

Workshop on Gender in Global and Regional Trade Policy: Contrasting Views and
New Research
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Women in the Cut Flower Export Trade in Colombia¹
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Paper for Session 1: **Defining the Issues**

Introduction

The trade in cut flowers has been steadily growing during the past ten to 15 years due to the increase in demand by the USA, Europe and Japan, where cut flowers are not a semi-luxurious gift anymore but a commodity that is almost routinely bought for self consumption and also to the fact that production has been gradually moved from the North to the South. Here, it has also been promoted as an important path to the development of certain Southern countries. The world's largest flower-growing nations of cut flowers are the Netherlands, Colombia, Kenya and Israel, all of which are large exporters to the UK. However, as with many other export-oriented products around the world, cut flower production has had social and economic impacts, positive and negative, on the countries where they are produced. My presentation in this workshop centres on the impact of cut flower production and trade in Colombia on the life and work of women workers, and their organised responses. It also examines the possibilities of strategies such as the cut flower campaign to support women workers in their struggle to the right to a dignified life and working conditions.

Characteristics of Colombia's Cut Flower Sector

Cut flower production in Colombia has been promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, with the state providing low interest credit and tax and tariff

¹ This presentation is based on my PhD Thesis and Wright, Caroline and Madrid, Gilma (forthcoming) *Contesting Fair Trade In Colombia's Cut-Flower Industry: A Case Of Cultural And Economic Injustice*.

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advantages. The majority of production is located around the capital Bogotá, benefiting from an international airport for export, a good climate and an abundance of 'cheap' female labour. In 2005 Colombia exported US \$ 899,9 million, 80% of these to the USA, followed by the UK buying US\$37 million's worth of flowers.ⁱ

According to FIAN, a German NGO, floriculture doesn't pay tax as other industrial sectors, because it is considered to be an agricultural product. The importation of inputs is also free of tax (especially of agro-chemicals) and it enjoys preferential import tariffs into the USA and the EU. There are approx. 500 companies producing on 4 900 hectares more than 50 flower variety, however, carnations and roses predominate. Plantations were originally family-owned but the 1990s saw both increased concentration and the arrival of US multinational Dole (Mellon, 2004:2) who owns 25% of the producing companies.

Commercialisation

The distribution of cut flowers is done through importing companies in the USA, who then distribute them throughout the country to supermarkets, florists and petrol stations. In Europe, the distribution used to be done mainly through the Auctions in the Netherlands but since the arrival of the supermarkets in the cut flower business, the chain has changed. Supermarket cut flower sales are increasing at over 30% per year with an even greater potential for growth. Tesco reports increases in sales of 140% over the period 1996-1999. The supermarkets have increased their sales through the strategy of cutting out intermediaries, allowing them to have direct contact with the cut flower producer companies in the South. This direct contact is of strategic importance for the campaigns, as the supermarkets hold the key to exert pressure over their cut flower supply chain.

Tesco, Sainsburys and Marks & Spencers, tend to buy their cut flowers mainly from Kenya, Zambia and Colombia. The two main reasons for their success is firstly, their big purchasing power that allows them to buy flowers directly from growers, therefore, developing the second competitive aspect which is the commercialisation of flowers in ready made mixed bouquets, some of them already assembled in the South. The supermarkets have been expanding the total sales of cut flowers by encouraging customers to buy flowers for their own use.

Consumers in Britain spend over £1.5bn (85% from abroad) a year on cut flowers, however, every person spends, on average, £28 on cut flowers a year which is far

below the European average. Four out of every 10 flowers sold in the UK are carnations but there are also the chrysanthemum, rose, "mixed seasonal bunch", lily, freesia, tulip, daffodil, iris and alstroemeria.

Stages in cut flower cultivation

The length of time to produce a rose depends on the variety. There are varieties that take 65 days and others that take 80, the cycles are closely programmed during the year to match specific dates such as Valentine's Day and Mother's day. There are about fifty tasks involved in planting a rose plant, grooming it to the stage of pruning, cutting the flower and then completing all the post-harvesting processes such as classifying, packing, and sometimes labelling. The cycle of cut flower production relies heavily on manual labour. Most of these tasks cannot be mechanised and require high levels of dexterity, concentration and decision making. Working hours in a *cultivo* could extend from 6-7 a.m. until 3-3:30 p.m. and during peak season in the packing room they could go around the clock for months.

The tasks done by men include rose bed preparation, spraying of pesticides and irrigation. The rest of the tasks are mainly done by women and include: planting, disbudding the side buds of the plant, knitting to make the baskets that guide the direction that the flower plant grows, weeding, cutting the flowers, cultivation, mulching, pruning and the placing of rubber bands around the buds to keep them from opening overnight and then in the morning to remove the rubber bands, among others.

An example of a daily routine of women workers follows:

We, the ones who are with the *contratista*, they ask more productivity from us. We have to be very efficient, we need to cut 400 per hour in carnations and we have to disbud three beds a day, because my beds are producing a lot then I have to disbud but they also take us to go and plant the new plants and at the same time they tell us that we can't have that as an excuse for not having the beds ready. That we have to plant but also we have to look after the beds we already have, and then I think how am I going to be there planting and at the same time to be with the beds, disbudding? (Violeta)

Labour issues

In Colombia, the industry is labour-intensive, employing 80-90000 people directly and 50-80000 indirectly, mainly in packaging and transportation. Some 65% of workers are female, both migrants and local women. Migration in Colombia is both voluntary, in response to the paucity of agricultural livelihoods and increasing landlessness, and involuntary, following displacement by political violence.

Intensive chemical use without adequate training or protective clothing poses a substantial risk to workers' health. Two-thirds of workers have reported work-related health problems, ranging from headaches, nausea and conjunctivitis to miscarriages, congenital malformations and neurological problems. Work intensification at peak periods may involve involuntary overtime and constant bending strains workers' spine and joints. There is a preponderance of short fixed-term contracts, in spite that many employees work continuously in the same plantation for years and women workers are routinely dismissed when pregnant. Among the systems used by the companies is subcontracting labour through individuals or companies. The *contratistas* hire the women workers to work for days, earning only their wages and in some cases without health insurance or benefits. In this way the company could argue that they do not have any direct link with the worker and therefore no direct responsibilities and obligations for her

Cut-flower workers generally receive the national minimum wage of around \$ 408000 Or US\$150 but this meets only 45% of a family's basic needs, contributing to cover the costs of food and housing. The rest of the costs tend to be covered by loans and extra-income. Moreover, the 'surplus value' is substantial: the flowers picked by one woman in a day retail for US\$600-800 whereas her minimum wage was of around US\$2 in 2002. In 2002, under the rationale of lowering labour costs and creating jobs, the labour laws in Colombia were reformed to increase the official working day and reduce the premium for work on Sundays and public holidays, leaving women workers an average of US\$21-25 worse off per month.

Flower workers organising to improve wages and working conditions face huge obstacles; Colombia has been described as 'the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade union activist' with almost 4,000 trade unionists murdered since 1986. Repression in the 1980s saw the demise of most independent trade unions representing flower workers, although NGOs including *Corporación Cactus* have continued to document conditions and support workers where possible. In 2001 an independent national trade union of flower workers was formed, UNTRAFLORES, but dismissal of or discrimination against union members followed.

This is how Rosa, one of the cut flower workers interviewed, described her experiences:

At least me, if I want to go and work in another company I can't because I'm marked as a unionist and they won't hire me... It is similar to what happens when you are accused of stealing and are pigeonholed as a thief, as a delinquent and they say 'this one no, she is a revolutionary' and they don't even say that anymore, they say 'this one is a *guerrillera*'... this is what happens when we work with the unions you are branded as a *guerrillera* in all the companies.

The Cut flower campaign and the International Code of Conduct (ICC)

The European cut-flower campaign, a Swiss-Colombian initiative, was inaugurated in 1990. Its main tool, the ICC, is a multi-stakeholder code based on International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, environmental standards and universal human rights (see Annex 1).

The cut-flower campaign did not seek a consumer boycott, since this would risk jobs, but mobilized consumers to a) pressurise producers and retailers to commit to the ICC and b) buy 'fair' flowers where available (a so-called buycott). Human rights organisations, church groups, development NGOs, environmental groups and the media have joined in.

Response from the cut flower companies

The Colombian Cut Flower Growers Association (*Asocolflores*) members and staff took up selectively aspects of the demands of the campaigns/ICC and the result is the *Florverde* initiative that focuses on environmental problems with a small social sub-programme.

A comparison between the Florverde code and the ICC shows that the principles of the Florverde code provide for less comprehensive labour standards than the ICC (see Annex 2, Table 1). I will give you a couple of examples: the most significant difference is that the *Florverde* code makes no mention of freedom of association and collective bargaining, central to the ICC and considered by the ILO to be 'fundamental to the rights of human beings at work' and 'a precondition for... the improvement of individual

and collection conditions of work. In this respect *Florverde* offers less than the Colombian Constitution: Articles 55 and 56 provide the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike (Government of Colombia, 1991).

Equality of treatment is confined to the non-discriminatory selection of employees and the only stipulation about wages is that they be paid promptly. For working hours, *Florverde* falls back on national employment law, typical of corporate codes but often insufficient to protect workers.

There is also a gulf between the two codes regarding monitoring and verification procedures. It is now widely accepted that codes of conduct require independent scrutiny of their implementation; the ICC requires implementation and verification through 'an independent body, accepted by all parties involved (for example trade, unions, NGOs, employers)' with 'provisions for workers, trade unions and other concerned groups to lodge complaints about violations of the Code, which if serious, have to be followed-up' (Brassel and Rangel, 2001: 65).

Conclusions

Cut flower production and trade in Colombia is of crucial importance in terms of revenues and employment. However, the type of employment offered and the working conditions have not allowed fully for its benefit to trickle down to the workers. Even though there are some benefits in terms of gaining in status and certain economic independence for women workers derived from formal employment, the trade off of flower work tends to be very expensive for them in terms of damage to their health, physical exhaustion, lack of autonomy, political harassment, and job instability, among others factors mentioned before. Women workers have organised themselves to obtain better wages and working conditions, and there are some gains derived from their struggle but in Colombia it is presently a difficult time for political action such as organising and unionising. As pointed out by my informants in my field-work, cut flower work is a work like any other work in which conditions can be improved to get rid of the dangers and instability that right now characterise the sector. There is economic room for improvement as shown by the fact that the product of a US \$2 daily wage paid to a women worker gets sold to the Northern consumers between US\$600-800. In this context we might expect that the ethical consumerist movement would play a central role in strengthening the scattered manifestations of resistance.

However, the home-grown initiative of the Colombian growers, the *Florverde* programme might have been enough to satisfy the expectations of the retailers and the importers in the UK, and to counteract the effect of the campaigns at a PR level, but its origins and its premises make it clear that it can never deliver the changes that the workers and the campaigners are aiming at. But the same market that has brought the commodity closer to the public, has also brought the public closer to the commodity. And the consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the social and environmental issues surrounding cut flower production in Colombia.

Although the strategy of ethical trade is to target the main cut flower retailers, such as supermarkets, the consequences of such campaigns could be a boycott of Colombian cut flowers. The campaigners need to be wary of an ethical consumption movement that results in the boycott of Colombian flowers as 'bad' flowers, as the workers risk losing their jobs altogether. The challenge is to develop a campaign that puts pressure on entrepreneurs to invest in 'clean' flowers, whose positive meanings at the point of consumption coincide with positive meanings at the point of production

ⁱ The proportion of exports to Europe has declined since the early 1990s, probably due to the campaigns and competition from Kenya.