

# Impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Kenya



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## 1 Introduction

1.1 This short paper was prepared to inform the development of the Women Working Worldwide gender equality training module, as part of the Fairtrade/MM Flowers project: Building Resilience in Kenyan Flower Supply Chains, funded by Foreign, Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) as part of their Business Partnerships for Global Goals (BP4GG) and Vulnerable Supply Chain Facility (VSCF) and managed by Mott Macdonald.



1.2 Women Working Worldwide (WWW) have been active in the field of women's rights in global supply chains for over 30 years and have extensive experience of the flower industry in Kenya. Issues of gender inequality in Kenyan flower farms have been a major concern for many years. Whilst progress has been made in certain areas, and on certain farms, the overriding issue is still that women make up the majority of workers on Kenyan flower farms (approximately 60-70%) and the positions they hold are predominantly undervalued and lower paid. There is also a lack of targeted interventions, such as training and education, to help improve their progression and roles within the industry.

1.3 In the wider community women in Kenya are still facing a mainly patriarchal society where the rights of women and girls are seriously compromised, from access to education to forced early marriage and sexual violence. These inequalities, both in work and in wider society, are still being tackled and COVID-19 has both exacerbated these issues and drawn attention to the fact that they are still present.

1.4 This paper sets out to identify the various ways Kenyan women and flower workers have been impacted by COVID-19. Starting with a review of past work on women in flower farms in Kenya and East Africa. We then carried out a review of current research and media coverage of COVID-19 and its impact on the flower industry in Kenya and specifically on women.

1.5 We then engaged with local partners, HR and farm managers to gather 'on the ground' information of the impact of COVID-19 on the industry and women workers. These were conducted via email communications, phone calls and zoom meetings. The issues are sensitive, and the questions were able to be asked due to the relationship between WWW and the interviewees. The questions were very broad and consisted of an informal conversation around whether they were aware of any specific impacts on women and girls due to COVID-19, did they have any articles or other evidence they could share and for the HR and Farm managers if they had they noticed any impacts on their workforce. Finally, we reviewed the baselines being generated by the &Wider worker voice survey and reviewed the Farm Questionnaires from partner Africa. In brief our information sources were:

- Desk top research including papers by United Nations, UN Foundation, Care International, WWW, Fairtrade, Hivos, local newspapers and Kenyan Government.
- Informal conversations and data from 6 farm managers and 2 HR staff
- On the ground information from 2 Unions, (KUHABWO, Kenya Union of Hair and Beauty Workers and KPAWU, Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union), WRW, Workers Rights Watch a worker's rights organisation based in Kenya, and Kenya Flower Council.
- With feedback via other areas of the Fairtrade/MM Flowers project, such as &Wider worker voice phone surveys and Partner Africa farm questionnaires.

This information will enable us to plan our gender equality training module with industry relevant, up-to-date understanding of the specific issues that impact on women flower workers that are due to industry practices, wider cultural issues and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2 Heightened vulnerability of women and girls due to COVID-19**

2.1 Measures to tackle COVID-19 have actually exacerbated gender inequality around the world. Women in the global south are currently facing increased risks of abuse and discrimination as the widespread economic downturn due to COVID-19 begins to impact on businesses and jobs. Unfortunately, the actions that have been taken to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have actually contributed to the vulnerability of women and girls and there has been an overall rise of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment GBVH worldwide (*Unicef 2020*).

2.2 As a whole, women are more vulnerable to GBVH, especially teenage girls, during any situation where enforced curfews and closure of services occur, as they become less 'visible' and lack opportunities to seek and receive assistance. There have been many reports on the increase in Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) especially during wars and pandemics (*Unicef, 2020*) and based on early reports there has been a similar rise in GBVH in Kenya due to COVID-19.

### **2.3 Girls**

2.3.1 The research in Kenya has shown that during the daytime, children, particularly girls, have increased vulnerability to sexual assault perpetrated by non-foreign perpetrators (e.g., neighbours or family friends) in private residences due to school closures and a lack of alternative safe locations (*Flowe et al, 2020*).

**Table 2. Characteristics of the Violations by Survivor Age Group (Adults versus Children) Interviewed by the Human Rights Defenders.**

	Adults (n = 50)	Children (n = 29)
<b>% of sexual violence violations</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>97%</b>
<b>Average age of the survivor</b>	<b>29 years</b>	<b>12 years</b>
<b>% of cases with female survivor</b>	<b>94%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>% cases perpetrated by someone known to survivor</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Average age of the perpetrator</b>	<b>30-39 years old</b>	<b>30-39 years old</b>
<b>% of male perpetrators</b>	<b>94%</b>	<b>100%</b>

2.3.2 Table 2 shows that almost all of the incidents against children (97 percent) were those of sexual assault. Prior to the pandemic the average age of girls’ experiencing sexual violence was 16 years old. The pandemic has increased the vulnerability of younger girls (now with an average age of 12) to become victims of sexual violence (Flowe et al, 2020).

2.3.3 Young girls are also vulnerable to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Despite FGM being made illegal in Kenya 10 years ago and the President committing to eradicate cutting by 2022, one of the side effects of COVID-19 has been the rise in cases of FGM (Hodal.K, The Guardian, June 2020). Organisations tackling this crime, such as NGO’s and local groups, have not been able to operate due to COVID-19 restrictions and curfews. In addition, the schools have been closed, so the girls have not been within the safety of the school and where their absence would have been investigated.

2.3.4 Natalie Robi Tingo, founder of Msichana Empowerment Kuria, a Kenyan organisation working to end FGM estimates that “over 2,800 girls were cut over three and a half weeks” and some community elders have even claimed that “COVID-19 is because they have failed to uphold traditions such as FGM” (Newey. S. Daily Telegraph, October 2020).

2.3.5 The national help line 1195 has been a lifeline for women and girls suffering GBVH during COVID-19 and the number of cases rose from 86 in February 2020 to over 1,100 in June and although the number of calls dropped in July 2020, they are still 4 times higher than the same period last year. (United Nations Report – Kenya, 2020).

**“There is however a spike in Female genital mutilation / early marriages / early pregnancies that are affecting their girls at home and indirectly affecting our female staff”.**

**Flower Farm HR Manager, November 2020**

One flower farm HR Manager interviewed for this study stated:

*“There is however a spike in Female genital mutilation / early marriages / early pregnancies that are affecting their girls at home and indirectly affecting our female staff. Most of these were on a low scale pre COVID-19 because there were NGOs operating to rescue girls from such predicaments, but the NGOs are now not travelling because of COVID, the girls are not going to school, they have nowhere to run to and they are home all day hence susceptible to the vices”.*

2.3.6 Not only has FGM continued due to ‘cultural’ reasons but also for financial reasons. With the economic uncertainty, parents of young girls sometimes turn to FGM for financial stability. In certain cultures, men want to marry girls/women who have undergone FGM and are willing to pay an increased dowry. The dowry is paid to the parents of the girl/woman and with the uncertain source of income due to the pandemic, the ‘benefits’ of the increase in this practice will continue to put young girls at a much greater risk.

2.3.7 Young girls are also further compromised as they are at risk of not being able to return to school once closures are lifted due to economic reasons. With the pandemic affecting income, some families might have to sacrifice their children’s education and boy’s education is still considered a priority for many families. Not only does this have a short-term effect (the girls are therefore at more risk of sexual abuse, forced marriage and pregnancy) but also a long-term effect (as this will affect girls’ educational opportunities and future financial independence).

## **2.4 Women**

2.4.1 Women have increased exposure to sexual and physical assault, with assaults by foreign and non-foreign perpetrators (e.g., intimate partners) occurring in both private homes and in public (Flowe *et al*, 2020) with over 65% of cases being perpetrated by intimate partners (see Table 2). This ‘pattern’ is seen in many other countries and cultures, as well as in Kenya.

**“Men who have lost their jobs ...are taking out their frustrations on their families”**

**Kenyan Female Flower Farm Worker**

2.4.2 However, Kenya is still very much a patriarchal society, and many men feel that women are there to serve them and that men should be entitled to sex with their partners or wives whenever they want, whether or not the woman consents. Women are, therefore, more vulnerable to sexual violation by their husbands or partners per se, and the pandemic and the enforced lockdowns have created a situation where GBVH is made ‘easier’ to perpetuate.

One interviewee also stated that there has been an increase in domestic violence due to drinking, job losses and lockdowns.

*There has been ...” increased domestic violence because men who have lost their jobs are either drinking all day or are around all day and are taking out their frustrations on their families” ... Kenyan Female Flower Farm Worker, November 2020.*

2.4.3 Women, who are in work or seeking work, are also at greater risk of gender-based harassment and discrimination as jobs become harder to find and harder to keep. Many supervisors and managers are men and they still hold a certain amount of power to determine who stays and who goes on the farms. Union members have also indicated that they feel they have been unfairly targeted for ‘letting go’ as management wish to remove ‘trouble-makers’ (*communication from Union General Secretary, November 2020*).

### **3 Economic difficulties faced**

3.1 We know that the flower industry has been hit hard by the pandemic with farms exporting only 20% of the 60 tons of cut flowers that they would normally send daily to markets including the U.K., the Netherlands and Germany, according to Kenya Flower Council Chief Executive Officer Clement Tulezi (*Bloomberg 2020*).

3.2 The impact of COVID-19 has also been felt in country. For example, Kenya is heavily dependent on road freight for the trade of essential goods, and COVID 19 testing sites and curfews have caused transport bottlenecks, leading to delays in delivering commodities. This impacts on farmers’ abilities to plant crops, shop keepers to stock their shelves, street vendors to sell their goods. The “impacts of COVID-19 are likely to play out on different time scales, with many short-term shocks to production and trade giving way to longer-term consequences” (*IIED 2020*).

3.3 Because women work in overwhelmingly under-valued, lower-paid, unstable and part-time employment, they have little to no economic security and social protection, such as health insurance or savings. Therefore, they are more likely than their male

counterparts to experience economic shocks much more profoundly in times of crisis such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Women are also less likely to have access to and control of productive resources and properties, such as land. Food shortages and increased food insecurity due to financial instability puts women under increased strain especially where they are responsible for household food security and may lead them to being victims of GBV, especially through intimate partner violence, or dependence on negative coping strategies, such as transactional sex, sexual exploitation and even resorting to agreeing to child marriages.

**“Marrying off a daughter reduces family expenses and temporarily increases family income”.**

*Care International, 2020*

3.5 Research has shown that poverty can sometimes force parents to use child marriages to increase their family income. Marrying off a daughter reduces family expenses and temporarily increases family income. With the pandemic leaving many people out of work, some may take this path as the only way to gain temporary financial stability (*CARE International, 2020*).

3.6 Many women workers on the Kenyan flower farms are dealing with these sorts of economic challenges. Any awareness and training programme needs to acknowledge the economic challenges that all workers face but with a sensitivity towards the specific challenges for women. This could be a useful starting point to encourage dialogue between the different genders on the training programme.

## **4 Impact from limited health services**

4.1 In Kenya, before the pandemic, those who suffered sexual violence were able to access support from the gender-based violence referral centres. However, access to these has been reduced due to curfews and shortages of PPE and the impact on those suffering GBV has been noted as “the need for medical assistance increases while its availability is significantly reduced, as witnessed by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) teams, who work to provide emergency care and assist victims of sexual and gender-based violence” (*Africa News 2020*)

4.2 Those who have suffered injury due to GBV have also found access to medical help difficult to source. Some hospitals have stopped operations and delayed or cancelled health services in an attempt to ensure they were able to deal with the expected rise in Coronavirus patients and minimise overcrowding. “Ambulances don't have fuel, there's a lack of reagents for testing, contract tracing is weak and referral hospitals are overburdened” as reported by Chibanzi Mwachonda, secretary-general of the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (*Yahoo News 2020*).

4.3 Kenya has one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world and one in twenty-six (26) babies will die before their first birthday. Research and modelling are highlighting the wider impacts of COVID-19 on mothers and babies, such as a reduction in women accessing pre and anti-natal support, reluctance to attend hospital for births and a reduction in the percentage of women breastfeeding through a lack of advice and support; all of which seriously impact on women's health and that of their babies. (*Global Citizen, 2020*)

*"When women and girls have access to reproductive and maternal health care, they lead healthier lives, are more likely to stay in school, and contribute to their communities. We must continue to provide women with adequate health resources and information amid global health crises"* Global Citizen, 2020.

4.4 Research by the UN Foundation has shown that women in the global south are particularly likely to face a higher risk of human rights violations during the pandemic and there is a growing recognition that protecting and improving the health of women workers is critical to business success (*UN Foundation 2020*).

4.5 From the Kenya flower farm worker voice research carried out by &Wider it is clear there is a real stigma attached to COVID-19 both for those that have it and even those who recover from it; similar in many ways to the reaction to those with HIV and AIDS in the 1980's. This needs to be incorporated into any awareness and training programmes and added to the range of health and well-being issues that women already face, from healthy diets and child nutrition to breast cancer and the menopause.

## **5 Difficulties faced by those still in work**

5.1 When COVID-19 lockdowns occurred in Kenya some staff on the flower farms, such as HR staff, were able to work from home, but most general workers and managers were needed on the farms and the majority of these general workers are women. (*Communications with Farm Managers and HR staff July - November 2020*) Obviously, all workers, male and female, faced challenges but women are dealing with a unique set of additional issues and demands that means that the impact of COVID-19 is greater for women.

5.2 Transport to and from the farms was (and still is) an issue because government social distancing instructions of 50% capacity required many more buses to be laid on by the farms. The cost of petrol rose, in some areas to over 50%, and transport costs doubled impacting on farms and workers alike (*Capital News 2020*)

5.3 Curfews meant that the working times on the farms were curtailed and farms found it difficult to ensure staffing levels were sufficient to maintain the crops as well as fulfil orders when the demand for flowers began to rise again. Some farms instigated split shifts for workers such as 'two weeks on and two weeks off' which helped farms survive but reduced incomes and made it very difficult for workers to survive.

5.4 One example is Nafula Nyongesa, a 27 year old flower farm worker who was put on a 'two week on, two week off' rota meaning her pay was cut from £75 to £37.50 a



month and her husband also lost his job so she was worried about feeding her two children. “We’ve had to reduce our meals from three to two or one per day, and we drink less milk,” she says. “We don’t buy clothes.” (*Marie Claire* 2020).

**“I am also urging the police that people must be treated humanely”.**

**Hon. Mutahi Kagwe, Sec for Health**

5.4 The wearing of face masks when outside the home was made compulsory on April 9<sup>th</sup> in Kenya. This was enforced by the police and allegedly violently with some saying that people were killed, even the Cabinet Secretary for Health, the Hon. Mutahi Kagwe, asked for calm in his press statement on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2020 stating:

*“At this juncture I am appealing to our people to make it very unnecessary for them to engage with the police by staying at home. I am also urging the police that people must be treated humanely. However, let me state that we are not going to pull back on enforcement of the measures, we have so far instituted, as this will only make things worse in the fight against the disease”.*

However, many workers did not have sufficient funds or access to reusable and washable face masks. Many were wearing disposable masks more than once and by doing so were actually increasing their risk of catching the virus. Many farms provided masks and PPE for their workers but even they struggled to get sufficient PPE in a timely manner for all their staff due to logistics and availability (*communication from Farm Managers*)

5.5 When the virus first hit the UK (and the rest of Europe) many retailers cancelled or reduced their flower orders to focus on essential food items. Some honoured the payment to the growers/suppliers for their flower orders, despite cancelling their orders, some did not. The impact on the industry was catastrophic with an estimated 50 tonnes of flowers being destroyed daily and over 70,000 workers affected (*Herbling D., Bloomberg, March 2020*).

5.6 On the labour front there were a range of coping strategies employed by Fairtrade and Non-Fairtrade farms at the beginning of the pandemic to enable the farms to ‘tick over’ until (hopefully) orders were resumed. It would be fair to say that no one was sure what was going to happen, and it was a very confused and confusing period. Some farms reduced their labour costs by laying off their temporary and contract workers. Other farms reduced hours of all permanent staff, including managers and supervisors, as well as general staff. Some farms instigated pay cuts or instructed workers to take paid leave (*communications from HR and Farm Managers*).

5.7 The seriousness of the situation was highlighted by the actions of some flower farm workers who resigned from their jobs as they thought the industry was on the verge of collapse. Discussions were held between Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (KPAWU) and the Agricultural Employers’ Association (AEA) and their

recommendation was that in order to protect the industry workers should take unpaid leave (*direct communication from KPAWU and AEA 11/06/2020*). For many workers this was an impossible situation and it caused panic on some farms where workers who were entitled to severance pay resigned from their jobs in order to claim their gratuity so they would have money to help them survive (*communication from HR Manager*).

5.8 Many of the workers interviewed for the workers voice section of the 'Building Resilience' project indicated that their wages did not cover their living expenses for the month (*information from Partner Africa and &Wider, November 2020*) and that some of them undertook additional income generating activities. This confirmation of our initial basic needs analysis for the Building Resilience project shows the importance of the income generation section of the project. We have 100 people being supported in identifying and setting up suitable income generating activities and businesses and these will consist of women, youth and disabled workers.

5.9 On average a general worker on a flower farm will earn around 10-12,000 Ksh a month (*information from HR Department flower farm, Naivasha, June 2020*). Research by the Global Living Wage Coalition, using the Anker methodology, has indicated that general workers on flower farms in and around Naivasha should be earning around 26,546 Ksh a month (*Global Living Wage Coalition Kenya, March 2019*) to constitute a 'living wage'. This gap is something that needs to be tackled throughout the supply chain and all growers, suppliers and retailers need to address by:

- Enhancing consumer awareness of the real cost of goods
- Increasing costs of flowers (to cover decent wages/environmental costs)
- Improving wages gradually over a set period of time
- Encouraging entrepreneurship
- Supporting workers through rights training and education
- Improving opportunities for women within the workplace
- Supporting financial literacy for workers

The 'Building Resilience' project was designed to both ensure the flower industry was able to build its resilience against future shocks by encompassing a strategic and macro-economic view, and also to address the very real challenge of ensuring that those who supply our goods are suitably and appropriately rewarded for their labour.

5.10 On a positive note, M-Pesa, the Kenyan mobile phone money transfer system and M-Shwari, the mobile savings and loan system, have revolutionised ordinary people's access and control of their own money and savings. These systems are easy to set up and have helped many women to become more financially independent and secure (*WWW report to MM Flowers 2018*)

## **6 Conclusions and Recommendations**

6.1 COVID-19 has over the last 10 months had a severe impact on the global economy including that of the flower industry in Kenya. It has exposed existing gaps in countries' ability to respond to the crisis, the vulnerability of certain supply chains and exposed the inequalities endemic within all societies.

6.2 The research for this paper has highlighted that many inequalities still exist, and COVID-19 has exacerbated gender inequality across the world. Women and girls in the global south are currently facing increased risks of abuse and discrimination especially as the widespread economic downturn due to COVID-19 begins to impact on businesses and jobs.

6.3 In Kenya on the flower farms we have an opportunity, through this project, to build on the gender empowerment work that WWW, Fairtrade and MM Flowers have already started to initiate. In particular, around worker understanding of rights, effective grievance procedures, environmental awareness and health and safety. Areas for development include relevant health messages around COVID-19 and tackling stigma.

6.4 Key areas of concern highlighted by this research were:

- GBVH
- Issues arising in work from the impacts of COVID-19 on supply chains
- Wider health and well-being issues including disability
- COVID-19 and stigma
- Living wage and income generation

6.5 After discussions with HR Departments and local partners WWW will aim to develop a one-hour awareness and training programme consisting of an introduction and up to three 15 minute modules addressing one or more of the issues above. These will be delivered all together or in individual short sessions depending on worker availability and time frames. It is envisaged that these will be delivered to key workers within Gender Committees, Fairtrade Committees, Unions, Welfare Groups etc. for them roll out to other workers in their committees and on the farms.

6.6 Originally WWW were intending to deliver this training in person in Kenya. However, due to COVID-19 and travel bans this is now highly unlikely. We are now working on a revised plan in consultation with the farms, Fairtrade and MM Flowers.

6.7 We still believe that face-to-face engagement is essential for the training and we are aiming to engage a local consultant/organisation to deliver this aspect, along with developing a short animation to raise awareness on worker's rights and gender which can be shown at the target 40 farms and beyond.

6.8 We will work with the consultant/organisation to ensure effective delivery of our training and we are currently in communication with the HR Managers to ascertain the best time to engage on the farms and the identification of suitable participants from the Gender Committees, Fairtrade Committees or Union officials. Numbers will depend on COVID-19 restrictions and if the training is face-to-face or remote.

6.9 The work the project will be undertaking on income generation will address the issue of insufficient funds to last the month or those who have lost their jobs or are on reduced hours. However, the intervention is very small scale and there is ample opportunity for further research and funding to scale up this work.

6.10 Another area of interest that warrants further investigation is the individual response to the worker voice question on disability. The question was based on the Washington Group Short Set questions which cover difficulties in seeing, hearing, mobility, communication, cognition and self-care and are accepted as an appropriate way in which to determine disability. However, the &Wider survey needed to be succinct, so all issues were included in just one question resulting in a less detailed data set. Even so, the fact that the results showed that in some farms up to 27% of those participating identified that they have difficulties in one or more of these areas is an issue that could be explored through the future on-farm surveys and referenced in the gender training (*Worker and Farm Management Survey, Partner Africa, 2020*)

6.11 On the issue of a 'Living wage' we are hopeful that one of the retailer roundtables will address this issue, as this is a major project beyond the scope of this training. In addition, after this project MM Flowers has agreed to work with WWW on a pilot programme to tackle the living wage pay gap on its flower farms in Kenya.

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