



Taking a feminist approach to organising women workers in South Africa

A Power Up! Story

Part II

"From Concept to Movement"





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

with

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FROM CONCEPT TO MOVEMENT

This is Part II of the story about what happened when the Labour Research Service (LRS), a labour support non-governmental organisation (NGO) in South Africa, supported workers in precarious forms of employment – primarily women – to progress from being categorised by the State as 'voluntary food handlers' (VFHs) to a new categorisation as 'food handlers' who are now on a path to becoming 'nutrition activists'. The women transform from isolated individuals to members of a movement that is continually evolving.

We were introduced to the LRS Gender Team in [Part I](#) of this story, where we took a deep dive into what the team did to support the food handlers and accompany them 'from a dream project concept to a movement'; from words in a project proposal to collective, sustained action that continues to change real lives.

Now, in Part II, we join the food handlers' journey to see what some of those changes look and feel like.

The 2021 baseline research conducted by LRS as part of the inception phase of the Power Up!¹ programme showed that the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) was a lead project of the 1994 Mandela administration. The programme was designed to provide healthy nutrition that supports children's ability to learn. As recently as 2024, the [University of Cape Town's South African Child Gauge](#) indicated that 29% of children under five are stunted, due to poverty-driven food insecurity. "Stunting leads to irreversible physical and cognitive impairment, increased risk of death, and long-term disadvantages, such as potential learning difficulties and lower earning potential as adults"². More than 9.6 million children in South Africa depend on the NSNP. In 2020, learners at 21,000 no-fee paying primary and secondary schools received nutritious meals prepared through the NSNP. Besides supporting childhood nutrition (thereby enhancing the possibility of hunger-free learning), the programme purports to address nutrition education that promotes healthy lifestyles. School Food Gardens are intended to provide learners, educators, and parents with skills to

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

<https://thestar.co.za/mercury/2025-10-20-the-impact-of-malnutrition-on-south-african-childrens-development/>

grow their own food as a way of contributing to long-term household food security. The gardens are meant to be used as a teaching and learning resource.

This work done by 'voluntary food handlers' within the NSNP is regarded as an extension of the care work expected of them as women and mothers and, thus, seen as their voluntary social responsibility. They receive a small stipend - in 2025 the stipend is 43% less than the national minimum wage. The programme stipulates that every two years, a new cohort of people should be given the opportunity to benefit from these stipends - making traditional union style organising models impossible to follow.

In the project that the LRS gender team³ – Nancy, Nina, Nosipho, Phumzile, George, Zanele and Kukhanya – dreams up to work with the food handlers, they centre the needs and lived experience of the women. They implement a philosophy, design, and practice which involves them co-creating – with the VFHs - conditions that enable the VFHs to reclaim their dignity, take up greater space in their communities, and see their value recognised. In finding the space to be more fully themselves, the women gain the confidence, power and voice needed to build a movement on their own terms. In the process, they transform their sense of self, status, security and visibility. They draw from their historically developed capacities to organise (via church groups, stokvels⁴, extended family gatherings), and start to self-organise, to love and care for each other and to strengthen their solidarity and collective power. They access and reimagine indigenous and traditional ways of being in relation to food and cooking, reframing food as a social justice issue, while becoming advocates for the essential life-supporting nature of their care work. They win small victories, which inspire further action.

Most significantly – as the following parts of the VFHs' story reveal - they learn to reflect, to navigate the often draining and hopeless contexts they operate within and slowly begin to transform their relational landscapes: their homes, schools, and communities, the Departments of Education and Labour, the trade union movement, the media, the legal fraternity, and the ecological and food security movements.

³ See Part I to learn more about the LRS Gender Team members.

⁴ A stokvel is a community-based savings club in South Africa where members contribute fixed amounts of money regularly to a central fund, which is then distributed among members on a rotational basis.

BRINGING VOICE AND BODY INTO PUBLIC SPACES

LRS creates space for, and curates, meetings and events during which the VFHs interact with key stakeholders, including the press. These meetings and events are spaces in which the VFHs are able to speak up for themselves, make their experiences visible and their needs, wants, demands heard. Nosipho often begins a meeting with a simple Tai Chi-based exercise chosen to suit the moment, which helps participants centre themselves and bring themselves fully into the space physically, mentally, and emotionally.

At a press conference organised by LRS, the intention is for the press to understand the context, challenges, and victories of the VFHs and the work of LRS, and to generate ideas for making the VFHs work visible. The VFHs are prepared to present with visible strength that demonstrates their self-value. At the post-press conference reflection meeting with the *Amakhosikazi*⁵, the grounding focuses on them appreciating their whole bodies and all their limbs. The reflection after the grounding asks: “What do you appreciate about yourself?” - which connects back to the theme of the press conference, including looking at what they liked about their engagement with the press.

The VFHs' reflections indicate how closely woven this approach to space is with the methodological elements described in Part I. Prior preparation with both VFHs and the external participants is also part of 'creating the space'.

“I was scared when I saw the media walk in with their big cameras, but once the conference began, the fear vanished and I was able to focus. I was pleased that union officials congratulated and encouraged us. I expected the LRS to represent us, but I was relieved to learn that we could communicate with the press on our own.”

“The press conference made me realise how intelligent I am. These journalists were friendly, and we could even communicate in our native tongues. I felt liberated, and everyone spoke clearly.”

⁵ When the work with the food handlers gets underway, LRS facilitates leadership capacity development workshops with four women activists who are connected to the school community and bring diverse lived experience to discussions. This group becomes known as the *Amakhosikazi core group*. They work with the LRS team to mobilise VFHs. 'Amakhosikazi' is a Zulu noun that translates to 'Queens' in English. It refers to women in leadership and authority, recognising their influence and contributions.

“The presence of trade unions in the room also impressed us. They did not pass judgment on us or discredit VFHs. Their questions made me see some of the risks and challenges of doing this work. We all worked together as a team and complemented each other. You could tell we were talking about something we’ve known and lived for the past two years”.

“The press conference taught me that we need to believe in ourselves and not underestimate our abilities. We are wonderful people who care about what we do. We must acknowledge ourselves rather than wait for others to tell us so”.

“We were well prepared for all questions because we spent a lot of time preparing ourselves”.

“The press conference went well because we were all speaking from the heart, and we also knew a lot about VFH struggles. We are celebrating the small changes that we are seeing in the sector”.

The reflection in small groups in our meetings help us gain the confidence to speak. Groups give us presentation skills and confidence. We also know that one who plants the tree does not always enjoy the shade but will always be remembered for her role”.

Meetings tend to mix the use of English and various South African languages, so that participants feel free to fully express themselves. The LRS facilitators also encourage VFHs to practice using English, so that when they need to communicate with the public, they have confidence and an expanded vocabulary.

FINDING POWER IN RECIPES, COOKING AND NUTRITION

In a more in-depth discussion, the *Amakhosikazi* continue to reclaim ancestral knowledge practices and values that were suppressed by colonialism and use these to challenge dominant ideologies and practices around food, nutrition, and community. The group explores the meaning associated with objects that symbolise cultural diversity.

After much discussion the group agree that:

The **calabash** is a symbol of cultural diversity, spirituality, and nutrition. Historically it has many purposes, including storage. It will be present at every meeting to represent togetherness, conversation, and a return to embracing, loving, and celebrating our culture.

The **wooden spoon** is a symbol of sharing duties, responsibilities, and knowledge. The holder contributes to the work at hand, in whatever small way, like a group contributing to a dish by adding ingredients, mixed with the spoon.

The intention here is to reclaim the power of indigenous knowledge rather than reinforcing stereotypical gender roles.

The location of the **cooking fire**, which used to be in the middle of the hut, (not hidden away out of sight, like the kitchens where the VFHs cook) symbolises its centrality to cooking and family.

Phumzile explains how part of their heritage is organic life-sustaining knowledge:

“We learn about the three sisters - (samp (also corn), beans, squash/pumpkin) - when we discuss the importance of nutrition generally and to us personally. We interrogate how come our ancestors, parents, grandparents ate organic and natural food and never got sick. We explore and try to understand and remember what foods they used to prepare for us – the ones they knew had made them who they were/are - that is - energetic, strong and healthy. It was mostly food they themselves planted, and they knew what grows well together and what to cook with what. The three sisters are a typical example of the interconnectedness that mother nature shows us – how different parts protect each other, how these vegetables do not fight against the environment, how when they grow together, they use less water, they don’t need pesticides, they fertilise the soil. This helps us remember the importance, nutritional value of eating and preparing food in the old ways.

We recognise that the food prepared at school is nutritionally identified and intentionally packaged as a daily menu. There’s a need, therefore, to educate children that it is not food for the poor. We discuss how capitalist advertising paints a picture of your MacDonalds, Kentucky and other fast foods, concentrated with

salt, spices, sugar, deep fried in oil, as the “nice, tasty” food and for a certain class of people.

We wonder about needing to decolonise food, meaning going back and learning more about how and what our elders did to prepare the food, which grew organically. They ate fresh meat not refrigerated for months.”

BRIDGING ACROSS SECTORS AND PERSPECTIVES

Trade Union Dialogue - 'Housewarming'

In late 2022⁶, a meeting was organised between the Amakhosikazi and the unions whose work is most relevant to the VFHs' immediate context. The intention was to explore what it would take for other unions to value the VFHs and their work. The process was inspired by Paulo Freire's emphasis on dialogue, which he described as an 'encounter among women and men who name the world... as an act of creation. In a dialogue, people are active agents who, mediated by their contexts and perspectives, create and recreate their world. So, it is a collective action of creativity and growth'. With an approach that's likely unfamiliar to traditional trade unions, LRS aims to create space for authentic conversations grounded in mutual trust and understanding, suspension of judgement, and openness to each speaker's point of view. Metaphor is a powerful tool that stimulates creativity, helps make meaning, and is an important ingredient in the creation of embodied thought.

In co-designing the meeting, the Amakhozikazi propose using the metaphor of a 'new house'. For them, the programme is not only a job, but a vehicle for teaching healthy ways to cook and eat, reclaiming culture, and making it possible to receive and experience the benefits of the NSNP. At the dialogue meeting, they invite more people to 'the house', to see as the VFHs are seeing and to share in the joy the new house elicits while asking the guests to bring offerings of their own through the door.

After the grounding Tai Chi and introductions, Nosipho sets the scene by asking participants to reflect on their memories of celebratory or thanksgiving events. The reflection evokes a range of feelings and associations - the feeling of moving into a new home, ancestors, traditional food, joy, and gifts. The VFHs use their song 'Jabula' and the Day in a Life of a VFH video to introduce attendees to their stories, their value, the value of the NSNP, and the movement's challenges. The union representatives are invited to offer their own thoughts, strategies,

⁶ LRS' work with the VFHs started in 2021, when the Power UP! programme was launched.

commitments, and plans as 'gifts' to assist the VFHs. The celebratory framing allows for a productive and positive exchange that might have turned combative or critical with a less supportive facilitation approach.

The meeting closes with the Amakhosikazi proudly playing their Jabula song while presenting gifts to each of the participants. The gift packages 'embody' the VFHs' promotion of healthy eating, including carrots, beetroots, potatoes, patty pans, along with a warm message thanking them for coming and listening. The gifts are well received, with some participants asking for extra and vowing to use them to cook soup when they get home. This is a lesson for the LRS team on the importance of the vegetable gift pack. Besides it being a delightful surprise for participants, it also serves as a tool for showcasing the value of VHF work and nutrition education. A gift pack becomes an integral part of all future public events.



Roundtable – experts as 'living books'

The roundtable event organised in 2024 was designed to expand the VFHs' knowledge on broader issues relevant to their work and advocacy. It was inspired by, and draws on, the historical legend of the British King Arthur, who organised a round table so that none of his barons could claim seniority over any other. The team used the invitation to the event to prepare attendees for this power-sharing dynamic by imploring them to see themselves as *resources* rather than *authorities*. The attendees are told in the invitation that they have valuable

expertise and perspectives to contribute to the discussion, but the course of the discussion and the decisions that will flow from it are not theirs to control.



Colloquium – bringing the whole system into the room

The LRS team organised a colloquium at the [Women's Jail at Constitution Hill](#), Johannesburg to help the VHF's to situate themselves as participants in historical struggles for gender, racial, and class equality. The choice of venue is significant. It will connect attendees to the painful stories and activism of often invisible

women who suffered under the weight of these intersecting equalities before them, and then physically hold space for collective action going forward.

The team uses the framing 'Food in Schools is a Social Justice Issue' to make clearer the near-universal resonance of the Nutrition Programme and its goals. The invitation is extended to any potential stakeholder interested in helping the NSNP fulfil its potential and eager to join in conversation and generate collective ideas and strategies. Attendees span the entire ecosystem of social justice and labour rights, food security, community gardening, sustainability, law, and media. The event emphasises making visible what is invisible in the NSNP: the hearts and hands of the women holding the programme together and the true value of their work, particularly with respect to childcare, and the children who are recipients of that care. The ripple effects of this spirit of collaboration and the relationships that collaboration fostered remain in motion a year later.

Nelly explains that for years, VFHs and their issues barely featured in mainstream media. Coverage focused on budgets or procurement, never on the women central to implementation. The Food Justice Colloquium in 2024 changed that:

“We brought editors and journalists into the room, built relationships, and some of those connections still shape our advocacy. It takes deliberate nurturing of specific journalists to be advocates of VFH/care work issues in newsrooms.”

Zanele shares how touched she was to see “how the food handlers showed up in the room, had conversations with allies, and presented their stories with power and emotion, connecting to the hearts and minds of the stakeholders in attendance. Both food handlers and school learners in their uniform spoke proudly about the NSNP and the critical role they play in it. There was singing, tears, laughter and joy. The room came alive with hope. The food handlers managed to own their visibility, their narrative, and share their vision of how their movement should be shaped moving forward”.

Dumisa Mguda is a facilitator working with Sustainability Matters, an organisation supporting unemployed youth who also benefit from the EPWP and who take care of nature. He shares this memory:

“I valued hearing the children's knowledge and awareness of their connection (and appreciation) to the soil (land), which grows the food. An understanding which brings a different way we relate to food, connected to culture; the way people live, appreciate and see

food. It was so nice that all those kids know the nutritional value and benefit provided by the three sisters - how they are grown together in the garden in natural and organic ways that support each other's growth (ways in which people could mimic in their everyday lives to support each other's growth and well-being)."

Another external participant at the Colloquium is Nthakoana Maema, who works on food systems innovation and solidarity economies. The Colloquium is her first encounter with VFHs and LRS. She describes the powerful resonance and impact of the event, in her life and work, and the limitless potential of these gatherings to catalyse permanent change and forward movement. Like Dumisa, without prior knowledge of LRS or the VFHs, from her encounter that day, she accurately outlines the LRS approach to transmitting their ethos in a public space, and how in sharing their lived reality and knowledge, the VHF's were able to use this space to build supportive and long-lasting alliances.



Nthakoana Maema

"When I left the Colloquium, I remember feeling unsettled, expanded, inspired, but also enraged, which means that I was fully immersed and I was fully applying myself in it. This kind of rage gives me energy to want to do something about it, to get into action as a person who is oriented towards innovation.

It was quite special already, the venue, being at the Old Women's Prison. Doing the tour, understanding what people were going through in terms of food security (my lens) at those times, when the prison was still active, is already in itself, a pain. I feel extra connection to events where place is important. The NSNP, even though it's not ideal, is a very important social policy feeding 9 million children who don't have access to food. It is in a way, de-commodifying food for those families so that their children can have at least one meal in a day.

What left me enraged was really hearing the women's stories - unedited or unintellectualized - hearing them as they're experiencing it, with the emotions they're feeling, once again, that reproduction and social reproduction work, remains unrecognized and undervalued. That these women are doing really critical structural work under deplorable conditions, like cooking,

cleaning, sustaining school kitchens without protective equipment, or job security, or space security. Some of the ladies sharing how bad the physical conditions of the infrastructure of school kitchen can be, without even clarity of who their employer is. And the woman is talking about pride, how she's bringing her own equipment from her house. So, they're meeting a gap that the government is unable to meet, to keep the programme running. Then they are also relationally connected in the school. For example, I heard stories about how teachers send dysregulated children to talk to Bo' mme in the kitchen. So, they're also playing the role of an auxiliary social worker where they're helping regulate children for the school. When children are writing exams, they're the ones who are encouraging them. When children are feeling low, they're the ones who are encouraging them. So, they're part of the emotional fabric of the school. Why it feels like so part of me and indivisible, is because the intentional design of it is very clear.

Like starting the day with a Tai Chi exercise, which is not something that you normally do in a policy space or a space like a programmatic space. Nosipho did the Tai Chi very well to link that movement to the movement of food and sun and elements and nutrition, which was really

great. And the provocations from the team where they were just talking from the heart and giving context, but not like academics doing PowerPoints.

At some point, we had porridge for breakfast. We went to the kitchen, which had been owned by the food handlers. They're the ones serving us, wearing a uniform with pride, showing us the menus that they had redeveloped with the Gauteng Province, speaking to us. That's a lot about it, but more so about the importance of the food, and then how this is the reality of the children that they're working with, and what they would love to see more of.

So that was an amazing, symbolic way, and the learners were in the room connecting us with them, and their work.

Also, instead of these food handlers being like academic case studies where academics are around to legitimise their voices, they were the professionals. They and the children were the ones who were presenting to us. The children were telling us their story and their connection with the three sisters, why it's important to them and the fact that they'd learned that from the food handlers. That was amazing, meaning again that the women are not only acting as volunteers, food handlers,



Contd.

but they're also nutritional educators, and they're moral models to those young children. The way they told their stories didn't feel contrived. They had their own posters - very simple, creative, expressed in their language. It was a very humane setup for them to communicate and talk to us. This, I think is a feminist and decolonial way of convening and centring care, embodiment, and relational learning.

In the end, it was about reorienting my own practice. Highlighting more and more how we cannot have policy conversations or programmatic conversations without the voices and the bodies of the everyday labour that makes those systems work. They are an embodied part of me now. I carry them with me everywhere, so whatever space that I am in, whether a policy conversation around agroecology, or a project meeting with the city of Cape Town or a food system dialogue where I am a panellist or a participant, in those

spaces that I present, I make visible the food handlers.

Most of the time we might be talking about farm workers, small scale farmers, informal food traders, people that are responsible for food flow, but the NSNP although a state program, is being sustained by these women who are food handlers in it. Yet you never hear anything about them in these spaces.

Then they're also embedded in community. We talk about how we should recognise food system heroes as well, as invisible anchors of national food security. So, there's potential with these women to help them transition into a solidarity economy or into social enterprises, so they can generate a sustainable livelihood. It has continued to inform my sense of justice in the food system and to keep naming these women that are responsible.

I was left with the question what is next? Yes, social dividend is necessary and social protection is important. Better pay and better security of their pay is important. Certification of their skills is important because it gives them access to new jobs and other places where they can do food handling as a job. But on the next level, how can we reshape the work that they're already doing into something that is a sustainable enterprise that embraces co-operative principles, which they're already doing and how does that get supported and how does that get linked to the food flows? How does that get linked to the urban growers - the informal food traders - the ECDs - the spaza shops - the retailers supply chain? How does that work get linked and supported as part of an embedded security solution? That has income generation in a positive way, that has ecological regeneration in a positive way?"

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR ADVOCACY AND POLICY CHANGE

Legal intervention comes with institutional tension

In 2023, LRS is introduced to the labour law firm Webber Wentzel by a colleague in the union movement. The LRS team accepts their pro bono offer to assist in the fight for greater legal visibility of the VFHs. The plan is to engage the VFHs' employers in the Department of Basic Education, but first the LRS team must address a serious dilemma and contradiction. The VFH are not yet legally registered, which means they cannot enter formal negotiations with their employer. It is also impossible for the VHF to challenge their employment status without entering negotiations. When it is clear there is no alternative path, the LRS makes the decision to break with their core principle of VHF self-representation and stand in as client on their behalf in a class action case.

Meanwhile, the VFHs meet the lawyers during the Colloquium and represent themselves at the Healthy Living Alliance⁷ (HEALA) Assembly – where the NSNP Directorate is present. To be able to work in sync with the VFHs, the lawyers only launch their formal process with the Department after these meetings conclude. Nina comments that after this, the Directorate is very nervous about LRS bringing VFHs to future meetings!

⁷ HEALA is a coalition of South African civil society organisations that advocates for equitable access to affordable and nutritious food. The Assembly focuses on improving the school food environment and health outcomes for learners, addressing issues like malnutrition and promoting local food systems.

Demystifying budgeting - embodying budgetary analysis

In the second half of 2025, inspired by South Africa's [gender responsive budgeting](#) practice, LRS organises three thinking laboratories. They are designed to help the VFHs expand their role beyond being the heart and hands of the NSNP to also become part of the head - to read, understand, analyse, and create a national budget that is more responsive to learners' nutritional needs and supports decent work for VHF. In analysing the economic and political systems that shape their working lives, including the power structures and processes that guide NSNP budget construction, they identify for themselves the goods and services that are missing from existing school and home budgets, and develop more effective strategies for influencing public opinion on national allocations to the NSNP. The LRS team consciously uses play as a form of facilitation to strengthen group connection, active learning, and greater memory retention.

The first lab focuses on the percentages, averages, inflection, and references to demand and supply common in national budgets. The goal is to demystify these figures and economic concepts so the VFHs can discover how the national budget, the NSNP, and the school and home budgets impact them as women and VFHs. The group includes women of all ages. The newer and younger VFHs infuse the lab with energy and confidence. Their presence encourages older participants to speak more, and mentorship flows both ways. The lab becomes a rehearsal space; women test their voices before going public.

A creative exercise brings these concepts to life in a way that's accessible, interactive, and even fun. The facilitators begin by counting everyone in the room and use this total as their 100% baseline for a new budget. Using everyday examples - items familiar to the VFHs' own household budgets - participants are directed to divide into smaller groups to mimic the allocation of the budget to each item. Participants are asked to divide as quickly as possible into 50%; if one group has a few extra people, they must learn how to balance the scales quickly. They start to move seamlessly from 50% to 25% and back to 50%, observing in real time how each new division impacts the formation of the budget and the funds available for each item. The VFHs are fully present in calculating, dividing, and organising themselves. Later, heated discussions ensue about how to allocate percentages for key items in their own household budgets. When they learn that only 1% of the national budget is allocated to the NSNP, they feel the exclusion in their bodies. The exercise has made real the signal this allocation

sends about their perceived value as food handlers relative to other items like transport or social infrastructure.

In the second lab, the VFHs reallocate the percentages to more accurately reflect the reality of their work in the kitchens, both in scope and potential. They could provide nutrition education; old food handlers could train new ones and assist in monitoring them; funds could be reallocated to food handler salaries, reducing unemployment.



Display at the second lab. Recommended food stuffs for a food basket costing roughly R5000 – not anywhere near what VFH's earn.

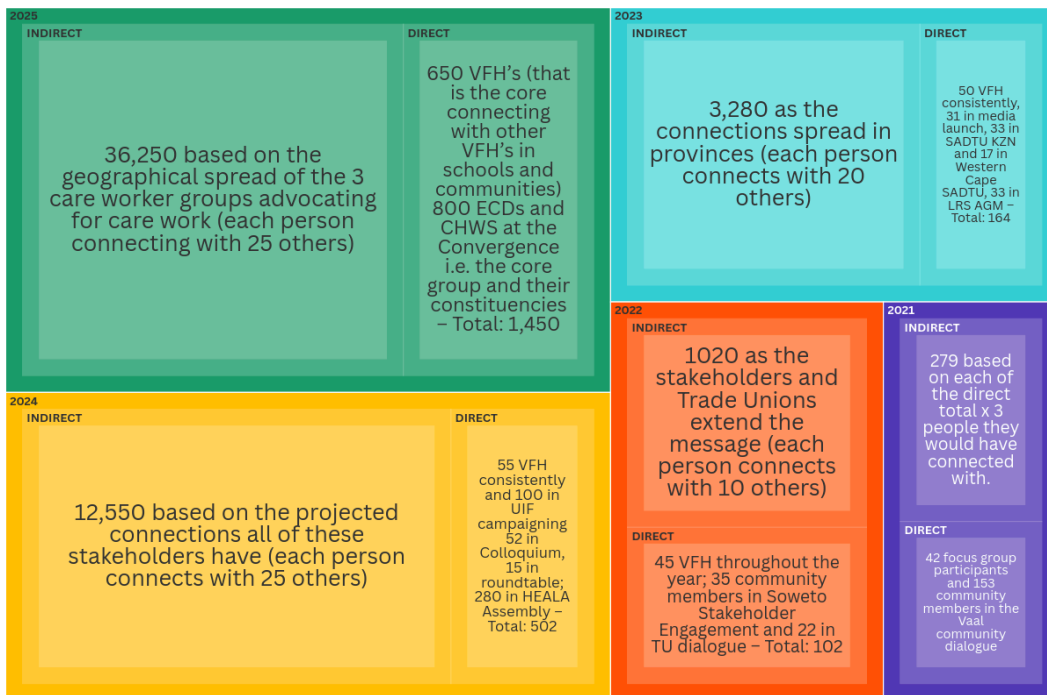
By the end of the third lab, the VFHs are using the [Gender at Work Framework](#) to develop strategies for engaging with principals, coordinators, parents, the departments of labour and education, and the national budget itself.

Who we reach

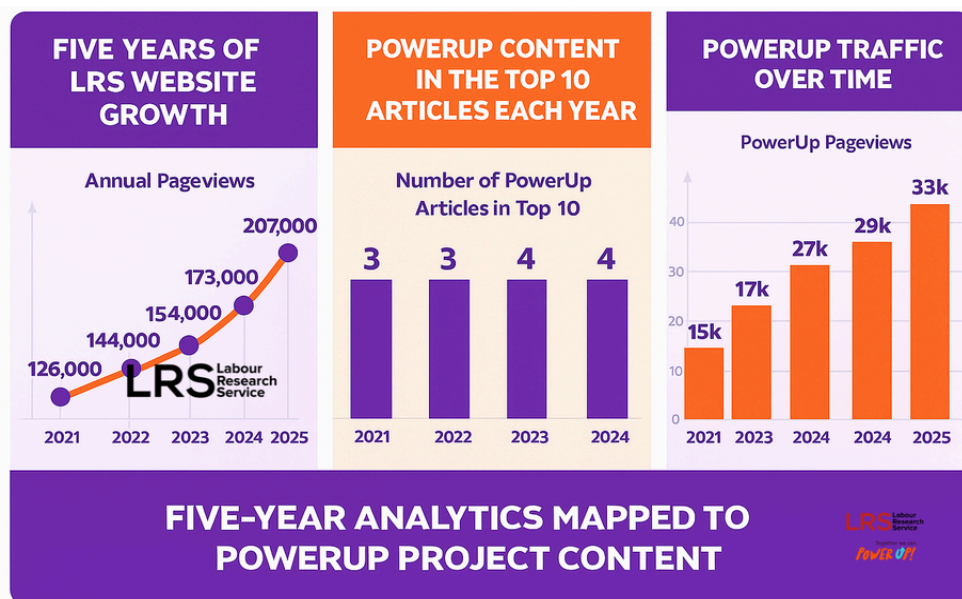
What the LRS Gender Team can see and hear as evidence of their reach, is like the tip of an iceberg. It is hard to see how deep and expansive this reach is and impossible to measure. It is certainly clear from the stories, from how it is growing and the successes from the government, that the food handler issue is now a visible issue in society.

Below, the first infographic captures the impact of direct contact with food handlers and associated ripple effects. The indirect ripple numbers are extrapolated – using a multiplier effect starting with 3 and ending with 25 (based on growing confidence and advocacy skills etc.)

Impact of direct & indirect contact with food handlers



The second infographic demonstrates indirect reach through media and the website.



FINDING JOY AND FOCUSING ON LOVE DURING A POLYCRISIS

bell hooks (1999) reminds us that 'love is as love does' – when we are loving we openly and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust.

The contexts the VFHs navigate in this work are painful, depressing, and even violent, but delight, laughter, and love are present too. These moments of levity are not accidental. Joy has been essential to the VFH organising process, to claiming agency over their lives and to fostering a sense of belonging. The VFH song, 'Jabula', captures this idea so well.

In *Power, A Users' Guide*, Julie Diamond states: 'power used well is an act of self-love and owning our own authority and influence is a necessary condition for self-development'. This is a resonant framing of the VHF organising process. By participating fully, creatively, and passionately in their lives, finding the learning in setbacks, and choosing hope after defeat, the VFHs reclaim power while caring for themselves and each other.

Nancy suggests that VFHs return to the spaces and engage virtually "because I [as a VFH] want to, because I come home happy and excited. So, I feel a sense of fulfilment. I feel different, lighter. Now that I know all my problems and all the terrible things, I feel lighter". Nancy understands: "It's an antithesis. It doesn't make sense".

Nosipho understands a movement as one "that sees, loves, values all those who are a part of it and builds on collaborations, while valuing indigenous knowledge. In other words, without heart, love and care, it will be very difficult for us to create movements".

Hendel (2018) suggests that an important way to feel seen and heard is to have one's feelings acknowledged; this emotional acknowledgement is particularly important for individuals who experience different forms of social discrimination and exclusion. The LRS team knows this intuitively.

The spaces the LRS team creates, both offline and online, welcome the sharing of feelings of all kinds, including grief. Tai Chi helps people process and shift energy. VFHs experience grief when their two-year stipends conclude. Mentions of death, diabetes, heart-trouble, and heartbreak are frequent. Nosipho describes how much joy and excitement she sees in the eyes of the VFHs; how they keep saying they want to create similar spaces for others to be so gently held.

“What allowed that gentle holding was the fact that we did not embody or transfer any tension that was coming from the funders [of the project]; we show love in the care and nourishment, in the venue, cooking food together, in the WhatsApp group. Integrating mind-body work and self-reflection are key strategies in helping the VFHs manage anxiety and conflict.”

During a post-event reflection in 2023, one participant reflects:

“An activist friend died the other day, and I realise I didn’t do enough for her when she was still alive. Only yesterday did I realise how much we love and are connected to each other in these food handler spaces. We must appreciate the role that each of us plays because we are always in a hurry to change the world.”

Another acknowledges:

“I am grateful for my entire body, as well as the connections we have with one another. This project is assisting us in connecting with our hearts and with each other.”

An HIV positive participant sees how she is learning to appreciate life and give thanks to her body for carrying and providing her with the opportunity to be alive and well.

At a [Thinking Laboratory](#), emotions are welcomed and the sounds of dancing, singing, heated debates, and laughter intermingle. Two children join the session – a three-week-old baby and a lively seven-year-old boy who lends his voice to the chorus and moves to the music. The VFHs don't have to choose between children and their own development. In taking care work seriously, the LRS team create spaces where care is part of how the VFHs organise.

AN ENDING AND A ‘COLLECTIVE COMING OUT’

The closing of the Power UP! programme marks a new beginning for the VFHs. Increased visibility and awareness have opened new possibilities and calls to action.



Being invited to be part of broader school activities like the condolence committee or school social events has become more commonplace. This is a significant departure from previous years, including in 2021, when the LRS' work with VFHs started. At that time, VFHs were barely seen by the rest of school staff. These invitations signal something deeper – VFHs are being treated as part of the overall functioning of the school. *"We are now part of the organogram of the school."*

There is also a growing recognition of VFHs in wider public spaces. One example of this is the recognition and applause for the VFHs' participation and presentation at the 2025 People's Summit for Global Economic Justice, a Summit to challenge the G20 leaders' decisions and to promote alternative economic solutions. This is an example of VFHs being validated beyond the school gates, as well as an illustration of the growing confidence and collective identity of VFHs. A second example is of 20 VFHs who wrote and shared their personal stories at the national Care Worker Convergence in October 2025, alongside Community Health Workers and Early Childhood Development practitioners. The stories the VFHs share offer powerful accounts of their daily work, challenges and aspirations. This storytelling is a form of 'coming out' - a public claiming of voice, identity and worker status. It expands the spaces where VFHs are seen and heard, reinforces their collective identity, and connects their struggles to national conversations about valuing care work. This positioning of VFHs within the broader care sector of the Expanded Public Works Program strengthens the work towards building a care platform across three sectors of predominantly women workers who face similar struggles of invisibility and lack of decent work.

VFHs produce their own content for online media engagements, advocacy, mobilisation and recruitment. Significantly, an online petition that started in 2024 in collaboration with amandla.mobi has been presented to the Department of Employment and Labour. As a result, the DOEL has confirmed the food handlers' status as **workers**.

This 'collective coming out' is taking place in the schools, online and in public gatherings. Each of these changes is significant because they signal a broader movement: from invisibility to recognition, from isolation to a collective presence, and from being treated as volunteers to being engaged as essential workers within the NSNP. In 2026, the Department of Education accepted the name change to '**Food Handler**'. Officially the name has been changed in the Division of Revenue Act and will soon be changed in other official documentation. The growing recognition of VFHs as workers has significant implications for women and for the broader struggle to value care work. The shifts seen in 2025



have begun to disrupt gendered norms about the value of women's work. As VFHs name themselves as workers, the ripple effect could be a more generalised growing of confidence, agency and public voice amongst broader layers of women advocating for the value of care work.

'It is preferable to change the world on the basis of love of [human]kind. But if that quality be too rare, then common sense seems the next best thing.'

(Bessie Head)⁸

⁸ *Maru*

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