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**Female Employment in Agriculture: Global challenges and
global responses**

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1. Introduction

What are the effects of globalization 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. The rise of supermarket retailing is contributing to the transformation of agriculture. Initially concentrated in developed countries, supermarkets are now growing rapidly within 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 women's empowerment. However, these benefits are not always easily realized. Women workers still face high levels of embedded discrimination and inequality, they are more likely to be found in casual and temporary work, and 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. Government has an important role to play in protecting workers through labour regulation and implementation of Conventions agreed under the International Labour Organisation (ILO). But government is often constrained where global supermarkets dominate production and employment practices. Civil society organizations 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, ethical and fair trade. Enhancing synergy between regulatory and voluntary approaches can help to secure decent work for women employed in global agriculture.

2. Women's Employment in Global Agriculture¹

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 growing domestic consumption. Two factors have played an important role in the expansion of high value agriculture in global production. Firstly technological innovation has allowed the operation of cool chain and transportation that facilitate the production

¹ This section draws primarily on the following more detailed studies: Barrientos, Dolan and Tallontire (2003); Dolan and Sorby (2003); Smith, Auret, Barrientos, Kleinboi, Njobvu, Opondo and Tallontire (2004).

exports of more perishable goods. Trade liberalisation has stimulated developing countries to expand into high value agricultural exports. Countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Zambia, Uganda and India now produce high value agricultural goods as a growing source of agricultural export earnings (Jaffee 1993¹). By 2000 high value agricultural exports were estimated to account for approximately two-thirds of total agricultural trade (Dolan and Sorby 2003).

A second factor has been the growth of supermarkets as dominant buyers of high value agricultural products, sourcing globally, regionally and locally. Supermarket food chains operate differently to traditional markets. Supermarket buyers exert high levels of control within their value chains in order to meet consumer demands and maximise their market share. They aim to provide the same produce year round, irrelevant of local seasons. They operate through global networks of preferred suppliers, using pre-programmed or computer controlled orders that are directly channeled through to their centralized distribution systems. They set stringent specifications and standards for their suppliers that include product specification, food hygiene, and increasingly social and environmental standards (Dolan and Humphrey 2004). In the UK, supermarkets control 80 per cent of all food retailed. A similar trend is also taking place in parts of Asia and Africa. In South Africa supermarkets now account for 50 to 60 per cent of all food retailed, and are rapidly expanding outlets in other African countries.² In Kenya supermarkets have grown rapidly to capture over 20 per cent of urban food retailing (Neven and Reardon 2004).

Women have historically worked in agriculture as unpaid family labour (Boesrup 1970). Female labour has less often been found in certain traditional agricultural crops (e.g. livestock, grains), but been prevalent in crops such as tea and coffee, often on estates or through family labour in small-holder production. HVA production has, however, stimulated a high level of female employment across developed and developing countries. Table 1 provides a summary for selected HVA producing countries.³ The source and composition of female employment vary by country and product. In South African fruit, for example, women are concentrated in temporary and seasonal employment, with their employment traditionally tied to that of male partners or relatives (Barrientos and Kritzing 2003).⁴ In Kenyan flowers they are more often found in regular employment, and in Kenya are usually migrant labour.

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 agricultural. They provide 37% of all temporary labour, 32.5% of which is migrant labour from non-EU countries (Francis et. al. 2005). Early studies in South Africa and the UK indicate that the gender composition of contract gangs is more likely to be male (65% 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

² For example the South African supermarket Shoprite has 119 outlets in 16 African countries (Angola, Ghana, Egypt, Mauritius, Madagascar, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and Malawi 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. This has also been increasing casualisation of agricultural labour (male and female).

mobile than local seasonal labour which is usually female. But this could change with the expansion of female migration.

Table 1 Comparison by Country of Selected High Value Agricultural Production

Country	Main market	Estimated level of employment	Gender composition	Type of employment
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	75% temporary
UK agriculture	UK	99,460 recruited direct, 224,713 via temporary labour providers (TLPs) and SAWs students.	TLPs: 35% female 65% male	Majority temporary (31% recruited direct, 37% via TLPs, 32% SAWs students)
Zambia Vegetables & Flowers	EU	8,000	65% female (veg only)	60-75% temporary (veg only)

Sources: Dolan and Sorby 2003; Smith et. al. 2004; Francis et. al. 2005.

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 rarely have assured supply contracts. Flexible employment allows producers to vary their employment levels on a rapid basis, whilst 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 NGOs and trade unions argue that the purchasing practices of large supermarkets plays 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).

3. Opportunities and Challenges for Women⁵

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 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 for women in particular. Women packhouse 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. They 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 hours overtime, 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 they should be re-employed. These workers are thus in a highly vulnerable position.⁶

In agriculture, an issue that would appear to affect many workers is health and safety. This in particular 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 green houses,

⁵ This section draws primarily on the following studies: Barrientos and Barrientos 2002; Dolan and Sorby 2003; Barrientos and Kritzing 2003; 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).

where exposure tends to be high, and employment often female. Evidence suggests that health and safety procedures in relation to the handling of pesticides and chemicals are often lax or violated. Effects of chemical exposure can include skin irritation, respiratory problems, nausea and dizziness. The longer term effects can be 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 socialization. It also provides access to government and community support programmes, which might otherwise be inaccessible. Therefore even where there are negative work attributes, there are also many positives, and women may still prefer this work to the alternatives.

4. Global Responses

A key policy challenge is how to enhance decent work for women working in high value agriculture. 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’. It provides a framework for the analysis of employment in global production combining four dimensions: employment, rights, protection and voice (ILO 2000). In principle, all member states in the ILO are meant to implement its Core Conventions, including the principle of no discrimination. In reality, even where legislation itself is good, enforcement can be weak. Especially in the context of high value agricultural production, 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.

Civil society organizations have put increasing pressure on supermarkets for poor employment conditions in their global supply chains. This has resulted in a number of supermarkets introducing codes of labour practice which 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 amongst its members.⁷ Initially the ETI focused on conditions in developing countries. But in 2002 the ETI 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. It now has exemplary labour legislation, including The Employment Equity Act, and Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) which also covers labour brokers. However enforcement remains a problem

⁷ ETI company members include Tesco’s, Asda, Sainsbury’s, Cooperative and Marks and Spencers. Morrisons is the largest supermarket that is not a member. See www.ethicaltrade.org.

(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. The inclusion of civil society organizations has played an important role in ensuring 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 high value agriculture. 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 seek 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 bi-lateral and multi-lateral 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 to women workers of participating in this high earning sector.

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 realize this potential.

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