

# Enhancing Fairtrade for women workers on plantations: insights from Kenyan agriculture

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*The growth in the market for Fairtrade certified agricultural exports from Africa has been rapid, promising empowerment for workers and communities through the Fairtrade Premium. Increasingly the Joint Bodies that administer the premium and the kinds of projects funded have been the subject of mounting criticism. Drawing from two empirical studies on Kenyan flowers and tea that explored pathways to empowerment for women workers on plantations, this paper compares and contrasts the practices of two standards mechanisms operating on the farms: the Joint Body (JB) and the Gender Committee (GC). This analysis finds that the GCs were more empowering for women workers than the JBs and draws out examples of good practice from the former that could help to improve practice in Fairtrade in plantation agriculture. The paper argues that appropriate training for members and non-members of committees alike, organizational and spatial structures, the nature of representation, and mechanisms for strengthening voice are of great importance in ensuring empowering outcomes for workers.*

**Keywords:** Fairtrade, gender, agriculture, empowerment, women, Kenya

AS THE FAIRTRADE STANDARD has become increasingly important in both the floriculture and tea sectors in Kenya, increasingly, concerns have been raised with respect to the impacts of Fairtrade on workers (particularly women) (Nelson and Martin, 2012; Tallontire and Said-Allsopp, 2013). More specifically, questions have been raised about whether the Joint Body (JB) is adequate to deliver Fairtrade International's (FLO) core objective of hired labour standards; that is, the empowerment of workers rather than minimum worker rights (FLO, 2010: 12). In this paper we consider how in practice the JB could become more empowering, especially for women workers. We draw on two related studies of Kenyan agriculture which sought to understand worker experiences of plantation employment and the operation of standards and through this compare the workers' experience of Fairtrade through the JB with Gender Committees (GCs) which were also established on the farms studied.

A JB is instituted on Fairtrade certified farms under the 'hired labour' standard for Fairtrade. Its role is to receive and use the Fairtrade Premium (the 'extra' part of the Fairtrade price designated for the development of producers), which accrues

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to producers through trade. We acknowledge that the Fairtrade hired labour model does not solely hinge on the JB as a mechanism for empowerment; some aspects of the Fairtrade hired labour standard are linked to empowering effects through enhanced job security and promoting freedom of association. However, the JB is the most tangible mechanism, particularly for workers, and an aspect to which FLO has dedicated considerable attention.

The Kenya Flower Council (KFC) began to promote the use of 'Gender Committees' on Kenyan flower farms in the wake of labour rights campaigns in 2002–03. The chief executive officer of KFC says that they were instituted to enable women's voices to be heard in the auditing of the KFC code, because previously, she says, 'the women were shy to talk' (interview 20 May 2008). GCs play an important role in the audit process, facilitating interviews with female workers who represent the bulk of the workforce and providing a tool through which the gender-related recommendations from audits could be implemented and monitored. While the mechanism originated within floriculture, the tea company in our study, which also engages in floricultural production, has implemented the mechanism across its operations. Farm managers in Study A explained that they established gender committees to be a voice for women workers and to help them to fight against 'women's problems', particularly sexual harassment, which at the time was both widespread and prolific.

In this paper we compare these two committees and explore how they work, how they could be improved in order to deliver empowerment, particularly for women workers, and how the two committees could learn from each other.

Our analysis draws on interviews and focus groups with workers, farm managers, standard setters, and other industry spokespeople from two studies. Study A analysed empowerment within two (related) companies that supplied horticultural and tea products to the UK (Said-Allsopp, 2013). For contextual purposes, we also drew on the findings of a second related study (Study B) which investigated a wider sample of 11 floriculture firms in Kenya that were also involved in the same Kenya–UK value chain, in order to explore workers' understanding of social and environmental standards (Tallontire et al., 2011). The operation of standards was part of the wider context of the first study, but the second examined more explicitly how standards were being developed and applied in the value chain.

In Study A, women workers were interviewed in two phases and from two companies (Company A and Company B) that each had multiple farm sites. Phase I (2008) comprised 14 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 163 women workers in Nairobi (vegetables), Naivasha (flowers), and Kericho (flowers and tea), in which they were asked about the changes (at work and at home) that they had experienced during their employment, their aspirations for the future, and plans for achieving these. Phase II (2009) involved semi-structured interviews with 78 women workers which examined their experiences in more depth. The sample included general workers and supervisors as well as Gender Committee members.

In Study B there were 29 focus groups with both male and female workers on 11 flower farms. The sampling framework for farms was based on ensuring a range of experience with standards. The FGDs with workers were stratified by gender and

production section (e.g. greenhouse or packhouse) and included some discussions with shop stewards.

The fieldwork from both studies highlighted that workers were more aware of Fairtrade than any other standard. Further, it was the one in which they felt most involved, largely because of the Fairtrade premiums and the Joint Body (JB). Nevertheless, knowledge of Fairtrade was limited to workers from only four firms, despite six of the firms in our collective sample being currently Fairtrade certified and another two expressing an interest in Fairtrade at the time of the fieldwork. The data on GCs relies on the in-depth research at the farms investigated in Study A.

Our approach to the comparative analysis of the two standards mechanisms is to examine how they operate on the ground, drawing on the perspectives of the actors using the standards mechanisms, rather than focusing on compliance with the requirements of the standards (Loconto, 2010; Ouma, 2010). We are interested in how the standards are embedded within the local context, including how different standards may become 'entangled' with each other and inform each other through practice (Aasprong et al., 2013). We explore worker perspectives and identify practices related to the standards, particularly what may be considered 'best practice' with respect to empowerment outcomes.

Our analysis of the workers' testimonies was largely an inductive process, through which we identified three areas as being crucial for women's empowerment through standard mechanisms: the gender composition of the committee; project selection and the processes surrounding this; and training and education. These areas of concern are analysed in turn with respect to each of the two standards mechanisms.

## Fairtrade in Kenya

An important part of Fairtrade is Fairtrade International's hired labour model. FLO has two standards for Fairtrade, one focused on small producers and, our concern here, one for 'conditions of hired labour' pertaining to plantations or large-scale commercial agriculture. There are 168,000 workers involved in Fairtrade, predominantly in Africa and Asia. Fairtrade is the dominant model for some crops, such as flowers, and is important in tea. In 2012, 100 per cent of flowers and plants were under the hired labour model and workers accounted for 60 per cent of the combined workers and small producers involved in Fairtrade tea (FLO, 2012).

In Kenya, the Fairtrade standard has become increasingly important in the cut-flower sector. While some Kenyan flower farms were certified to Fairtrade standards before 2005, more farms were certified when the UK's Fairtrade Foundation began to issue licences for retailers to sell Fairtrade certified roses. Fairtrade flowers were first sold in the UK in March 2004 but Fairtrade certified flowers had been available in Switzerland through Max Havelaar since around 2000. By 2008, there were 20 FLO certified companies (18 producers and two traders) in Kenya. While Fairtrade was regarded as the benchmark standard for the sector by our interviewees, there are several standards in Kenyan floriculture, with growers certified according to membership of particular bodies (e.g. the Kenya Flower Council) or

their target markets (e.g. German buyers may require the Flower Label Program or the Dutch auctions require Milieu Programma Sierteelt, MPS) (Riisgaard, 2009, 2011; Tallontire et al., 2005).

In the tea sector, Fairtrade certification has been sought after by certain brands and, particularly in the UK, retailers. However, growers are starting to engage with Rainforest Alliance certification, which is becoming a more widespread requirement as a result of commitments by major buyers such as Unilever (Ochieng et al., 2013). Many tea companies also follow the Ethical Tea Partnership's code of labour practice.

While standards proliferate throughout export agriculture, there is relatively limited understanding of the mechanisms by which impacts emerge (Nelson and Martin, 2012). It is clear, moreover, that impact is profoundly affected by context (Nelson and Pound, 2009; Center for Evaluation, 2012). Standards may be enacted in different ways and, in practice, they are embedded with local context which may affect their implementation practices, often leading to unintended outcomes (Loconto, 2010; Ouma, 2010; Fisher et al., 2013).

### **Comparison of practices in the Joint Body and Gender Committee**

We discuss the practices of the JB and the GC on the farms studied in this section. Of course, these are not the only organizational structures on the farms concerned with worker affairs. Out of the 100,000 workers employed in the flower sector, an estimated 60 per cent are members of the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (KPAWU) (KHRC, 2012). NGOs have argued that the trade unions (TUs) are not doing their job in representing workers, especially female workers, and highlight a gulf between the high politics of the general secretary's office and under-resourced regional organizers (KHRC, 2012).

Other organizational structures such as welfare committees or even (at least for women) the TU were not seen by workers as spaces where they could exert their voice. For example, the welfare committees established by farm management with the remit of dealing with worker disputes were said to be 'on the side of the company. They get paid KSh200 [US\$2.33] extra and the chair gets paid KSh500 [\$5.82] extra, so they don't want to lose this. When a problem goes to them, they decide in favour of the company not the worker' (GC member and Supervisor, August 2009, farm B).

In a context where mixed gender groups such as TUs and welfare committees continue to be dominated by men, it is crucial from an empowerment perspective that women have a neutral space over which they have ownership, independent of men and the management. As shall be demonstrated below, the GCs provide such a space, and the JBs also have potential for worker voice to be heard but, as we show, there are some challenges in practice, especially for women workers.

### ***Gender composition of the two committees***

The Fairtrade hired labour standards indicate that the Joint Body comprises elected workers, and must be legally independent from the company, but there must also be representatives of the company on it, in addition to democratically elected worker

representatives. This democratic aspect is crucial to the second objective of the JB: its link to empowerment, through the capacity building impacts of decision-making and project planning.

Fairtrade's strong ethos of gender equality means that the rules regarding the Joint Body highlight the need for equal representation of men and women on the JB (FLO, 2007a). However, it has proved tricky to ensure sufficient female participation on the JB, as women have been reluctant to stand for election due to cultural norms.

Workers cite a lack of information and education as the problem; managers on farms and several key informants concur. However, a solution remains elusive. One option farms have pursued is to try to 'assist' committees to become more gender balanced. JB election processes have evolved so that, increasingly, workers are trained on the purpose of the JB, and in the words of an FLO official, how such representatives differ from TU officials. In some cases, seats on the committee may be reserved for women, but this is a very tricky balance to maintain: 'If you leave it too laissez faire – you can end up with it all men. But you cannot impose it ... If you impose, it will come out that there were "not elections but selections". If you let it go, during the inspection they [FLO] will say that there is not enough women', a consultant supporting producers told us (interview 9 September 2008). Women's ability to perceive themselves as agents of change was limited; regardless of whether they propose ideas for projects that would benefit them during the consultation phase, the projects selected were not those they suggested, nor do they have any idea of how these decisions were reached. Women committee members as well as general workers frequently stated that projects were chosen by the men on the committee and they had not been able to influence the decision-making process.

At the time of the study, the GCs at Companies A and B were composed exclusively of women. The strength of the committee lay in the level of support they received from management as well as their clear mandate upon creation – to tackle sexual harassment. While a recent study (KHRC, 2012) found that some cases persist, interviews in both studies A and B found no instances of sexual harassment, a finding that workers attributed to the GC. GCs have been arguably the most important tool in the fight against sexual harassment of women workers on farms in Study A, both as a vehicle for disseminating education and training, as well as through sensitization of workers.

As sexual harassment was a crucial issue for companies, considerable power was put into the hands of the committee and any worker found guilty was summarily dismissed. By the time the issue had been dealt with, the power of '*wamama gender*' (the Gender Mamas) had been cemented in the eyes of both male and female workers. 'The gender committee has been given responsibility, they are very highly respected here' said one woman worker. Interestingly, no additional prestige was accorded to GC chairs over members in the eyes of other workers; all were *wamama gender*.

Women workers had confidence in the GC as a forum where women could defend the rights of fellow women workers without being under the control of men: 'The gender committee is important because if a male worker does something to a female worker like sexual harassment, he is reported to the gender committee and the male

worker will be answerable for his actions' (FGD, Company A). As neutral spaces which women have ownership of independent of men and the management, the GCs were able to effect far-reaching changes on a variety of issues that have evolved along with women's changing needs (e.g. developing from a body specifically tasked with dealing with sexual harassment issues, to organizing demonstrations at the community level, and establishing rotating savings and credit associations). While we would not argue for the JB to become an exclusively female domain, indeed in 2011 female GC members on some sites requested they be allowed to choose sympathetic males to join the committees in order to be able to better tackle *gender* issues, it is important for women's voices to be guaranteed within the JB so women do not continue to be the largely silent and marginalized members they were found to be.

### ***Decision-making in the Joint Body and Gender Committee***

Despite the great potential that Fairtrade has for contributing to women's empowerment, women workers in Study A who spoke of Fairtrade, all talked of how they had *previously* had high hopes that the premium money would change their lives. Much of the discussion of Fairtrade in the focus group discussions centred on the investments made through the premium fund. The JB and the premium projects (at least in theory) present opportunities for workers to build up their skills (e.g. short courses for workers to improve their skills, such as tailoring, IT, driving, carpentry) and to develop social infrastructure (a housing project; community water; construction of schools; a bus for hire), as well as to deal with more immediate welfare needs. There were a number of examples where premium funds had funded childcare facilities, which would meet the practical gender needs of women. At Company A, female workers told us 'there is a Fairtrade project [a day-care centre] here where children are provided with food, [disposable nappies] and clothes; all of which have been paid for by Fairtrade'.

However, the projects mentioned above were seen in only 4 of the 13 farms investigated in the two studies. Stories abound in Naivasha about how premium money has been spent on galvanized tin roofing sheets, Fairtrade branded baseball caps and T-Shirts, TV sets and aerials, and other similarly individualistic projects that fail to meet many of the ideals set out in the standard (FLO, 2007a). The majority of workers in Study A were under the impression, at least initially, that the premium would be distributed to workers as a form of a bonus. The result of people not understanding the purpose of the premium manifested itself in the sorts of projects that were then proposed.

Women workers often viewed the projects as being more beneficial for men than women. The skewed gender balance for beneficiaries of the skills training courses was corroborated by a consultant supporting producers who said that 'At [one flower farm] they asked for driving classes; there are 62 men and 4 women having lessons. This year we will talk to the women; some of them want to do hairdressing and tailoring', (interview 9 September 2008). When talking of these projects, one woman stated, 'We women feel like we have been left behind'. The gender bias

in project selection can be linked, firstly, to a lack of transparency in how the JB operates on these farms and, secondly, to the dominance of men within these committees that means that women, who are constrained by cultural norms, bow to the wishes of male committee members. It was often the case on Company A's flower farm that projects of benefit to women were outvoted by the male majority. For example, a crèche using the premium funds was repeatedly vetoed by male committee members who felt that the project would benefit women not men. It was only when this project was rephrased as being a project for children and not their mothers, and using arguments surrounding child nutrition and care, that the project was finally approved.

Turning to the example of the GC, there the agenda is set by the women workers themselves and the projects that have been pursued have changed according to women's changing needs. While initially dealing just with issues of sexual harassment, Study A found numerous examples of where, to deal with the problem of low wages, the GCs had established rotating savings and credit associations (RoSCAs) to help workers save money and get interest-free loans from each other to pay for large expenses such as school fees or to buy food items such as maize in bulk. In two notable examples, one GC had set up a beekeeping project and a cooperatively run crèche, while another had set up a hotel that employed the children of workers who had finished school but were unable to find work.

What these examples show is that when women were given voice and power to influence the agenda, the kinds of projects that resulted were ones that were of benefit to the community as a whole. While this may not apply in all cases, it was found to be so in the case of workers in these Fairtrade certified tea and flower plantations in Kenya, highlighting the importance of ensuring a space for women within the JB.

### **Training and education**

Training and education are crucial for empowerment as they help to build the capacities of women to act both in their own best interests and in those of their fellow women. Other than the purchasing of things (from T-shirts to crèches), the Fairtrade premium has also been used to fund various courses for workers at certified farms. These have included IT training, establishing a kitchen garden, nutrition, and driving lessons. For these women courses were significant: 'You know this job is not forever,' said one woman, 'they can come to you one day and say you are fired. But if we have received these courses, like hairdressing, I know that I can sit down and braid someone's hair and that will give me the 20 shillings I need to buy milk for my child'.

Where there are low levels of educational attainment, training plays a crucial role in fostering empowerment. Training can help workers gain greater levels of self-confidence and knowledge about their rights and health issues, as well as practical skills, all of which are crucial in facilitating empowerment. At the workplace, '*Gender wame neutralize wanaume* [the gender committee has neutralized the men]'

said one worker. 'It helps defeat traditions and cultures. We too have the right to work here. The women have been *taught*, we have that freedom'.

A training manual highlights: 'Capacity building, one of the requirements repeatedly found in the Fairtrade standards, is all and above about empowerment' (FLO, 2007b: 10).

Training funded by the Fairtrade premium is not just limited to courses, but also member training on the purpose of the premium as well as numeracy and literacy explicitly geared towards improving their ability to carry out their roles. However, at the time of this study, many members had not yet received this training, with one stating: 'Maybe once we go for this training, is when we will be able to come back to the farm with new ideas and teach the others that projects do not just have to be sleeping materials'.

Furthermore, only a few workers at a time are able to benefit from training offered through JB premium expenditure and due to the nature of the project selection, these are often men. When we look at the capacity building offered to the JB members themselves, there are no mechanisms in place for this training to be disseminated among the broader workforce and the benefits remain with the few.

In contrast, training delivered via the GCs have two main differences. The first is that the training offered to members is not just explicitly that which will help them to fulfil their roles as JB members, but also gives them a wider variety of skills that can help them both in the workplace and at home. Secondly, the GCs also act as a peer education tool, with management using committee members to disseminate training and information to the workforce at large. At meetings, GC members are taught by the company or by NGOs about a wide variety of issues including problem solving, conflict resolution, starting a business, budgeting, and health. After the meetings, they talk to their co-workers in their places of work (e.g. gender committee members from the greenhouses talk to greenhouse workers, etc.) and teach them what they have learned, thereby sharing knowledge with each other. While no time has been set aside for GC members to act as peer educators, they carry out these duties alongside their paid ones. Despite this, they were found to have been very effective in disseminating the education given to them, with women workers citing many examples (e.g. many women workers in flowers farms in Naivasha referred to training they had been given on how to start their own business).

There are, however, limitations within the GC model in terms of training. As the information dissemination occurs on a very informal, *laissez-faire* basis, the greater the proximity of women to each other and the lower the ratio of GC members to workers, the faster the transfusion of ideas between workers, and the easier the job becomes. This was especially evident within the tea plantations where one woman could represent hundreds of employees who worked over a large area, rarely in close proximity with each other. There, knowledge of the responsibilities and roles of the GC was low, penetration of the training was limited, and a handful of interviewees did not even know about the GC, showing the importance of adequate representation.

Training provided to GC members also contributes to empowerment by exposing them to new ideas and possibilities with respect to action that they can then use

to improve both their own lives and those of their fellow workers. In contrast, the responsibilities of the JB members did not include passing their training on to the non-members and, as a result, the JBs were seen as being more closed by non-members.

The training given to the GC members, specifically targeted at issues that women face both in the workplace at home, has contributed significantly to women's power. Workplace training given to them has raised awareness about issues (such as HIV/Aids or sexual harassment) which impact worker health and well-being, while 'gender' targeted education has provided women with tools to overcome barriers caused by societal norms (e.g. training on how to start a business or be a good leader that is provided to GC members). As a result, the GC has managed to effect broader changes in gendered dynamics between male and female workers than the JB.

The peer educator model used by the GCs (whereby the benefits of training trickle down to non-members), as well as the nature of the training offered to members (that is both practical and gender aware) could also be applied within the context of JBs and would help them to empower a greater proportion of workers than the few who directly benefit from the training or items purchased with the premium funds.

## Synthesis

FLO has recognized that Fairtrade standards mechanisms for hired labour need to interact more positively with social protection measures, including labour legislation, within the supplier countries. Greater dialogue with trade unions to avoid undermining collective bargaining is highlighted as part of the new strategy for hired labour, agreed in early 2012, as well as more flexibility in the use of the premium to reflect local conditions, e.g. to support living wages (FLO, 2012: 26). However, our analysis suggests that there is a need for Fairtrade to acknowledge the local context, including gender relations, and learn from good practice at the local level.

First, there is a need to enhance representation of women. The limited voice accorded to women workers in the JB hampers its efficacy in providing projects that are equally beneficial for men and women. Given the patriarchal nature of Kenyan society, it is important to acknowledge the gender dynamics within the JB and to take measures to build capacities of women workers so that they too can participate fully in the JB. Training should be given to all workers, once elected, to help challenge the prevailing negative view of women in leadership positions. Second, there is a need to ensure that training covers a wider range of topics and is more gender-aware and widespread. The training offered to JB members and general workers through short courses only benefits a small proportion of the workforce. More diverse training should be given to JB members that better equips them to deal with issues both inside and outside the workplace. Further, measures should be put in place to equip JB members to act as peer educators and disseminate their learning more widely so that the benefits do not accrue only to the few, though there may be challenges here given the limited literacy of some workers.

The third key area for action is wider dissemination of principles of Fairtrade and the original intentions for the premium. While we note that FLO recognizes the need for greater flexibility in premium expenditure, and also that the lack of a living wage means that proposed projects often focus on immediate needs, nevertheless, there was considerable evidence that workers did not understand the purposes of Fairtrade. This contributed to workers proposing short-term, individualistic projects. Representatives of FLO say that they have provided training to workers, but we argue that there is a need to re-evaluate the methods used in order to widen the impact of this training.

Membership of the JB could be a very empowering process for workers. Aside from the member training, JBs can contribute to enhanced women's power through increasing their ability to perceive themselves as agents of change, as well as by increasing members' self-confidence and making them strong role models for their fellow workers. The training and experience accrued by GC members (e.g. providing advice and counselling or mediation between injured parties) are useful both in the workplace and in their households and communities, where they are better able to deal with and resolve conflicts. Through these processes, membership of groups such as the GC and JB can be seen to contribute to women's empowerment.

Our analysis shows that the practice of standards differs from the plans and expectations of standards developers and that it is important to recognize that 'the process of interpreting requirements and adapting them to local conditions is far from straightforward, and this may well have consequences in terms of time and resources invested' (Aasprong et al., 2013: 94). The outcomes of standards are influenced by 'horizontal governance' processes, such as means of monitoring or promoting compliance, as much as the designs of the standard setters (Tallontire et al., 2011). In the cases examined here, some of the choices by the JB were reinforcing gender divisions and offered limited opportunities to build up collective action by workers.

## Conclusion

There is potential for standards mechanisms to inform each other; a form of positive 'entanglement' (Aasprong et al., 2013) between standards that draws on local best practice. Our analysis has unpacked how two standards mechanisms empower women workers and through this has highlighted some ways in which the JB can learn from the empowering processes identified in the GC.

An irony of our study is that a mechanism developed to assist social auditing and that was initiated in a top-down manner by company management has demonstrated greater empowerment pathways than a standards mechanism that is explicitly designed to empower workers, especially if gender is considered.

Given the embedded gender inequalities in Kenyan society, it is important that Fairtrade recognizes this and develops means to counteract it in standards mechanisms such as the JB. Our analysis suggests it is important for Fairtrade practices to recognize and engage with local norms and practices, particularly

unequal gender relations, so that the benefits of Fairtrade can be enhanced, and to limit the potential for these benefits to be undermined.

The main implication of this analysis for standards bodies, in terms of enhancing the empowering effects of standards mechanisms, is that they need to ensure that all relevant workers are able to shape, benefit from, and participate in the JBs, actively building up the capacity of workers to engage so that they can be part of a process of self-empowerment. Training of committee members so that they are better able to represent all constituencies of workers is central to this.

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