

Case Study

SITRAP Costa Rica – Recruitment Drive for Women Banana and Pineapple Workers

Banana Link | August 2020



Photo: SITRAP

Organisational overview



The [Costa Rican Union of Agricultural Plantation Workers](#) (Sindicato de Trabajadores de Plantaciones Agrícolas - SITRAP) was established in 1972. The Union is based on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, in the regions of Limon, Pococí, Siquirres, Guacimo and Matina. Here, the banana and pineapple industry employs around 45,000 workers on its plantations. Costa Rica is the world's largest pineapple producer, with pineapples representing 10% of the country's exports, and it is the second biggest supplier of bananas to the UK. SITRAP currently has a presence on around 70 banana and pineapple plantations in the area, belonging to large multinationals such as Dole, Chiquita, Del Monte and Fyffes.

The Costa Rican context

Over the last four decades, union activity has been stigmatised and heavily repressed in Costa Rica. A campaign against trade union organisation in the 1980s saw the percentage of unionised workers fall from 90% to just 5% over a seven year period (1982 – 1987). SITRAP has been able

to make significant progress in the last few years. Notably it has achieved a marked increase in recruitment of female workers in the pineapple and banana industry it represents.

In the Caribbean coastal region where SITRAP operates, the rural population has few employment opportunities to choose from. Women often leave school early and with limited qualifications. As Mauren Gamboa, SITRAPs' recently recruited Womens Officer, puts it, *"For this area, the banana and pineapple is what reigns supreme"*. While Costa Rica does have a social security institution, the payments are low and accessing them is extremely difficult. Working on the banana and pineapple plantations is the only real option for many rural women to earn a living.

Women employed on plantations work from Monday to Saturday from 6am, sometimes until after 6pm, just like the men. The work is very physical and for some it means being outside all day in the heat of the sun, or in the rain. Many of the women workers are heads of household, and those who are not, generally have a husband or partner who is also in full time work on the plantations. The wage of plantation workers is sufficiently low that many women do not have the option of staying home to care for the children while relying on income from their husband or partner. They have to find work to support their family and when they get home, their work day begins again as they cook, clean, wash clothes, help children with their homework and so on - work within the home which disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women, whether or not they have a partner or are already in full time employment. The space they have to become involved with union activity is therefore extremely limited.

In Costa Rica, as in the wider region of Latin America, the banana industry workforce is overwhelmingly male - on average 87.5% of workers are men¹. There is a cultural perception of women as primarily actors within the domestic environment and suited to childcare and household tasks. The women who do enter employment on the plantation are generally kept within the lower paid, lower skilled packhouse environment. Field tasks are thought to be too technical or physically challenging for women. In addition to the occupational health and safety risks posed to women's reproductive health by agrochemical use, women employed on banana plantations often have to face sexual harassment and gender based discrimination and not infrequently, discrimination against union affiliation as well. This is the environment in which SITRAP is operating and the conditions which the union seeks to improve for female, as well as male, workers.

The drive to increase women's membership

In 2016, SITRAP created a five year work plan which laid out the steps for a committed drive to increase the membership and representation of women workers on tropical fruit plantations within the union. The work plan stipulated:

¹ [Women in the Banana Export Industry Regional Report on Latin America- Working Paper Series for the World Banana Forum by Anna Cooper, Banana Link](#)

- All training and outreach activities should include a gender perspective by referring to the particular status and needs of women workers;
- All agreements with companies should include commitments to the stability of women's employment and recourse to the protective legislation relating to their gender;
- Specific training would be developed with a focus on women's leadership, women and trade unionism and the development of 'soft skills' such as public speaking and decision making;
- The creation of a Women's Committee to plan and evaluate activities to further gender equity;
- The provision of childcare during all training activities carried out by the union, and training to be carried out near to women's homes to enable their participation; and
- Equal representation of women in all union activities.

The hope is that the activities and strategies laid out in the workplan will lead to a situation where different regional union factions each have at least one female member, where women have the confidence to negotiate, engage in social dialogue and defend their labour rights and that ultimately, women plantation workers will enjoy greater job security and improved working conditions.

The five year plan included a commitment to take up all the recommendations of the [Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana and Agro-Industrial Unions](#) (COLSIBA) Women's Platform. The Women's Platform recommendations² take a wide ranging and thorough look at how gender equity can be built into collective bargaining arrangements. It starts with a focus on language: *"it is common to find a sexist language that expresses the interests and needs of men, assuming that women are also considered within those needs and interests. This is a major limitation, as it does not allow women's needs and interests to be made evident"*³ it states. Observing the fact that women disproportionately shoulder the burden of the household and caring workload, it recommends that clauses include provisions for women to have special leave in case of household emergencies - with the intention that men be included as directly co-responsible for dealing with such emergencies, with the aim that any clause does not reproduce the gender bias that women are responsible for household and childcare duties.

Legal reform

During the same year that SITRAP devised their work plan, in January 2016, the [Costa Rican Labour Procedure Reform Law](#) (LPR) was passed by Parliament, coming into effect in July 2017. This law represented a far reaching overhaul to Costa Rican Labour Law, and was one that SITRAP, and other unions, had strongly advocated for. The new legal structure makes the work of labour unions more effective. Justice can be done more quickly through the labour courts, and many cases that would typically take years to proceed through the courts can be heard in weeks or even days.

² [PLATAFORMA DE ACCIÓN REIVINDICATIVA DE LAS MUJERES DEL SECTOR BANANERO LATINOAMERICANO-COLSIBA](#)

³ *ibid*

SITRAP has welcomed the Labour Procedure Reform Law and responded by holding workshops on employment law for workers with the engagement of university lecturers and law students, as well as SITRAP’s lawyer. The union has filed lawsuits in labour courts for unfair dismissal due to breastfeeding, pregnancy, abuse of authority related to women employees and harassment, many of which have resulted in the reinstatement of women workers.

SITRAP has benefited from the support of union-to-union support from British unions [UNISON](#) and the [GMB](#). The solidarity and financial support from the UK unions has enabled SITRAP to build a new activity room at their headquarters in Siquirres as well as the development of newsletters that inform workers of their rights and the practical steps they need to take in order to arrange breastfeeding at work or to report sexual harassment.



Photo: SITRAP

Impact

Didier Leiton Valverde, General Secretary of SITRAP, discusses the impact of SITRAPs women-focused work plan: *“Training and capacity building of newly recruited women workers on their labour rights and the LPR has built their confidence and willingness to defend their labour rights. They feel protected by the union, and in turn the union has adapted to meet their needs.”* Women who join the union will often bring their children, their partners, their neighbours and friends to union meetings, and in this way awareness is spread and union membership continues to increase. As stipulated in the work plan, childcare must be provided for all union meetings. The unions’ AGM in January 2019 was attended by 700 SITRAP members and had a clear family friendly appeal (a bouncy castle was even provided for the children).

The training and capacity building of women leaders can prove tricky, since they are working a 6 day week and need Sundays for rest and to attend to household affairs. SITRAP has been able to negotiate for women on some plantations to attend training on their working days, with salaries paid for by the employer. It is a medium term goal for SITRAP to hold all it’s board

meetings during the week, with workers salaries paid for by the employer, in order to protect Sundays for workers to rest.

The training of women leaders has proven a highly effective method of recruiting women to the union. The board of directors of SITRAP is now 5 women and 6 men. Mauren Gamboa, the new Women's Officer, explains that acting as a role model among her fellow female workers and sharing her experience has been part of the increase in female membership. *“What is it that makes a woman decide to join when, unfortunately, her basic labour rights have been violated? They witness our example: they see that we are union members and we have someone representing us, and even fighting for us. In my workplace, I am the union rep, so it is me who defends the rights of the other women. It is difficult because the limits on womens’ time are many, but as colleagues, they witness our example and it reflects their own potential back to them. They notice that we are treated better”*

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Further Reading

English:

- ['GMB witnesses historic moment in Costa Rican labour history' - Banana Link, 2019](#)
- ['Global pineapple production by leading countries 2018' - M. Shahbandeh, 2020 .](#)
- ['Staying under the radar: constraints on labour agency of pineapple plantation workers in Costa Rica?'- Annelien Gansemans & Marijke D’Haese 2020](#)
- ['Costa Rica: Labor Procedure Reform Law Makes Sweeping Changes to Labor Code'-JD Supra, 2018](#)
- [NEW COSTA RICAN LAW ALLOWS WORKERS TO BE REINSTATED QUICKLY'-The Violence of Development, Martin Mowforth, 2018](#)
- ['WHEN WOMEN THRIVE , BUSINESSES THRIVE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICA'- Mercer, 2017](#)
- [Our Work in Costa Rica- Banana Link](#)
- [Supporting the Union of Agricultural Plantation Workers, SITRAP, in Costa Rica- Banana Link and UNISON](#)
- [El Rodin Leaflet 'El Rodin'- SITRAP Union Bulletin, 2015](#)
- [Women in the Banana Export Industry Regional Report on Latin America- World Banana Forum/ Banana Link, 2015](#)
- [PRESENTATION ON THE RECENT ADVANCES FROM DIALOGUE AND NEGOTIATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA- Iris Munguia, COLSIBA](#)

Spanish:

GENDER EQUITY ACROSS SUPPLY CHAINS

a comparative analysis



- [Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social Costarricense.](#)
- [Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres de Costa Rica](#)
- [Sistema Costarricense de Información Jurídica](#)
- [Opinión de las Mujeres en SITRAP Sobre la Ley de Paridad de Género en las Juntas Directivas 2011](#)
- [Trabajo femenino no remunerado alcanza índice «dramático» en Latinoamérica- COLSIBA, 2018](#)
- [ANEXO: Comité de Mujeres del Acuerdo Internacional Chiquita/ UITA/ COLSIBA-](#)
- [PLATAFORMA DE ACCIÓN REIVINDICATIVA DE LAS MUJERES DEL SECTOR BANANERO LATINOAMERICANO](#)