

**Executive Summary of Master's Thesis Titled:**

**Gender Segregation in the Tropical Fruit Supply Chain – A Female Perspective**  
Comparative Study Between Costa Rican and UK Female Packhouse Workers



Presented to Anna Cooper of WBF for review

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**October 2017**

## **Table of Contents**

<b>i. Foreword</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Aim	4
1.2 Research Background	4
1.3 Research objectives	5
<b>2. Research Design &amp; Methods</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Discussion &amp; Conclusion</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Recommendations</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ii. Bibliography</b>	<b>9</b>

## **i. Foreword**

This document is based on research conducted as part of a master's degree course with the University College Dublin, Ireland. The study is still under review by the University and as such a result has not been widely circulated or discussed within Fyffes.

Stella Davis is currently participating in the Fyffes graduate trainee programme working in the Sustainability Department in Costa Rica. Her participation in the conference is with the aim of contributing to the debate and identifying potential avenues for long-term solutions.

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Aim**

Investigate the role that gender plays in the employment experience of female packhouse workers in the banana and pineapple industry.

## **1.2 Research Background**

The exercise of women's rights is affected by deep-rooted and entrenched cultural attitudes and perceptions that are often internalised by women themselves (FAO, 2002). While women are participating in commercial farming, it is happening with rigid gender division of roles (FAO, 2010).

To address female needs and enhance their contributions to improving agricultural productivity and poverty reduction, it is necessary to understand the constraints and opportunities facing women (Meinzen-Dick, 2010).

A global phenomenon has emerged in the tropical fruit industry where female staff are found in highest numbers in the packing areas. The FAO (2003) highlighted that the banana industry employs more female workers than any other agricultural activity; however, their involvement is mainly limited to unskilled labour e.g. packhouse (United Nations, 2004). As such, female participation in the workforce is not reflected in senior management positions (United Nations, 2004, Prieto-Carrón, 2006). Prieto-Carrón's (2006) research found that most females only apply for positions in the packing houses, therefore reducing their own opportunities. This is not an indication of women's inability to carry out alternative roles, but rather that gender segregation (refers to the division of labour by gender) in the tropical fruit industry is a manifestation of both cultural and attitudinal circumstance (Ellis, 2003). For instance, in countries where there are trends of males migrating from the sector into other productive sectors of the economy such as construction and tourism, females are found in a more diverse range of roles. For example, in Honduras (30%) and Nicaragua (27%), there is a higher percentage of women workers participating in the field (Cooper, 2015). Women tend to stay in the industry because they are less 'mobile' due to family responsibilities and their limited employment opportunities in other sectors compared with men (Ellis, 2003). Cooper (2015) highlights that these trends show women to be capable of fulfilling a broad spectrum of roles.

Contributing factors to gender segregation include women's difficulties with regards to access to education and training, lack of affordable and available childcare, and the realities of females managing their triple workload (this study refers to a woman's domestic, on-farm and off-farm work responsibilities when discussing the triple workload) (Prieto-Carrón, 2006). The triple working day of women means there is a gendered impact to the health issues resulting from excessively long working days engaged in physical work. Women, in comparison to men, work to a greater extent in the domestic economy both before and after their working day (Cooper, 2015).

### **1.3 Research objectives**

The study focused on the growing and ripening sections of Fyffes supply chain for banana and pineapple production. The research was conducted in two ripening centres in the United Kingdom (UK) Site A. Basingstoke, England, and Site B. Livingston, Scotland, and two pack houses in Costa Rica comprising of one banana farm in Rio Jiménez, Limón, and one pineapple farm in Rio Cuarto de Grecia, Heredia, all sites are owned and managed by Fyffes. The study investigated reasons behind gender segregation of roles within the tropical fruit industry from a female perspective. The study also examined if women from the UK, working in ripening centres on packing lines in that country, face similar issues and challenges in comparison to women working in Costa Rican packhouses. The aim of this research is to find the root causes and underlying reasons behind the gender segregation while considering probable cultural barriers that influence female workplace roles.

#### **Four key research objectives:**

1. Establish the drivers for female participation in tropical fruit employment and, specifically, for working in the packhouse.
2. Determine the social value and added benefits associated with women's employment such as standard of living, and benefits to local community e.g. access to education, healthcare, clean water, the creation of additional employment in the area and access to credit.
3. Identify whether women have experienced gender related discriminatory behaviour in the workplace i.e. unequal opportunity for promotion to managerial positions, choice in job roles, equal opportunity to diversify roles into the field or around the packhouse, equal pay, previous employment, or pregnancy.
4. Determine if female employees feel a sense of vulnerability associated with other roles, such as in the field, due to perceived possibilities of risks to health, sexual harassment and well-being, and, as a consequence of these risks, have they themselves chosen to work in the packhouse rather than in other roles.

## **2. Research Design & Methods**

The study was primarily qualitative in nature and, as such, reflects a subjective perception of reality (Sarantakos, 2005). Data was gathered through a series of four focus groups. Furthermore, a cross-sectional analysis (data collected at the same point in time) was used to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the segregation by gender. Background data on the total workforce was collected from the Human Resources (HR) departments on the day of each of the focus groups. In addition, a detailed literature review was conducted and presented in the thesis. These methods have ensured triangulation of the research was achieved and therefore increased the reliability, validity and objectivity of the study (Gray, 2004).

### **3. Discussion & Conclusion**

This study found that women are deliberately excluding themselves from mechanisms and positions that, in the long run, would have positive impacts on their livelihoods. In short, they are focusing their employment choices on daily commitments to their family, therefore, restricting their own employment development.

The study concludes that females have actively elected to have their position of employment in 'light roles' to reduce the risk of injury, fatigue, perceived risk of exposure to sexual harassment and human and animal attacks, ensuring their availability for their family, to fulfil their triple workload. Women, therefore, face differing vulnerabilities to that of men in the workplace. Throughout the four focus groups, family, children's welfare and education were the participants' primary drivers for their employment. This has resulted in the women limiting their own wage, position and success in an effort to have the necessary time and energy for their families. This is demonstrated by low female representation in managerial positions, which could offer a voice to women's issues and concerns. With this in mind, the current situation is satisfactory from both the female and the companies' point of view, as the women fulfil their societal roles and responsibilities to the family and the company contributes to family incomes. Consequently, there is no pressure currently to change the status quo and employers have not invested in the development of solutions or mechanisms to overcome these challenges for females to access improved workplace protections and positions.

The World Banana Forum argues that the employers must recognise the specific needs of female workers, ensuring both equal access to employment and equal treatment. The forum highlighted that employers should provide for the specific needs of women in the workplace and eliminate discriminatory hiring practices. This study found that women do not want to have the same roles as men, as they want to be hired for 'light work' to allow them to perform their family commitment and have concerns for their safety in isolated roles.

One consideration that needs to be taken into account is that the failing to address female needs and adapt to their specific requirements may have resulted from protection instruments aiming to treat men and women equally and, consequently, neglecting to take into account the issues that affect women directly due to their domestic roles (Prieto-Carron, 2006).

#### **4. Recommendations**

On the basis of results of the study the following recommendations are directed towards stakeholders within governments, NGOs, employers, research and academic institutions;

- This study has clearly found that women's commitment to their families dictates their choice of employment. Women are restricting their own success in the workplace to protect their time available for the family. Greater resources, allowances and assurances should be set in place for females who wish to progress in the workplace, allowing them to have time for family while attaining supervisor and management roles.
- Mechanisms should be developed to encourage greater participation of men in the domestic workload, through Government and educational programs.
- Trade unions and worker representation mechanisms need to adopt an approach which will increase female involvement. They should increase their understanding of female priorities and commitments outside of the work place. These organisations will actively have to design a program or schedule to increase female participation.
- Employers, private standards and certification bodies should familiarise themselves with female working priorities and tackle underlying issues that are promoting workplace gender inequality. There is a need for the employer to investigate alternatives to private standards to drive their CSR agendas and, by doing so, taking the responsibility of ensuring that the challenges and issues concerning all employees are addressed in the workplace (including women and gender equality).
- Companies certified by Rainforest Alliance and similar standards that have a community engagement aspect should develop programs to engage with local communities to increase average years of schooling for females, in an effort for females to secure improved employment positions and job security.
- Efforts and resources should be placed in addressing the challenges women face in securing roles and protections, through carrying out trials and further research into understanding women's position in the tropical fruit industry.
- To allow for a greater understanding of women's current work life situations, sexual harassment related data should be made more freely available for researchers from the Ministry of Labor and Governments.
- It is essential that tropical fruit employers evaluate their own business and develop mechanisms to provide for the specific needs of women in the workplace.

- Further research should be conducted to develop a greater understanding of the barriers females face in obtaining managerial and higher paying roles in the tropical fruit industry.
- Furthermore, in order to overcome segregation practices, all actors need to be involved in the process. The current situation is that employers' behaviour and agendas are shaped by the consumer demands and not necessarily by on-site issues. This study calls for employers, certification bodies and private standards to become proactive in tackling barriers facing female workers equality. Private standards and certifications need to be structured in a way that will satisfy female needs and priorities.
- This study invites companies to create gender-sensitive practices to improve the conditions of female workers. For example, when looking at wages companies should not only consider equal pay for equal work but also the gendered division of labour. This change in approach by companies may act as the first step towards tackling the challenges that women face in the workplace.
- This study recommends that employers can further progress their CSR agendas by moving away from a sole reliance on private standards and supermarket demands to determine their CSR program, and begin to actively align and implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2016 into their CSR program.

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