

REPORT ON WORKING CONDITIONS OF FEMALE BANANA WORKERS IN
THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON: BY FAWU GENDER OFFICER
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The Republic of Cameroon is situated in the Central African region and the countries that make up the central African region are:

- 1) Republic of Cameroon
- 2) Republic of Tchad
- 3) The Central African Republic
- 4) Republic of Congo Brazzaville
- 5) Republic of Gabon and
- 6) Republic of Equatorial Guinea

The Republic of Cameroon is boarded in the North by the Republic of Tchad in the South by the Republic of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, in the East by the Central African Republic, in the south East by the Republic of Congo Brazzaville and in the West by the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Cameroon has a total land area of 475.000 square kilometers or 47.5 million hectares of which almost half is forest while 33% is under cultivation. The area under cultivation represents:-

- a) 20% for permanent cash crop cultivation which includes Banana Plantations
- b) 13% for food crop cultivation.

The population as determined by a recent population census puts the figure at 20 million inhabitants of which 52% are women. The population density in relation to the total land area is estimated at 100 persons per square kilometer and made up of 200 tribes that speak more that 80 different dialects with no national language as the lingua-franca. The inhabitants practice four forms of religious worship based on the following percentages:-

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| 1) | Atheists | = | 10% of the population |
| 2) | Christianity | = | 36% of the population |
| 3) | Traditional Religion | = | 14% of the population and |
| 4) | Moslem Religion | = | 40% of the population. |

The Republic of Cameroon has been under three different colonial influences starting with German colonization in 1884 to 1914 and from 1916 under French and English administration as a United Nation's Trust Territory. During the German occupation their colonial policy was the establishment of extensive plantations and thus Cameroon's export crops remain to be:-

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|----|--------|----|--------|
| 1) | Coffee | 2) | Cocoa |
| 3) | Banana | 4) | Cotton |

- 5) Rubber
- 7) Timber

- 6) Bauxite

BANANA PLANTATIONS: Banana growers in the Republic of Cameroon have an Association known as ASSO-BACAM presently Headed by the General Manager of CDC which is an Agro-Industrial State Corporation that has Banana plantations in the English speaking sector of the Republic of Cameroon. This report dwells on the female Banana workers working conditions as found in the CDC plantation known as “BANANA EXPANSION PROJECT” (BEP) and the CDC/Delmonte joint venture known as CDC/Delmonte Tiko Banana Project. The Banana Expansion Project was started in 2008 and is managed solely by CDC while the CDC/Delmonte Tiko Banana Project is a Joint Venture with CDC providing Land, labour and management, while Delmonte Fresh Produce Cameroon SARL provides finance, banana growing techniques and markets the fruit which they buy at (FOB) prices. The CDC/Delmonte Tiko Banana Project started operations in 1987 and as at December 2011, it has 200.565 hectares with a Labour force of 4557 workers of which 918 are females and 3.369 are males. Its operations are based on 1.2 labour per hectare. The purely CDC Banana Expansion Project has 1750 hectares under cultivation with a labor force of 1587 workers out of which 375 are female and 1212 are males. The percentage of female workers in the CDC Banana Expansion is 24%.

Work in Banana plantations consist of the following operations:-

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|----------------|----------------------------|
| 1) Deleafing | 5) Harvesting |
| 2) Deflowering | 6) Chemical Application |
| 3) Probing | 7) Irrigation |
| 4) Bagging | 8) Packing and Engineering |

Sixty percent (60%) of the banana plantation labour force are aged between 30 – 34 years while the Tiko Banana Project records a high degree of absenteeism by male workers, that leads to abscondment and replacement, this is not the case with female banana workers who are more focused and enduring being mostly single parents.

WORKING CONDITIONS OF FEMALE WORKERS: It is observed that women’s employment in banana plantations is restricted and this is based on the nature of work. This is confirmed by the fact that in the CDC/Delmonte Tiko Banana Project, only 20% of the labour force is female while in the CDC Banana Expansion Project the percentage is 24%. In the two instances most of the female workers are single including widows.

TRANSPORT TO AND FRO PLANTATIONS: The inadequacy of personnel transport fleet, obliges a personnel truck to run at least two trips to the farms or more on each working day and since there is no limit to the number of workers a personnel

truck should carry at a time, this at once is a source of problem to the female workers who have to struggle with male colleagues to board the personnel truck so as to be able to reach the Farm and scan in time. During the struggle to board the trucks the males due to their masculinity trample over the weaker gender (Female). Heavily pregnant female workers are in most cases disadvantaged being unable to push and shove to get onto the trucks, and when they arrive the farm late, the scanners refuse to scan them and the consequence is that they are not only marked absent but will have to trek back their residences which is three (3) or more kilometers away from the Farm.

Because of poor organization of transportation system which can best be described as “SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST” system, female workers are made to suffer the following:-

- leaving their homes as early as 4:30 am in order to reach the transport collection point on time
- Because of their gender, they fail to board early trucks and are refused scanning when finally they get to their farms, and are marked absent for the day.
- Having not been allocated work, they are refused transportation back to their homes.
- Three consecutive absences, exposes such a worker, if unjustified to dismissal as provided in Article 41 of the present National Collective Agreement.

USE OF AGRO CHEMICALS: Eighty percent (80%) of this operation is carried out by female workers and it is observed that spreading of fertilizer in required measurement, needs a lot of concentration on the part of the female worker as the operation in itself is back-breaking. Mixing of chemicals is carried out without PPEs and fertilizer application is carried out with only hand gloves as P.P.E., without masks and boots and under severe tropical heat which pollutes the air that the worker breaths and affects the eyes as well.

To maximize risks in fertilizer application this operation should be carried out as early as 6 a.m. to 9.30 a.m. when places are relatively cool and the tropical temperature not too high as is the case at the moment. With no masks to protect their eyes and noses, they have difficulties breathing as the air becomes toxic under high temperatures.

On the 22nd December 2011, a gang of female workers at Tiko Banana Project Plantation was witnessed at 11 a.m. still waiting for fertilizer in the field and female workers were also seen applying a Chemical known as “COUNTEER” which is understood to be banned in the U.S.A. but applied in the Banana plantation in Cameroon twice a year by hand. I personally witnessed pregnant women opening bags lined with chlopyrifos an organophosphate by hand despite the prenatal risk it entails. The quality of P.P.Es are questionable as hand gloves and boots only last as follows:-

- Hand gloves one month only.
- Boots three months only and are issued once a year only or when Global gap Auditors are to visit, and also other visitors.

Female Banana workers usually always complain of being ignorant in the handling, storage and application of agrochemicals for reasons that they do not receive neither quarterly training nor instructions and as a result, they have no knowledge of the danger posed on them and their environment. They are never issued with washing soap, fresh pasteurized milk or Overalls, and so female workers applying chemicals like 'NAMATICITE' always collapse in the fields because of the toxic nature of this chemical being applied without proper P.P.E.

The effects of chemicals on female workers in the Banana Sector are enormous, such as:-

- Skin diseases.
- Cardiovascular diseases.
- Miscarriages.
- Persistent abdominal Pains.
- Irregular Menstruation.
- Asthma
- Eye infections.
- Nose bleedings.
- Nail fungi affects about 60% of female workers in the banana sector.

Female workers who carry out chemical applications on a regular basis are neither subjected to undergo thorough medical examinations either on a six monthly or a yearly basis for purposes of detecting work related diseases which are after-effects of contacts with chemicals. Unfavourable working conditions of pregnant female workers in Banana plantations, is a cause for alarm. Work in packing Houses require standing for very long periods sometimes for ten (10) to fourteen (14) hours a day with 30 minutes launch break. During a visit to Mafanja 1 packing House, I witnessed two female workers who were five (5) and Eight (8) months pregnant respectively, who had been standing for more than ten (10) hours, and had developed swollen feet and legs and who bitterly complained of waist pain. Pregnant female workers are victims of molestations and intimidation in an attempt to discourage them from having children and after deliveries, they are given tedious allocation such as deleafing and deflowering requiring climbing of ladders which leads to continuous abdominal pains. Due to their health conditions and the bad faith in not allocating them to operations that do not add to their precarious health situations, many resort to absenteeism after maternity leave.

Another reason for the rampant absenteeism amongst female nursing mothers is the fact that they can ill afford to employ baby sitters due to very low wages to care for their babies when they are at work. Over three quarters of workers of the packing houses are female and with closing time at pack houses fixed at 18.00 hours on non packing days and up to 22.00 hours on packing days, and being that there are no crèches provided for children of female banana workers the children are left to their own devices, and end up with high rates of child delinquency amongst them.

REMUNERATION: Cameroon's Social legislation provides for equal work for equal pay with no gender discrimination but the SMIG and SMAG salary structure is still applicable. The legislated minimum wage as at 2008, is set at 28.216FCFA. The various economic sectors employer's Associations and the Trade Union Confederations improve on the legislated minimum wage through Collective bargaining. The Collective Bargaining for the Agricultural sector to which banana plantations fall, set the Agricultural minimum wage at 30.777FCFA. The provisions of the Collective Agreement in the Agricultural Sector regarding the minimum wage and the legislated minimum wage are not respected, and by way of ambush the workers are paid less than both minimum wages. The ambush is carried out through payment by results, which entails pro-rate payments. This system disadvantages banana workers in general and female workers in particular whose take home pay due to pro-rata is usually 40% - 50% lower than the legislated minimum wage.

Because they are not paid a living wage they suffer consequences such as:-

- Inability to educate their children up to high school.
- Inability to provide for themselves and family at least two balanced meals a day.
- Inability to hire proper accommodation resulting to overcrowding in single room accommodations, due to the fact that 25% of their basic salary paid to them as Housing Allowance is grossly inadequate.
- 25% of 30.777FCFA gives 7.675FCFA and a single room of cardboard cost 12.000FCFA.

The National Collective Agreement of Agricultural Undertakings provides for the advancement of workers from one category echelon to the other bi-annually on merit basis. The appraisals of female workers performances for purposes of merit increments by their Sectional Heads is a tool for sexual harassment while Line Headmen use pro-rata payments as a tool for sexual harassment as well.

PROVISION OF FOOD AND DRINKING WATER: Pack house operations has a female population of 85% and work longer hours, and during peak crop periods start work at 6 a.m. and close as late as 10 p.m. leaving their homes as early as 04.00 hours in order to get to transport collection point before 05.30 a.m., they start work at 06.00

hours up to 13.00 hours when they break-off for lunch. Although the food provided to them is said to be free, they pay for the food by way of the unpaid extra hours they work in excess of the statutory weekly hours of 48 hours, in keeping with the saying that in economics there is no free lunch.

Waking up as early as 04.00 hours and working to 13.00 hours with no breakfast and taking one inadequate lunch-meal, and closing as late as 22.00 hours to 22.30 hours means that female workers involved in packing house operations are permanently on one meal (not square) a day. For their drinking water, they are provided with two liters plastic containers in which they bring their drinking water from their homes. The field female workers, working under severe tropical weather conditions with very high temperatures, the two litres do not take long to finish and they are tempted to drink unsafe water used for irrigation in the fields and this becomes a health hazard as they develop running stomach (diarrhea).

HEALTH CARE: The Clinic offers consultation to all workers and their dependants thrice a week with only one doctor to attend to at least 300 patients on such consultation days. Because of the unavailability of drugs and the very poor wages they are paid, they cannot afford to procure drugs prescribed which are unavailable at the clinic, this in some cases have resulted to the deaths of some workers and their children. Some pregnant female workers who attend the clinic for Ante-natal, do not receive proper care especially where there are complications, there is a lot of delay in referring such cases to see a Gynecologist as the Hospital provides care on two levels, one for Management Personnel wives and female Management and Supervisory Staff and another for labour. At the clinic there is delay in carrying out laboratory investigations due to the non functioning of the sterilizer. During pregnancies, female workers who are prescribed drugs which when taken, need rest, are given one day Excused duty, which unfortunately is spent at the clinic and during child labour because there is only one “Labour Bed” a female worker may be delivered of a child in the night and discharged from hospital a day after delivery in order to create space for the others in labour and in many cases the babies die from jaundice which was not detected early.

Lastly, female workers who after working in field operations under severe weather conditions and are worn out, or are victims of work related accidents or occupational diseases and some with partial permanent disabilities of 70%, are allocated to very difficult tasks and since many are unable to accomplish such tasks many abandon work. Since the Cameroon Social Insurance Scheme does not provide for unemployment benefits, they only qualify for old age pension lump-sum allowance, paid once or old age pension allowance paid on a monthly or quarterly basis if such a worker has fulfilled such conditions as:-

- Have been associated with the National Social Insurance Fund (NSIF), for twenty, (20) years.
- Have contributed 180 insurance premiums.
- Have attained the mandatory pensionable age of 60 years and,
- Have stopped all remunerated employment.

Those, who meet all the other criteria but have not contributed the 180 insurance premiums is paid a lump-sum payment only once.