, she is connecting with whole people and building relationships with them.

Phumzile, a consultant to LRS, is the oldest member of the team and most closely connected to ancestral knowledge. She is a retired union organiser who used to work in the Health Sector. Phumzile is a co-facilitator with Nosipho and sees her role as one of using her experience as a participant to help authenticate the process. She brings energy, inspiration, design knowledge, and encouragement that makes it safer for VFHs to express themselves honestly and discover for themselves what actions they need to take to change their realities. She also has family members who are teachers and she has a deep knowing of broader educational contexts.

⁴ See "A river changing its form" in [Writing from the Inside. Stories of Hope and Change](#) (pp 46-47); "[Seeing with Kind Eyes/Confronting with Respect](#)" in [TRANSFORMING POWER. A KNOTTED ROPE](#) (pp34-43); "Using conversation to overcome barriers" in [OUR HEARTS ARE JOINED. Writings From Letsema](#) (pp137-144);

George, the only man on the team, is an LRS researcher and collective bargaining educator. He is an ex-union organiser and national negotiator with a deep knowledge of labour law, sectoral determination conditions⁵, (key to making sense of what conditions are related to workers in precarious forms of work) and bargaining strategy. He finds this unorganised context, free of the usual bureaucratic obstacles rife in older formal sector trade unions, refreshing. In this process George reconnects with his earlier self, recognising that this is the only labour environment where he gets so emotionally triggered. He finds the VFH spaces respectful, focused, and interactive, with the participants less concerned with 'showing off' or dominating others.

As the head of LRS communications, **Nelly** sees her role as ensuring all the media relevant to the VFHs is up to date, available, and strategic. She profiles VFHs' experience, voice, and campaigns, and links their realities to wider public debates at the right time. She is from Kenya, with firsthand knowledge about the place of school meals in community life in Kenya. Her mother, a Headmistress, started a farm to support the government school feeding program, teach agriculture, and earn from surplus crops. Nelly remembers that while acquainted with the caring, compassionate, and hard-working cook, Wambui, she never fully considered the reality of her working conditions, a reflection that is analogous to the largely invisible work of the VHF's.

Zanele is the LRS communications coordinator, leading the development of engaging multi-media content, including storytelling and video that centres VFH narratives. Zanele sees her role as a conduit, translating the team's vision into tools and resources for the food handlers and other audiences that represent their truth without exploitation.

“We are a channel for the stories of real people who lead us and show us how best to represent them”. She has been amazed by the vulnerability the VFHs have entrusted to the team: “It has been the privilege of a lifetime and I am grateful”.

Kukhanya is the youngest member of the team, a lawyer interning at LRS. Both her grandmother and aunt were teachers. She has an interest in human rights law and in making law accessible to people – especially women - living in precarious conditions. Relating to and connecting with the food handlers comes naturally to her. The younger ones are close to her age, and the older ones think she is their child, and share with her what they are not comfortable telling other facilitators.

⁵ Sectoral determination law in South Africa refers to legal instruments that set specific minimum wages and working conditions for different sectors or industries, established by the Minister of Employment and Labour.

Kukhanya organises and shares transport to meetings with those living in closest proximity to her. This opens space for informal conversation that fill in gaps on how food handlers are faring, even after contracts expire. She enjoys taking and sharing pictures of the food handlers (who usually hide in the background) that make them feel good about themselves.

WHAT WE DID: OUR APPROACH/METHODOLOGY FOR NOURISHING NEW PLANTS

The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made; and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination (John Schaar cited in Sharma, 2017:233).

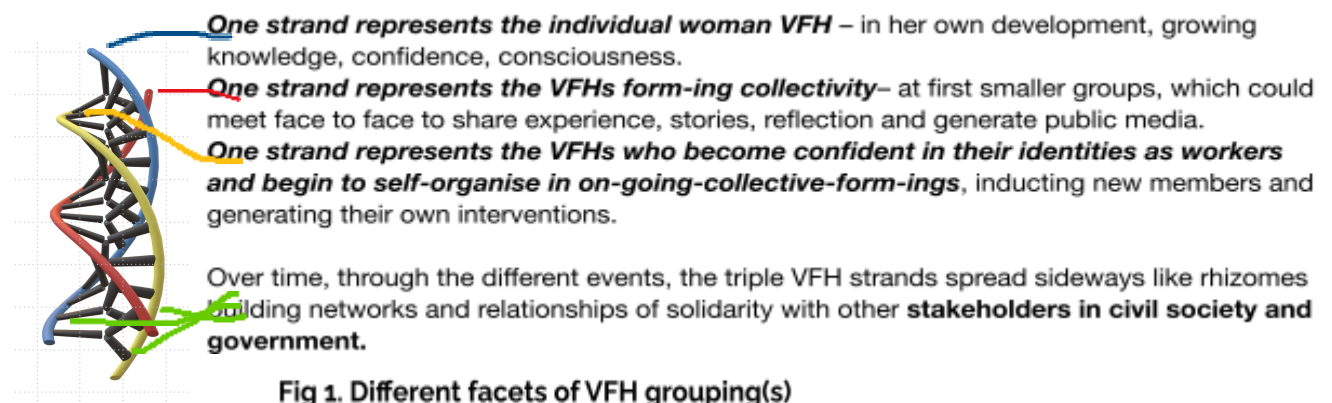
“It takes many, many conversations amongst us to build the necessary strategies and approaches for implementing what started out as a concept and is now a formidable movement with endless possibilities” (Zanele).

The underlying philosophy or ethos that Nancy brings to the team is visible in whatever the LRS team is supporting or designing - whether events, media, or the facilitation of a WhatsApp group, everything is approached with a consistent methodology, flow, and set of exercises. Over time, other team members learn the requisite sensibilities and are finding their own ways to apply and adapt this philosophy as a living practice. Adaptation will remain critical; the VFH 'grouping' and the context they operate in is in constant movement, forever forming, reforming, and changing. It is not possible to construct a movement-building 'guidebook', because movements are emergent, never fixed. This process is as much about the empowerment of the VFHs through effective politics and policy change as it is about these women's lives, with all their griefs and joys, and the intersectional identities they bring to their active participation in the movement.

The LRS team carries an awareness of the larger system; they understand that decolonisation is a necessary element of this work. They seek to craft a loving, caring, responsive, and flexible way of engaging with each other and with the VFHs, while supporting advocacy for greater community and government recognition of care work. At the heart of VHF's efforts to reclaim value is an appreciative inquiry approach: "I am not complaining and I'm not begging. I tell

what's good and I ask for the recognition. I am expecting my value; that one that you don't see".

We can envisage this movement growing; we can imagine it like a triple helix (Fig. 1), with each strand of the helix representing a different facet of the VFH grouping.



The LRS team accompanies and supports the VFHs as they do what they need to do. The reclaiming of their value and visibility, the desire for greater confidence and knowledge grounded in lived experience, and the strengthening of their personal and collective critical consciousness and power are always at the centre. Everything is designed to ensure the VFHs are in the driver's seat, determining and controlling the pace, agenda, and direction. They speak for and represent themselves.

The **rungs** of the helix (Fig. 2) represent the elements of the LRS methodological approach - the inputs and 'magic' they bring to the whole interweaving. These elements can be simultaneously present in different constellations that are unpredictable, with the one constant being that changes are always driven and made by the VFHs.

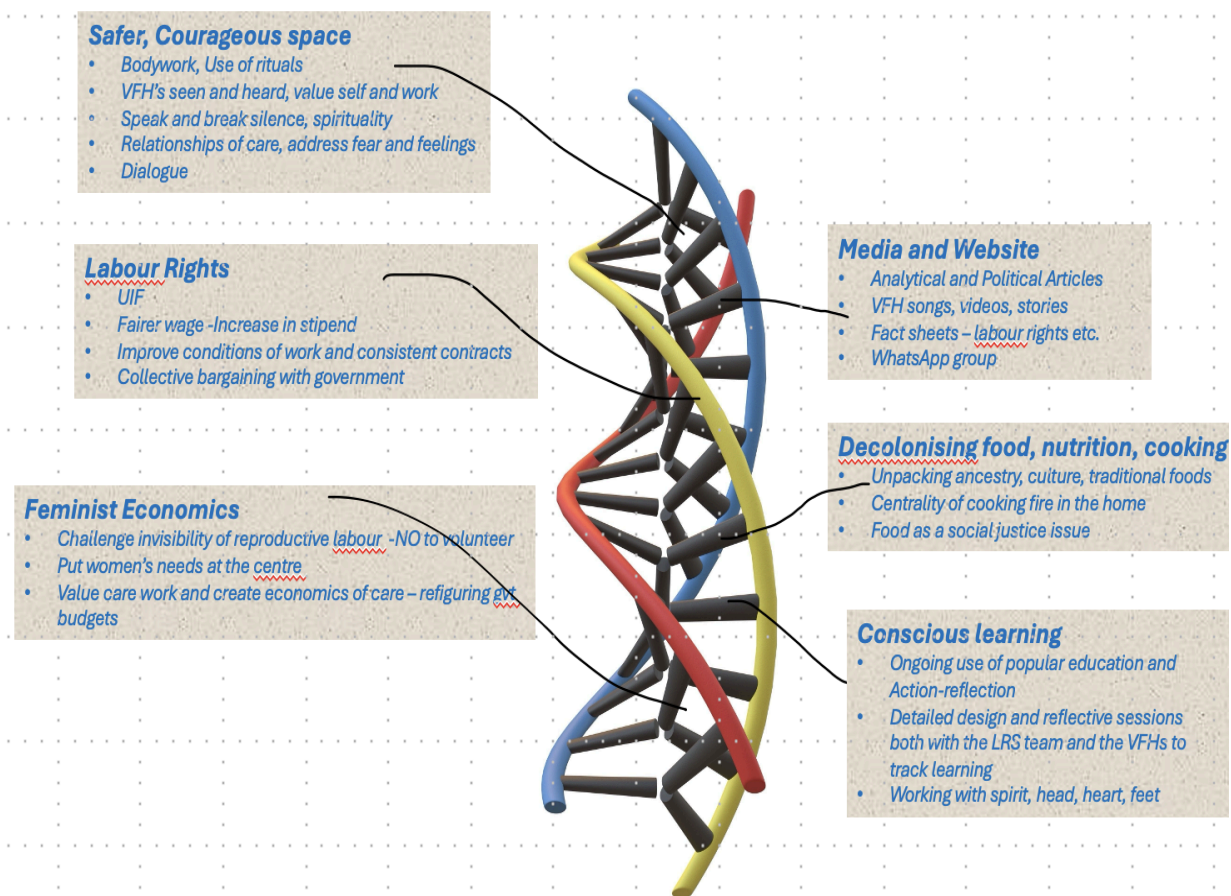


Figure 2. Elements of LRS methodology

All participants in the different activities are respected as whole human beings who are spiritually interconnected to a larger whole and relationally connected to themselves and to each other. This interconnectedness is grounded in something that they resonate with or are familiar with from their everyday lives - whether ancestry, culture, tradition, or personal practice (e.g. wooden spoons, homecoming gifts, or even the Bible). What the VFHs offer is affirmed: their relationship to food, nutrition and cooking, the value of the NSNP and the value of food and nutrition to learners and society.

Abstract concepts are made accessible through embodied, sensory, experiential learning that favours dialogue, participation, and problem-posing methods. Art, music, food, story, metaphor, and fun are an integral part of the learning environment, making it easier to imagine alternatives. Labour law and feminist economics inform exercises and reflections. VFHs contribute to generating the

media that is shared through the LRS website. Both the LRS team and the VFHs engage in conscious, rhythmic learning practices linked to each activity on each step of the entire process.

SPROUTS AND FRUITS

The biggest victory to date for the VFHs is the shift in both their sense of personal and social value. They are reclaiming their dignity and humanity. They feel seen, so they can see themselves. There is meaningful external validation of their lives and place in the world. They no longer walk with sagging shoulders, lacking confidence and unhappy. The tears and laughter they experienced through this process have healed and empowered. They walk tall, value themselves and the work they do, and can more readily deflect negativity from school staff and the broader community. They identify as workers and have pressured the government to make policy changes to recognise that identity. Their stipends have increased. They are accessing their [UIF benefits](#) more effectively. Beginning in 2026, a major shift marks their new-found status as workers: the ['volunteer' tag will be removed](#) from their title. The Department of Education responds to legal and media pressure to increase VFH visibility by sending out a circular to school Principals outlining how they should be supporting VFHs with UIF access and properly registering new cohorts of VFHs.

No longer invisible and ignored, VFHs tell their own stories and share their experiences with pride and confidence. It is akin to lotus flowers blossoming from the mud in which their seeds have taken root. Collective discussions between VFHs at the school level help bolster their visibility and value in the eyes of learners and teachers. They are also being increasingly recognised as caregivers in their relationships with children, as mediators in activist spaces, and as people knowledgeable about food and nutrition, and how to deconstruct colonial and capitalist influences on healthy eating. This is captured in the VFH slogan: *Ho atlehisa mmele bakeng sa kelello etjhatsi* (nurturing bodies for bright minds)⁶.

VFHs are self-organising to grow beyond Gauteng and establish a national presence. Consequently, LRS is receiving requests for labour rights support from across the country. In representing themselves in media conferences, at multi-stakeholder roundtables and colloquia, they are visible. People are speaking about VFHs independently of the LRS. Certain stakeholders are reaching out to support the FHs pro-bono. FHs are being taken seriously in discussions within formal unions for the first time. The Department of Education is

⁶ 2021 Power Up! Annual Report.

asking to learn from them. amandla.mobi, an organisation that organises petitions, has established an independent relationship with the food handlers and is campaigning around their working conditions. VFHs are now more visible and less afraid to engage with authority figures like school Principals. They have begun engaging with other care workers to broaden their movement's tent to welcome a much larger care-worker collective.

HOW WE DID IT – SOME EXAMPLES

The following examples⁷ illustrate the rich texture and flavour of the nature of the 'soul food' that the LRS team is offering. They demonstrate what Ailton Krenak⁸, Indigenous Brazilian writer, philosopher, journalist, environmentalist, and activist of the Krenak people, says about how 'affection connects people to each other and to the land; genuine learning comes from enchantment, curiosity and respect'. These examples are not chronological, but they show how design and facilitation catalyses and co-creates with the VFHs the possibility for them to control their own narrative, part of which is that their work and contributions help feed 9.6 million children every day. In the process, they build a connected web of relationships with other stakeholders.

CREATING SAFER, COURAGEOUS AND WELCOMING SPACE

We must maintain safe spaces for collective and individual care and protection as a critical strategy for building movements (Urgent Action Funds, 2023)

“When I walked inside and saw the beautiful decor and setup, it reminded me of our meeting spaces in Evaton. I told my fear, ‘Fear, wait for me at the door; I will take you back when I leave the meeting. We don't need you in here’”. (VFH participant after the press conference.)

Feminists working as facilitators have long recognised that facilitating the development of more inclusive, holistic communities requires learning spaces in

⁷ Readers interested in the full details of each event or wanting to know more about the specific methodologies are encouraged to visit the LRS website and explore the full-length reports [here](#).

⁸ Thanks to Solange Rocha for introducing me to Krenak.

which participants feel valued, brave, and safe enough to be challenged. The LRS team have mastered the art of creating such spaces.

When an event is being organised, the Gender Team and facilitators are conscious of what it takes to create spaces in which VFHs feel safe and confident speaking honestly. The various methodologies are based on giving them the right and power to own the space, to be regarded as experts in their fields, and to make sure the LRS team are also learning from them. A peer learning environment deconstructs the hierarchy of 'the expert', who is there to tell you what you should know. In this sense, the team is creating what psychologists call a 'relational home' – a space that allows people to feel 'safe', vulnerable, valued, free from judgement, and able to express and integrate their vulnerability into who they experience themselves as being and to find their authentic voices (Hendel 2018).

On a physical level, care is taken to make meeting rooms engaging and familiar. The well-loved Vukani space in Evaton is used for many meetings. As Nancy describes it:

“Imagine a VFH arriving in a room in the township that is set up with a round circle, like the Lekgotla⁹. The room is full of clay pots we make beer with; a calabash, African print cloths that I know, big wooden African cooking up spoons – things that I use for my clothes, for cooking, for living. I am not arriving to a place that is a hall with desks, a flip chart, a projector and a paper to say what we're going to do. I am invited to have a coffee and biscuits. From the beginning, everything tells me - this is not a thing to fear. It is not something that I am outside of. Everyone arrives to hug each other, to say, what happened? It's a totally different environment.”

This practice is a powerful way for VFHs to feel confident in other physical spaces as well. Meetings held in more 'traditional' spaces with press, unions, community members, or government officials, are similarly laid out and decorated with VFHs' 'familiar objects'.

⁹ Nosipho explains that Lekgotla is a Tswana word used in Southern Africa. It refers to a traditional gathering or assembly where community members get together to discuss important issues, make decisions and resolve disputes. What is important for LRS is how these meetings are structured and trusted. Participants sit in a circle without hierarchy. The circle represents 'no beginning and no end' connecting people to the past and the future. People who are there to share their stories are deeply listened to, without interruption until they are finished. Responses are offered from a place of deep respect and humility. All responses are valued contributions. Decisions that are taken are collectively owned and respected.

At the joint May Day/Mothers' Day celebration in 2025, for instance, the physical space is designed to create a visually engaging learning environment. At the entrance of the hall, a school kitchen is re-created with posters reflecting May Day Celebrations. Deep inside the hall, a home space is created showing the distinction between the workplace and home, with flowers to mark the Mother's Day Celebration. A circle of chairs is arranged in the middle of the room for the discussion.

On a less visible level, Nosipho beautifully describes her awareness of O'Brien's¹⁰, suggestion that the 'success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener':

“I had to walk with them in the gentlest way I've ever had to work with a group of people. Each time we had to remind each other why we are doing this, why we are in this, and why we need to protect the space and collectively learn.”

Nosipho uses body-based practices to ground herself and down-regulate her own emotions, which helps her reduce 'empathetic distress' (Halifax, 2018). She consciously brings an awareness into the group of wanting to create equality and equity, an atmosphere of care, trust, respect and compassion.

“I'm aware of my power and positionality and hold my position so gently. I realise that I am where I am, and the fact that I meditate, think through, set intentions in the space in order to participate as a full person, regardless of who I am and of what I hold. I have learned that by being true to myself, by not having anxiety, and by engaging and coming exactly from where and how I'm located, without guilt, without accusation, people warm to me. They respond and relate to me as a member of the group. We emphasise with everything that we do that we're not experts, but activists, collectively, with them, with the same mission of trying to create a better world. How that world is created is dependent not only on me and them, but others in the communities, and we also look at what we're offering, what we're bringing in with kind eyes, and understand that sometimes there might be things that would want to divide us, but because we are aware and because we have an awareness of building and coming together, all the things that might actually divide us will not succeed.”

¹⁰ Bill O' Brien, quoted by Otto Scharmer (2018:8).

UNPACKING 'THE COLONIAL FOOD BASKET'

Reflective, creative exercises invite the VFHs to reflect on what is close to their hearts: the day-to-day work of providing nutritious meals to learners – and, thus, make conscious their own knowing, fears, and aspirations. The VFHs articulate connections between healthy nutrition and child health, affirming the positive impact the school programme has on social issues like poverty, food insecurity, crime, and poor performance in schools. They may initially see the NSNP food as 'poor people's food', believing that this diet deprives children of processed meat, sugar and salt.

As they participate in meetings and actions, the LRS team is learning alongside the *Amakhosikazi* and VFHs about what it takes to dismantle the 'colonial food basket' and associated mindsets to re-weave those vines¹¹ into a nutrition activist perspective that values women's work as work, not volunteerism, and values the NSNP diet as a healthy one.

In an early workshop with the *Amakhosikazi*, the LRS team is exploring how to **support** them in effectively communicating the potential of their work to improve childhood health and wellbeing through food and nutrition. To do this the team creates an inner and outer square. The inner square represents the healthy food used in the NSNP, and the outer square represents other kinds of food. The dirt bin is for food that does not promote health. The discussion is focused on the different nutritional value of the foods. How they have been used traditionally? Why they are healthy? When and how have they become unhealthy? The role of sugar and salt is discussed too. Exploring the food by touch elicits memories and connects participants to family and ancestors. In reflecting, they revisit the impact of colonisation, the pride they take in traditional food preparation practices, how the addiction to sugar and salt has been amplified with capitalism and the fast-food industry, and their potential to address these harms as nutrition activists. The participants then use their creativity in a fun and playful way to make something – an embodied 'artefact' - that can communicate their collective learning. In this instance, the form of a song is used. It connects participants back to struggle songs and the way music has been used in South Africa to spread activist messages and inspire others to act. The team reminds participants that the purpose of the song is to spread their message widely, to VFHs across the country who might speak different languages, and to secondary audiences, other stakeholders connected to the VFHs.

¹¹ Thanks to Ailton Krenak for this image.

The group plays with words and tunes, moving around the room so they feel the song in their bodies. Constructing a creative 'output', which captures their energy and enthusiasm, is like spreading the spark of a fire. It is later deliberately used to grow the movement beyond the small group. The team records the song and plays it back. The participants receive immediate feedback and mirroring. Everyone signs on as co-authors, which builds collective spirit and ownership. In the process, the participants reflect on their own experiences, deconstruct colonially imposed ways of thinking and doing, and collectively learn how to communicate the lessons distilled from that reflection and practice using their voices in public. One of the *Amakhosikazi* group members, Jabulile Magae, explains why it is called 'Jabula' (which means to be happy or rejoice).

“There’s something special about the song. As Africans, when you are happy, you sing. When you are sad, you sing. When we made the song, we envisioned learners queuing for lunch while listening to it... that it would prevent the agitation and fighting that often occurs in the queues. We want them to hear the song and associate it with the loving mothers who are waiting to feed them.”

At a later meeting with trade unions, Nomadlozi Gumede says:

“As a person, you relate better when you see something that you think represents you in the media...As community leaders who are also food handlers, we felt that even if not all food handlers were part of the song, food handlers on a national level, when they hear this song, will find meaning in it.. They will recognise their importance. They will take ownership of their own struggle.”

MOVEMENT-ATION¹² IN ACTION – ECOSYSTEM WEAVING

Relationships are not objects, or things; they are the activities of meeting that shape the world within which we find bounded and finite 'things'. They live between the things. They surround things.

¹² In October 2024, Gender at Work PU! partners met in Rwanda. There, the word 'movement-ation' was coined to better describe what partners are doing, which can capture the - sometimes small but very deep - roots the partners are planting and nurturing. Participants expressed discomfort with the word 'movement' as being a 'colonial tool', limited in its meaning and its roots, used historically to oppress people. *Movement-ation* captures the fluidity, that better characterises these partners, what they're growing and the more horizontal leadership they are developing.

They enable new things to emerge. We need to build a relationship with relationships to discern them at all (Proteus, 2020).

The VFHs expand their reach horizontally across the country, laterally across the broader trade union movement, and ultimately across all parts of civil society and relevant government departments. One means of expansion is bolstered by LRS providing VFHs access to groups and individuals they have spent years cultivating trusted relationships with. This network includes the LRS Member Union Forum, other union federations and many influential actors in civil society and government.

LRS helps translate these relationships into action by curating events that bring these *Amakhosikazi* together to combine forces. Events are carefully designed and facilitated to establish equal participation and representation. The LRS team have learned that relationships are 'not objects' that can be manipulated or forced into action; allyship and effective cooperation flows from mutual respect and understanding.

Power-sharing between all stakeholders in the room is essential and respected without exception; the purpose of each event is to co-create in service of the movement. They embody the words of Brazilian scholar Vanessa Andreotti (2025):

'The future is a result of the relationships you weave in the present. That we need to learn to be with each other not as fixed identities but as entities that are part of a relational field creating intelligence together co-intelligencing and being changed and transformed by the process.'

The LRS team observes and facilitates with empathy, guided by their desire to cooperate, rather than control outcomes. They affirm what is working well and offer tactical suggestions on what might be improved. An open and affirmative approach to ideas and perspectives invites broader participation from individuals who might otherwise avoid these kinds of discussions for fear of reprisal or judgement. Each new participant is a potential life-long ally.

A good example that illustrates this approach is at the Trade Union Dialogue in 2022, where the SADTU (South African Democratic Teachers' Union) national negotiator said:

...as unions, there is no way we can praise the employer. You can only reach the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) through us. Both the employer and labour meet at the ELRC to discuss challenges. Our focus is on the criticism. That is how we will bring change.

Nina replies:

“...we have developed a set of advocacy tools to assist with widespread awareness and reach out to a larger group of people and increase visibility. Other stakeholders also concerned with nutrition, hungry children and food sovereignty bring bigger possibilities for further engagement. It is difficult to win something without broad support, so other stakeholders will be key. It’s not just the negotiator’s table that counts. There are many other parts to be played. We are hoping for widespread stakeholder support.”

VALUING TRADITIONAL WOMEN’S ROLE WHILE STRENGTHENING THEIR STATUS IN THE WORLD

From the start, George realises that the word ‘volunteer’ in the VFH title can be challenged entirely from a legal labour rights perspective. The feminist angle, brought by the LRS team, insists, however, that the valuing of reproductive labour as real and non-voluntary work must also be considered. For the LRS team, there is little value in winning a legal battle that the VFHs do not feel powerfully **within themselves**; they cannot represent themselves in a struggle that does not feel authentic and embodied in their lived experiences.

At the same time, the LRS is suggesting that the kitchen can be claimed as a political space, while simultaneously highlighting the need for women to challenge the relegation of women to the kitchen by taking up space elsewhere. Similarly, the wooden spoon is seen as a symbol of claiming back the power of indigenous knowledge rather than reinforcing gender roles. LRS and the VFHs walk ‘a tightrope’ to ensure that the fight for recognition in one sphere does not diminish recognition in another. The struggle to claim more value and power for the public work of the VFHs do must not reinforce the idea that work done in the home is less valuable, or that the women engaged in it are less deserving of value and power. Despite it being unpaid, women’s work in the home needs to be recognised; celebrating Women’s Day or offering the occasional bouquet of flowers is woefully insufficient.

Connecting with other stakeholders and building alliances

Communications

Media and communications are core elements of the LRS teams' strategy for expanding the VFH movement's reach beyond its humble origins and limited resources. Members of the LRS communications team are not an add-on to the project. They sit with VFHs in meetings, visit their homes, and listen to their stories. Technology delivers these resonant stories to previously unreachable ears - seeds that find purchase in unfamiliar earth and bear the branches of an ever-expanding collective of activists and allies. Nelly explains:

“That kind of proximity shaped how we tell their story. The feminist popular education methods we used also pushed us to tell stories that are embodied and authentic, and outputs that resonate. That process made me care deeply about the VFHs struggle, and it shifted how I saw my role. Once you care, you communicate differently. The landing page gave me clarity and a sense of ownership, and it also pushed me to see communications as part of advocacy, not just a support function.”

LRS website

The PU! programme and its ongoing development can be easily tracked on the VFH [landing page](#) of the LRS website. LRS currently manages this page in support of the VHF. The VHF will have their own media as they move forward in developing an organisational formation. The aim of the site is to raise awareness, encourage and support advocacy, and expand organisational reach. Visitors interested in learning about the VFH movement will find articles and fact sheets outlining relevant political perspectives on care work, the role of the NSNP, the role of VFHs, and the Unemployment Insurance Fund. Activists and allies will find practical advocacy and campaign resources. The site's content about food handlers is particularly popular; it ranks high in both page clicks and Google searches, which is critical for reaching new participants. One VHF explained that a Google search led her to the website, which directed her to the WhatsApp group, where she was welcomed to a community that recognised her rights and encouraged her to use her voice to reclaim them. For Nelly, “this woman's journey is a reminder of why this work matters, and why communications is a part of organising, not separate from it.”

Visitors to the site can also explore videos recorded in the field and written stories that centre the VFHs' voices and bring their lives and struggles to life. Nelly describes the importance of authentic storytelling:

“When we shot the UIF video, we started with a plan: to show the gendered disparities in accessing social protection. But reality quickly shifted us. The FHs set the pace, and we had to adapt. Sometimes the crew worked from 5 am to 7 pm in homes with no electricity or food. Our carefully planned narrative didn't always work, but that's the point. Authentic storytelling means following their lead and adjusting as events unfold, even bringing in experts when needed. That flexibility is what has also worked in making it credible.”

Nelly ensures that VFH's voices are central to the LRS team's online strategy. Besides curating the website, she also uses existing national calendar moments to frame appropriate messaging. During South Africa's Women's Month, the site features profiles of VFHs that highlight their intersecting identities and contributions as mothers, workers, activists, and nutritionists. On Workers' Day, their labour is framed as essential care work. On Budget Day, the spotlight is on arguments for gender-responsive budgeting in public care programmes.

WhatsApp group

LRS facilitators manage the VHF WhatsApp group in a caring way that fosters the same 'holding each other' ethos of the live events. The group has proven effective in maintaining the project's momentum. The VFHs use the WhatsApp group to share their feelings, observations, thoughts, and insights. They use it to prepare for upcoming events and meetings and share updates, questions, and reflections after meetings. The group is one way they can maintain their human relationships, sense of community, and collective identity between in-person gatherings. The purpose is to help members and strengthen organising; care is taken to minimise interactions that detract from that work.

LRS is learning that the WhatsApp group allows for a level of self-organisation and continuity that was difficult to achieve through in-person meetings. Access to information and resources can be easily shared in the group, eliminating barriers for those who cannot travel to a common location.

WHAT HAPPENED: DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS OVER TIME

If the conclusion of the process is the peak of the mountain, we can identify clear steps and events demarcating the path from the bottom to the top. The steps connect to the thinking behind the initial learning questions the LRS team used to frame their strategy. Namely:

- What will it take to create pathways to women's economic autonomy, resilience and stability?
- What will it take to enhance the leadership capacity of a group of community women leaders?
- What will it take for women leaders to engage in sense-making around feminist political economy?
- What will it take for care work in the public space to be recognised and valued as work?
- What will it take to create alliances that advocate for the economic equality of women?
- What will it take to create collaboration, solidarity and action across civil society and Government in support of the VFHs' to decent work?

In 2021, the LRS team focuses on building relationships while learning more about the landscape the VFHs inhabit and the multiple perspectives of various role-players inhabiting that landscape.

School coordinators responsible for the management of NSNP at a local level are interviewed along with a series of action-oriented focus group conversations with small groups of VFHs across the greater Vaal area, and two Vaal-based community meetings are convened. Leadership capacity development workshops are held with four women activists who all have connections to the school community and who bring diverse lived experience to discussions. This group becomes known as the *Amakhozikazi* core group, who work with the LRS team to mobilise VFHs. 'Amakhozikazi' is a Zulu noun that translates to 'Queens' in English, and refers to women in leadership and authority, recognising their influence and contributions.

In 2022, the team embarks on a three-part journey – valuing the VFHs' work, leadership development and alliance building.

First, they broaden the base of the VFHs, increasing their capacity to make their work more publicly visible. Reflective discussions are held on traditional food production and preparation, where the VFHs begin to reclaim their heritage; on decolonising nutrition, meaning actively creating something new in response to

colonial legacies, rather than just dismantling the old; on expanding awareness of their potential role in shaping healthy eating behaviours; and on increasing food security through developing food gardens. '[Jabula Mntanami](#)', the VFH song - which means 'be happy my child' - is composed, workshopped, and recorded. The "[Day in the Life of a VFH](#)" video captures a storytelling workshop, and VFHs discuss ways of popularising this video.

Second, through feminist leadership empowerment workshops, the leadership capacity and political identity of the women community organisers in the *Amakhozikazi* group is strengthened. Third, the LRS team supports the VFHs in beginning to build alliances and solidarity that address the value of care work across civil society. VFHs learn to plan and evaluate two dialogues - one with trade unions and one with community organisations.

In 2023, the team lays the groundwork for expansion through two key processes - developing the VFHs' capacities in public communication, media advocacy, organising, and reimagining their identities, and entering new geographic and legal/policy terrain.

VFH peer-learning spaces are used to support the VFHs in developing skills that will prepare them to represent themselves at a formal press conference. They participate in the conference and reflect on their learnings. Much attention is given to social media campaigns and maximising the use of the LRS website, which reaches other VFHs, workers, students, and academics, both locally and globally.

After the press conference, when their contracts expire, the existing core group of women activists recruit the next cohort of VFHs starting their two-year contracts, forming a broader mobilising, advocacy, and organising group. This group self-organises networks of VFHs across the Gauteng province, using both face-to-face engagements and WhatsApp groups. The latter are managed by the LRS team. As peer learners, the women activists' experiment with new ways of being and working, while strengthening their advocacy, mobilising, and organising capabilities. The identity of 'food handler' no longer captures and the breadth of their expertise, work, and impact, and they begin identifying as nutrition activists, capable of educating on both healthy and indigenous nutrition concepts and practices. As part of a broader collective action process for claiming Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) benefits, VFHs from different schools speak about challenges with accessing UIF on local radio stations.

Through its relationship with the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the LRS team is supported in meeting and organising VFHs in-person in

two new provinces: KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. The LRS accepts a pro bono offer from lawyers to strategically use their power within the legal system (i.e. the Constitution, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and commitments to gender equality) to engage the Department of Education.

In 2024, the process concentrates on expansion – ecosystem weaving.

The Gauteng-based VFHs learn to assess their current and potential position in the national budget. They write letters to the South African President, which are also shared via social media with other VFHs. One VFH makes progress with organising an online petition. A roundtable event is organised that enables the VFHs to deepen their knowledge about food sovereignty, labour rights and working conditions, occupational health and safety, food gardens, and decent work. A national colloquium facilitates public interaction between VFHs and stakeholders from advocacy, legal, and media organisations, trade unions; LGBTQI and community-based organisations, environmental/ecological/food gardens/sustainability organisations, educational institutions, including school governance, universities/researchers, donor partners, and United Nations agencies.

By the end of 2024, the lawyers formally write to the Department of Basic Education, requesting an urgent meeting with the Minister to advocate for the VFHs. They demand fairer compensation and benefits, safer working conditions, access to training and development, respectful treatment, non-discrimination, and the elimination of the word 'volunteer' from their title.

In 2025, the focus shifts to negotiating legal/contractual power, growing a nutrition activist identity, and strengthening policy advocacy with Government.

To highlight their dual care worker identities as mothers in the private space and VFH in the public space, the LRS team takes advantage of two significant days in May - the May Day public holiday acknowledging workers day and Mothers' Day, the second Sunday in May. A single public event is designed to strengthen VFHs' dual identities by celebrating the value of their work as women. They also develop greater understanding of contracts¹³, in language they understand. That is, communication that connects to their lived experiences and uses concepts they recognise from home, community, and work - and how to best negotiate them in both their private and public lives. New VFH recruits are welcomed and introduced to the culture of the VFH movement.

¹³ There is the formal marriage contract and then a range of informal social contracts, for example, around work in the home, how resources are shared and so on.

A series of thinking laboratories are organised to encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and creative exploration of what it will take to create a care economy and an economy that cares. The VFHs learn how national budgets are constructed; how to calculate what percentage of that budget is allocated to the NSNP and what it might take to shift such allocation. They ask how a programme like the NSNP can be used to strengthen a care economy and an economy that cares. Their recommendations for making the NSNP more effective, centre decent work, food as a social justice issue, a decolonised nutrition system, and ideas for how the NSNP can promote food sovereignty.

VFHs attend the parallel People's Summit at the G20 in November 2025. As part of their advocacy work, the VFHs nurture their confidence and identity as nutrition activists: people who do more than prepare food; people who can educate on healthy food production, nutrition, and cooking. They imagine a possible redefinition of their job description while on contract with the NSNP and are explore what they might do once their contracts expire. This is an identity that will continue to expand beyond the school – something they might be able to use more broadly.

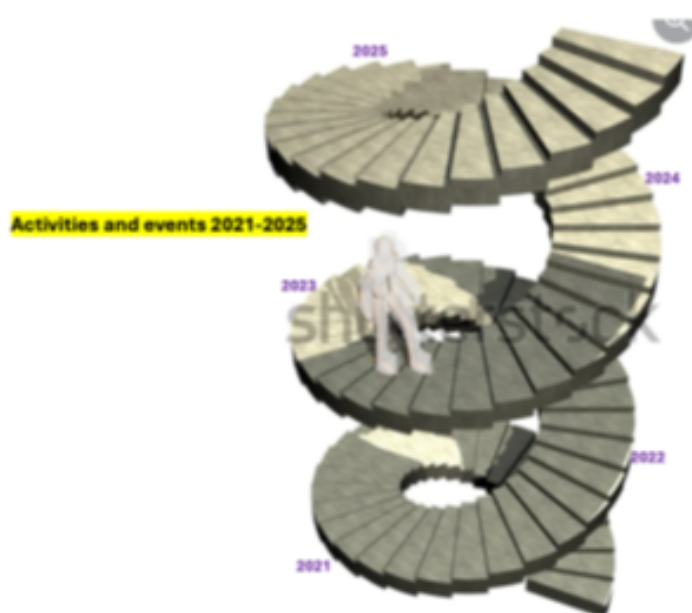


Fig. 3 Events spiral upwards in ever increasing layers of complexity

Figure 3 graphically represents how this 5-year process takes place. LRS slowly and steadily lays stepping stones that form a coherent, albeit spiral, path. A path that simultaneously repeats and reinforces an orientation that values women, their care-work, and their identities as workers, while scaffolding an increasing

level of complexity, engagement, and confidence. If the VFHs start learning to value themselves and their care work in 2021, by the end of 2025 they are learning to analyse government budgets, to advocate for greater inclusion in those budgets, and pressing for increased recognition of the true value of their care work and economic impact across the entire ecosystem.

MOVEMENT-BUILDING FEMINIST PRACTIS

This story illustrates the ways the LRS team bring themselves into their work and continuously evolve their versions of a feminist-inspired 'living practice', rooted in an understanding of intersectionality, human connections, and radical love.

They contribute to transforming the lived realities of women living in precarious conditions and employed as VFHs, into nutrition activists. They help consolidate, integrate and enhance many ideas, practices and tools they have been learning over a decade and a half. They influence the global Power UP! Consortium and reimagine the meaning of feminist movement building in the context of a State-sponsored public works programmes. The kind of feminism LRS is practicing is grounded in their own life experience as well as the lived experience of the women VFHs. In centring the food handlers, their security, status, visibility and value to the entire ecosystem, a different kind of systems change is made possible. In their focus on inner transformation – changing mindsets and behaviours - as a necessary part of collective action and systems change, they're also emphasising a meaning of economic life that contributes to the wellbeing of all citizens. In the process, they are creating communal holding spaces that offer opportunities for collective healing (Hübl, 2020) and address what Scharmer (2020) calls 'attentional violence'. This kind of violence describes what happens when one is not seen and recognised in terms of who you really are and who you could be.

Phumzile explains that the LRS facilitators consciously work to maintain their own sense of neutrality and calm while reminding the VFHs that creating a caring, loving, and respectful environment that they all seek, and that helps them face the challenges in their lives, is everyone's responsibility. The 'let go to receive' Tai Chi exercise, for example, brings a conscious intentionality to this practice of releasing what is unhelpful and inviting in the values of forgiveness, understanding, love, and peace that will strengthen them as individuals and as a collective.

“Conflicts might emerge in sideline conversations or during a check in session, where a person will ask to treat each other with love and respect, and you see others nodding in agreement.”

The facilitators try to approach difficult issues as opportunities for growth rather than confrontation.

“Yes we have power within, but as a leader you need to exercise it responsibly with wisdom so you don’t break the people you lead.”

Both Nosipho and Phumzile are well attuned to this and often resolve conflicts pre-emptively. They organically practise what Gilligan and Snyder (2018) theorised: ‘...Equal voice is the condition that makes it possible to work through conflicts in relationship without the use of force or by other means of domination’.

The LRS story beautifully illustrates what it takes and what it means to centre care, build relationships, co-create with participants and share power in the extremely precarious conditions that characterise the lives and worlds of women workers. In the engagement with the VFHs, the team itself is also changing and learning alongside the women they have been accompanying. They draw on their lived experience, apply and expand feminist popular education principles and practices to ensure power is shared, and care is centred. The LRS team models a different way of ‘doing-business’ for the food handlers. The team learns to value the unique contribution of each member, to observe emergent situations without judgement, to flexibly adapt appropriate responses, to share power and co-create in partnership, in support of a system-wide, collective, community-oriented goal.

AN END MARKS A NEW BEGINNING

The closing of the Power UP! programme marks a new beginning for LRS. During the last year of the programme, 2025, LRS uses a similar methodology to work with two other care constituencies – namely the Community Health Workers who are a much older and better organised group and the Early Childhood Educators who are being organised by SADTU. In late 2025, this ‘triple’ preparation culminates in a meeting bringing all three constituencies to share their stories¹⁴ and forge a new ‘collective. (see Fig. 4). A new ‘care economy’

¹⁴ <https://lrs.org.za/2025/08/29/our-care-story-we-are-essential-not-invisible/>;
<https://lrs.org.za/2025/08/18/community-health-workers-push-back-nothing-about-us-without-us/>;

platform is born, where all these groupings have the potential to expand their own sense of solidarity and collective power as care workers hired by under the Expanded Public Works Programme.

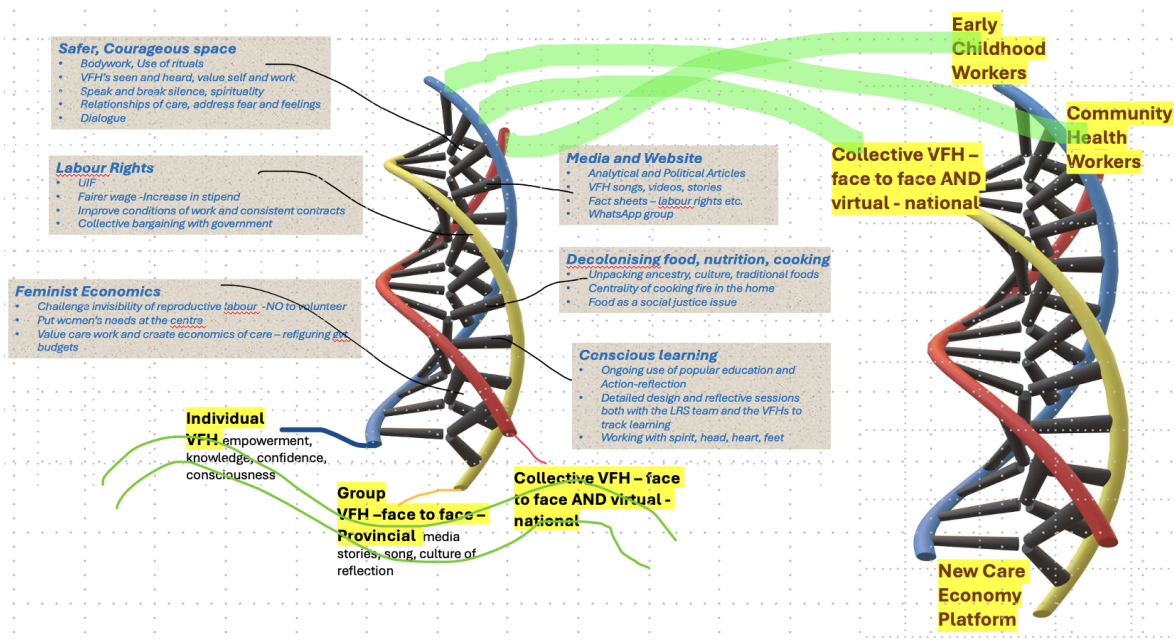


Figure 4. Care economy platform

The dream from the three care worker groups is that a stronger collective will push the Government to meaningfully and permanently recognise care work's true economic value and reward it accordingly. They envision public works programs that are conceptualised and implemented in a way that promotes, values, and rewards empathy, creativity, and care - care for ourselves, care for each other, care for future generations, and care for the planet we inhabit. We hope the VHF partnership will bolster broader fights for social justice, and inspire those engaged in these fights to centre care in both process and outcome.

The VHF programme is already inspiring positive change at LRS: LRS programmes on collective bargaining, corporate governance, trade, and decent standard of living are now learning from and attempting to integrate the Gender Team's approach to 'build from below' without imposing organisational form or strategy. Meanwhile, the Gender Team will need to redefine its support role.

'All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.
The only lasting truth is change.'

(Octavia E. Butler)¹⁵

¹⁵ *Parable of the Sower*,

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