

Promoting Women Workers' Rights in African Horticulture

Overview of research into conditions on horticulture farms in Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda

Summary

September 2007

Introduction

This document gives a brief summary of the research conducted into the situation of women workers in the African horticultural sector between 2005 and 2007. The research was conducted by local organisations in Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda and has been summarised by Women Working Worldwide. This document outlines the outstanding problems that have been found on some of the farms, although it is important to acknowledge that improvements have been made on some farms in the region as a result of work by international and national stakeholders.

For more information please download our full research overview from our website www.women-ww.org. National research reports are available at the partners' discretion.

Project Background

The project 'Promoting Women Workers' Right in African Horticulture' is a three year initiative designed to improve working conditions for women working in horticulture farms in East and Southern Africa using action research, training of workers and national and international advocacy. It commenced in January 2005. Women Working Worldwide has worked with four project partners on the implementation of this project:

Kenya Women Workers Organisation (KEWWO)
Tanzania Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (TPAWU)
Workers Education Association of Zambia (WEAZ)
Uganda Workers Education Association (UWEA)

Research aims and methodology

This research has aimed to document:

- working conditions on flower and vegetable farms in partner countries
- the companies operating in international supply chains
- workers' rights embodied in both company codes and national law
- the educational needs of workers.

During the course of the study, the research teams interviewed workers from 29 flower farms, 14 vegetable farms and 3 mixed crop farms. 613 female workers were interviewed and 357 male workers.

The bulk of information presented in the country reports was gathered using qualitative participatory research methodology consisting of interviews using pre-prepared questionnaires, focus group discussions with workers and multi-stakeholder workshops. Both male and female workers were interviewed. This was supplemented by interviews with management personnel, government officials, trade associations, NGOs and union representatives.

Obstacles to the research

At the start of the project all countries with the exception of Kenya experienced significant opposition from farm management. Whilst there are still problems on some farms, relationships with many farm management have significantly improved during the course of

© Women Working Worldwide
October 2007

Permission must be granted from WWW to cite this document

the project. In Tanzania, much of the opposition came from non-unionised farms which were not ultimately included in the research project.

Research findings

Gender

The research has been conducted with a view to collating gender sensitive information in order to highlight problems particularly relevant to women workers. Women form the majority workforce on horticulture farms in East and Central Africa. On the whole they occupy positions that are perceived as unskilled or low skilled and are consequently in the lowest pay brackets on the farms. The most serious problems affecting women workers are as follows:

- less able than men to access promotion due to lack of education or societal prejudice
- the jobs seen as more suited to women are classified as unskilled and therefore paid considerably less than jobs more often held by men. Job re-classification is recommended in some cases.
- many workers are classified as 'alone' and supporting dependents and wages are too low to support this need
- women are still expected to take the lead domestic role but this becomes challenged when they are unable to take maternity leave, take leave when their children are ill or arrange child care when overtime is announced at short notice.
- sexual harassment has been described as 'rampant' on some farms. More concerted action needs to be taken to tackle this.

The use of non-permanent workers

In Tanzania and Kenya, the use of non-permanent labour has reduced significantly in recent years. However in Uganda and Zambia the problem remains serious. In Uganda research interviewees were sampled at random – only 33% were on permanent contracts (lack of access to the farms makes it hard to ascertain the figure for workers as a whole). In Zambia only 26% of workers had permanent contracts on the farms studied.

In all countries, many non-permanent workers were found to be suffering from similar difficulties:

- Lack of employment benefits including sick leave, annual leave, medical benefits, housing allowances.
- Lack of opportunity for promotion
- Low income levels. In Zambia and Tanzania there were cases found where some casual workers were being paid less than permanent workers for the same work
- With the exception of Zambia, non-permanent workers were not unionised on the horticulture farms.
- In Tanzania and Uganda, some non-permanent workers were not given proper protective equipment.
- Lack of maternity leave meant that many non-permanent workers could not afford to have a baby.
- Unfair dismissal

Recommendations:

- In Tanzania the Employment and Labor Relations Act No.6 of 2004 insists on written contracts for every employee. This law is also due to be adopted in Kenya and Uganda and with proper enforcement will be an important step in improving conditions for non-permanent workers.
- The negotiation of CBAs and application of codes of conduct has been shown to reduce the use of non-permanent workers in Kenya and Uganda
- Downward price pressure from international buyers puts pressure on suppliers to cut costs by employing cheaper labour. This issue must urgently be addressed.
- If unionisation is not possible, other ways of organising casual workers must be found.

Salary levels

Salary levels in all countries were found to be much lower than was necessary to sustain a decent standard of living for workers. The lowest monthly salary was approx 24USD and the highest was 54USD. Many workers complained of being unable to finance 'basic needs' such as medical costs, clothing and a decent house.

Recommendations:

- National legislation on minimum wage must be enforced
- Multi-stakeholder forums must be established to set a living wage in each country

Opportunities for promotion and advancement

Women were largely found to be occupying the lower paid jobs on the farms whereas top management and supervisory positions were dominated by men. In Zambia and Tanzania the societal attitude that women were less suited to more responsible job was said to be preventing women from accessing promotions. In all countries except Zambia, promotion was found to be highly dependent upon relations with management.

Recommendations:

- Training for managerial staff on personnel management and gender equality
- Increase skills and literacy training for women
- Stronger union presence and establishment of women's committees.

Unionisation

The union situation on the horticulture farms remains problematic in Uganda. At the beginning of the project 77% of workers were not union members. The establishment of a new union in the intervening period has seen the unionisation of 2,000 workers but has complicated the labour movement. In Tanzania workers on six farms have not been unionised. In Kenya, the union KPAWU was not adequately reaching the workers, although it was improving its activities in the horticulture sector. In Zambia the union NUPAAW is making good progress in unionising workers but more work needs to be done, especially to reach casual workers.

Recommendations:

- Pressure must be exerted on farm management to encourage worker organisations.
- Unions need to be strengthened in order to respond adequately to workers' needs.

Lack of employment benefits for permanent workers

Permanent status did not necessarily mean that all rights and entitlements were being granted. In Uganda it is thought that lack of payment for sick leave, lack of union representation and access to child care are problems that are affecting all workers, regardless of their employment status. Many workers were also not receiving contracts that stipulated their benefits. In Tanzania and Kenya there were cases of maternity leave not being properly observed.

Recommendations:

- Permanent workers must receive written contracts, in a language that they understand, that stipulates the rights and benefits to which they are entitled.
- More consistent monitoring at a national level, especially by trade unions is needed to ensure that the workers are in fact receiving benefits that they are entitled to under national law

Long working hours

The reports from Uganda and Kenya both specifically complained about long working hours, often longer than those stipulated by national law. The fact that workers work overtime in order to meet set targets was also sited as a problem. Workers in all countries complained of overtime on some farms being obligatory, excessive and sometimes poorly remunerated. When announced at short notice following a late order it can mean that children are left unattended at home.

Recommendations:

- More efficient enforcement of national laws regarding working hours.
- Further research to examine the effect of purchasing practices on working hours.

Health and Safety

Personal Protective Equipment – At the start of the research there were reports of workers not having access to PPE (56% in Uganda, 35% in Tanzania), especially non permanent workers. There were also problems with workers choosing not to wear PPE and not understanding the danger of exposure to chemicals. In all countries in the last three years, there were noted improvements in the availability of good quality PPE on farms.

On site medical facilities – In Uganda many farms did not have on site medical facilities, including first aid boxes. In Zambia, whilst all the farms had trained first aiders and medical boxes, there were complaints that only the spayers were receiving medical checks, not the predominantly female employees found in production. Irregular menstrual flows for women were reported to be common.

Other complaints included lack of safe drinking water and drinking cups, lack of gender divided toilet facilities and lack of facilities to dispose of sanitary towels.

Recommendations:

There are a number of different issues encompassed in ‘health and safety’. It is important that workers are trained in health and safety issues and that farm management more scrupulously observe standards set in national law and codes of conduct.

Harassment

Sexual harassment was cited as a major problem in all countries. There were reports of supervisors requesting sexual favours in exchange for employment, time off, promotion and bonuses. Whilst some farms, especially in Kenya, now have good sexual harassment policies in place, this has been identified as an area where urgent action is needed.

The use of abusive language by supervisors was found to be common in Uganda and Kenya.

Recommendations:

- Training of workers and management on how to tackle harassment in the workplace
- Implementation of sexual harassment policies at farm level
- Establishment of women’s committees on farms to whom workers may report harassment without having to go to male management

Problems on small farms

Many of the worst incidences of labour rights abuses were found on smaller farms that are less financially secure than the larger farms that they supply to.

Conclusion

In order to continue improving the situation in East and Southern African horticulture, it is important to continue work with stakeholders at every point in the supply chain. More work needs to be done to examine the efficacy of codes of practice in addressing the various issues raised in this report. Furthermore, it will be important to engage with retailers in order to discuss how common purchasing practices are acting as a barrier to the implementation of international labour standards on farms. At a national level, advocacy must continue in order to further engage stakeholders such as employer/export/producer organisations, farm management, trade unions and government representations in processes that lead to the successful enforcement of international labour laws on farms. The creation of a work force that is aware of its rights is essential to this process. Finally the toughest issue of all will be to address the cultural and behavioural issues that are affecting women in their everyday working lives and preventing them from achieving all their rightful benefits as farm employees. This last issue needs to be tackled by all stakeholders in the supply chain.