

## CHAPTER 12

# Female Employment in Agriculture: Global Challenges and Global Responses

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### **Introduction**

What are the effects of globalisation on women workers in agriculture? In many countries the spread of commercial agriculture has provided new openings for female employment. Women have long worked in agriculture, but often as unpaid family labour (Boesrup, 1970). The rise of supermarket retailing is contributing to the transformation of agriculture. Initially concentrated in developed countries, supermarkets are now growing rapidly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Production for supermarkets generates opportunities for female employment. Accessing this employment can bring many opportunities for women, but also new forms of vulnerability.

Paid work allows women to participate more actively in economic and social life, increases their contribution to household incomes and enhances their empowerment. However, these benefits are not always easily realised. Women workers still face high levels of embedded discrimination and inequality, they are more likely to be found in casual and temporary work and they are often exposed to significant health risks. Where they lack employment security or social protection, women agricultural workers (and their dependents) continue to be vulnerable to poverty.

Achieving more equitable poverty reduction in a global economy requires access by women to decent work, in which their rights, protection and voice are respected. Governments have an important role to play in protecting workers through labour regulation and implementation of Conventions agreed under the International Labour Organization (ILO). But governments are often constrained where global supermarkets dominate production and employment practices. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have sought new ways to leverage better employment conditions in supermarket supply chains. This has spawned a number of voluntary initiatives, including supermarket codes of labour practice, and ethical and fair trade. Enhancing synergy between regulatory and voluntary approaches can help to secure decent work for women employed in global agriculture.

## Women's Employment in Global Agriculture<sup>1</sup>

Global agriculture has undergone significant changes over the past two decades. There has been a relative decline in the share in exports of traditional agricultural crops (such as grains, coffee and tea) and a rapid increase in high value agriculture (HVA), particularly horticulture, floriculture, rich protein meats and processed food products, both for export and rising domestic consumption. Trade liberalisation has stimulated developing countries to expand into HVA exports so that, for example, India, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia all now produce HVA goods as a growing source of agricultural export earnings (Jaffee, 1993). By 2000 HVA exports were already estimated to account for approximately two-thirds of total agricultural trade (Dolan and Sorby, 2003).

Two factors have played an important role in the expansion of HVA in global production. First, technological innovation has led to the operation of cool chain and other temperature-controlled transportation that facilitates the export of more perishable goods. Second, supermarkets have become the dominant buyers of HVA products, sourcing globally, regionally and locally. In the UK, supermarkets control 80 per cent of all food retailed. A similar trend is also taking place in parts of Africa and Asia. In South Africa, supermarkets now account for 50–60 per cent of all food retailed and are rapidly expanding outlets in other African countries.<sup>2</sup> In Kenya, supermarkets have grown rapidly to capture over 20 per cent of urban food retailing (Neven and Reardon, 2004). Supermarket food chains operate differently from traditional markets. Supermarket buyers exert high levels of control within their value chains in order to meet consumer demand and maximise their market share. They aim to provide the same produce all year round, regardless of local seasons. They operate through global networks of preferred suppliers, using pre-programmed or computer-controlled orders that are directly channelled through to their centralised distribution systems. They set stringent specifications and standards for their suppliers, which include product specification, food hygiene and, increasingly, social and environmental standards (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004).

Historically, female labour has been prevalent in crops such as tea and coffee, often on estates or in small-holder production, but has less often been found in certain traditional agricultural crops (e.g. livestock and grains). HVA production, however, has stimulated a high level of female employment across both developed and developing countries. Table 12.1 provides a summary for selected HVA-producing countries.<sup>3</sup> The source and composition of female employment vary by country and product. In South African fruit production, for example, women are concentrated in temporary and seasonal employment, with their employment traditionally tied to that of male partners or relatives (Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2003).<sup>4</sup> In Kenyan flowers they are slightly more often to be found in regular employment.

The use of workers hired by third party labour contractors is rising in some countries, but is particularly prevalent in South Africa and the UK. Over the past decade, 'gangmasters' have become an important source of labour provision in UK agriculture. They provide 37 per cent of all temporary labour, 32.5 per cent of which is migrant labour from non-EU countries (Frances et al., 2005). Early studies in South Africa and

**Table 12.1:** Comparison by country of selected high value agricultural production

<i>Country</i>	<i>Main market</i>	<i>Estimated level of employment</i>	<i>Gender composition</i>	<i>Type of employment</i>
Kenya: flowers	EU (UK, Holland)	40,000 (+ 4–5,000 small-holders)	75% female	65% temporary
South Africa: fruit	Europe	280,000	69% of women temporary/casual; 26% of women permanent	Mixed
UK: agriculture	UK	99,460 recruited direct, 224,713 via temporary labour providers (TLPs), seasonal agricultural workers (SAWs) and students.	TLPs: 35% female 65% male	Majority temporary (31 % recruited direct, 37% via TLPs, 32% SAWs and students)
Zambia: vegetables and flowers	EU	8,000	65% female (veg. only)	60-75% temporary (veg. only)

*Sources:* Dolan and Sorby, 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Frances et al., 2005.

the UK indicate that the gender composition of contract gangs is more likely to be male (65 per cent in the UK). Women form a larger proportion of directly recruited labour employed when seasonal production peaks. This appears to reflect a preference by contractors for male workers who can be more mobile than local seasonal labour, which is usually female. But this could change with the expansion of female migration.

An important aspect of casual female and contract labour is their ‘flexibility’. Agricultural producers face natural risks of seasonal production, climatic variation and vulnerability of crops to pest and disease. Producers in supermarket value chains also face high commercial risks in terms of meeting stringent standards and changing demands and orders from supermarket buyers, and they rarely have assured supply contracts. Flexible employment allows producers to vary their employment levels on a rapid basis, while keeping labour costs down. The workforce can be varied daily through (compulsory) overtime for casual workers and/or the use of labour contractors. Some international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions argue that the purchasing practices of large supermarkets play an important part in driving labour casualisation. Suppliers face a pincer movement of downward pressure on prices and increasingly volatile orders plus rising quality standards and costs. Casual and contract labour provide a buffer against the risks they face in supermarket value chains, with vulnerable women workers ultimately bearing the cost (Actionaid, 2006; Oxfam, 2004).

## **Opportunities and Challenges for Women<sup>5</sup>**

The expansion of employment in HVA production provides important opportunities for women to enter paid employment. However, the extent to which women are able to access the benefits of working in HVA is limited by their predominantly casual work status, reflecting embedded gender discrimination in hiring and promotion. A number of studies indicate that (with some exceptions) permanent workers are predominantly male. Permanent workers more often have a legal contract of employment, with greater stability and security of work. Normally they receive better wages (with a year-round income that most casual and contract agricultural workers do not enjoy) and have access to related benefits such as health and social insurance. Non-wage benefits are sometimes available to permanent workers, especially where they live on the farm or estate, including housing, social provision and transport. Permanent workers are also more likely to enjoy the right to freedom of association, although generally rates of trade union membership in agriculture are low.

Women usually constitute the majority employed in pack houses in HVA. Pack house workers often receive relatively good wages compared to field workers, and they are more likely to have access to pro rata employment benefits and rights to which they are entitled. Overtime, however, is a key issue in pack houses. It is often required at very short notice to meet variable orders from supermarket buyers, so that workers do not know in the morning what time they are likely to finish that evening. This can make childcare arrangements extremely difficult, particularly for women. Women pack house workers may therefore reap some benefits from working in HVA, but still struggle when they have to combine this with family responsibilities.

The problems facing casual and contract farm workers, however, are legion. They often have no contracts of employment (even short term) and have little information about their rights or terms and conditions of employment. They face high levels of work insecurity, even if they work regularly for the same producer for years. Wages (often paid on a piece rate) can vary on a day-by-day or week-by-week basis, depending on seasonal demand. Employees often receive no pay when production stops because of the weather, even if they have presented themselves at work. They may be forced to work long overtime hours, often with no additional pay. Casual and contract agricultural workers rarely receive their pro rata legal entitlements, such as health or social insurance, and compensation for work-related injury is often avoided. Because of their insecurity, workers fear making any complaint or joining a union in case they lose access to work. Women often fall prey to verbal abuse and sexual harassment by male supervisors, who are normally arbiters in whether or not they are re-employed. These workers are thus in a highly vulnerable position.<sup>6</sup>

Another issue that affects many workers in agriculture is health and safety. This especially arises from the use of pesticides and other chemicals in the production process. It is a particular problem for workers in confined spaces such as greenhouses, where exposure tends to be high and workers are often female. Evidence suggests that health and safety procedures in relation to the handling of pesticides and chemicals are often

lax or violated. The effects of chemical exposure can include skin irritation, respiratory problems, nausea and dizziness. The longer-term effects can be even more serious, including a higher risk of serious illness and adverse effects on children.

Despite the problems that face women agricultural workers in global production, many still express a preference for this work compared to the alternatives. Paid agricultural work provides increased independence within the household, ability to contribute to household income and greater socialisation. It also provides access to government and community support programmes, which may otherwise be inaccessible.

## **Global Responses**

A key policy challenge is how to enhance decent work for women who are working in HVA. Decent work, as defined by the ILO, is employment that takes place ‘under conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity, in which rights are protected and adequate remuneration and social coverage is provided’. The ILO provides a framework for the analysis of employment in global production combining four dimensions: employment, rights, protection and voice (ILO, 2000). In principle, all ILO member States are supposed to implement its core conventions, including the principle of non-discrimination. In reality, even where legislation itself is good, enforcement can be weak, especially in the context of HVA, where the demands of overseas supermarket buyers can affect employment practices and producers strive to compete for orders. However, a complementary avenue for intervention has been found through voluntary approaches.

CSOs have put increasing pressure on supermarkets over poor employment conditions in their global supply chains. This has resulted in a number of supermarkets introducing codes of labour practice that lay out minimum labour standards for their suppliers. In some countries, voluntary approaches have led to the formation of multi-stakeholder initiatives involving companies, NGOs and trade unions. An example is the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) set up in 1997 in the UK, which includes the main UK supermarkets among its members.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the ETI focused on conditions in developing countries. But in 2002 it set up the Temporary Labour Working Group, involving supermarket, NGO and union representatives, to establish minimum standards for UK gangmasters. It played an important role in pressuring the Government to support the Gangmasters (Licensing) Act, which was passed through Parliament in 2004 and came into force in 2006 (Pollard, 2006). Under this Act, all labour contractors have to be registered and monitored by the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, and producers have been made jointly liable if they do not use registered contractors.

Similar moves have also been made in South Africa, where exemplary labour legislation includes the Employment Equity Act and Basic Conditions of Employment Act, which also covers labour brokers. However, enforcement remains a problem (Carr, 2004). The Wine Industry and Agriculture Ethical Trading Association (WIETA) was set up following an ETI wine pilot in the country to develop and monitor its own local code of labour practice based on ILO Conventions and legislation. WIETA members include trade unions, NGOs, producers, exporters, government and UK supermarkets. CSOs

have played an important role in ensuring that the conditions of casual women workers are addressed in social audits. WIETA has also moved to include labour brokers in its membership, with the aim of monitoring their labour standards against its code of labour practice.

These examples highlight innovative ways in which voluntary and regulatory approaches can interact to address the employment conditions of workers in HVA. Ultimately, however, the commercial environment in which this employment takes place also needs to be addressed. Civil society pressure on supermarkets to improve their purchasing practices is one dimension. The rise of ethical and fair trade highlights that many consumers are seeking assurance that producers and workers are treated fairly. Easing downward pressure on producer prices and volatility of orders could go some way to helping suppliers to meet employment standards set out in supermarket codes of labour practice. It is also important that bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations, such as the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements, take the changing face of supermarket retailing and gendered nature of agricultural employment into account (Khan, 2006; Carr, 2004). Such trade agreements need to support moves by developing country suppliers and governments to upgrade within supermarket value chains, and to direct more of the benefits of participating in this high earning sector to women workers.

Globalisation has great potential to benefit women workers, which could play a significant role in lifting rural households out of poverty. But a proactive commitment is required by all actors – civil society, companies and government – to realise this potential.

## Endnotes

1. This section draws primarily on the following more detailed studies: Barrientos, Dolan and Tallontire, 2003; Dolan and Sorby, 2003; Smith et al., 2004.
2. For example, the South African supermarket Shoprite has 119 outlets in 16 African countries (Angola, Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and as well as India).
3. Official statistics for employment in HVA are very unreliable, and we have to depend on different estimates for country data.
4. Since 1994 there has been a process of rapid change in South African agriculture with the introduction of new labour legislation and rapid retrenchment of on-farm labour. There has also been increasing casualisation of agricultural labour, both male and female.
5. This section draws primarily on Barrientos and Barrientos, 2002; Dolan and Sorby 2003; Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2003; and Smith et al., 2004.
6. In the UK, media interest in the plight of gangmaster labour was most tragically brought to the fore by the death of 21 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecombe Bay in 2004. These were all undocumented migrant workers, controlled by unscrupulous gangmasters who extracted long hours at low pay in hazardous and dangerous conditions (Pollard, 2006).
7. ETI company members include Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's, the Cooperative and Marks and Spencers. Morrisons is the largest supermarket that is not a member. See [www.ethicaltrade.org](http://www.ethicaltrade.org)

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