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World Banana Forum (WBF)

Working together for sustainable banana production and trade
Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF)

WEBINAR

Fostering women's employment through empowerment – challenges and opportunities in the banana industry

Report of the WBF Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF)

Tuesday, 13 April 2021

1. Welcome by the WBF Secretariat

On behalf of the World Banana Forum (WBF) Secretariat, hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), **Ms Camila Reinhardt Hurtado, FAO**, welcomed participants to the first of a series of webinars this year, organized by the WBF Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF)¹ and coordinated with Fairtrade Germany.

This 2021 series focuses on priority issues for women workers in the banana sector, and is aimed at stakeholders in the industry, including representatives of companies, trade unions, civil society and NGOs. 'Fostering women's employment through empowerment – challenges and opportunities in the banana industry' was the theme of the 13 April webinar.

FAO, through the WBF, promotes inclusive growth and sustainable livelihoods in the banana industry. It does this, for example, by facilitating an evidence-based dialogue among stakeholders aimed at promoting decent working conditions for men and women working on banana plantations.

A key element contributing to the sustainability of the banana industry is the integration of gender equity throughout the value chain. The WBF has therefore facilitated a Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF) since 2012 to ensure that the gender dimension is integrated into all WBF activities.

¹ For more information, refer to <http://www.fao.org/world-banana-forum/working-groups/social/gender-equity/en/>

Ms Reinhardt Hurtado explained that every few years the WBF holds an international meeting on gender equity in the banana industry. The most recent of these was held in Geneva in November 2017, together with the Third Global Conference of the WBF. Key priorities for improving gender equity in the banana sector are identified at these meetings. Originally, the next international meeting on gender equity was to be held in 2020 together with the Fourth Global Conference of the WBF. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting was postponed and a series of webinars was planned in 2020 and continue this year to keep discussions focused on priority areas.

2. Introduction by the Chairperson

Mr Marcelo Crescenti, of Fairtrade Germany, is head of public relations for the organization whose vision is a world in which all producers can enjoy secure and sustainable livelihoods, fulfil their potential and decide their own future. Fairtrade aims to achieve better working conditions in the global South including the banana sector.

Mr Crescenti stated that the webinar sought to increase awareness among and inspire industry stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities for women's employment and empowerment, learning from good practices across various sectors and regions. The four webinar panellists joined from Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines, representing three continents.

He emphasized the importance of stakeholders understanding differing perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for women's employment—much of which can be accomplished by exchanging stories of collaboration. This is an effective way of spreading the word about ways to foster women's employment through their empowerment.

Mr Crescenti outlined the agenda of the webinar: first, introduce each of the four panellists; second, panellists present their activities and roles in supporting women's employment and empowerment efforts; and third, a Q&A session on 1) key barriers to women's employment and empowerment, 2) how empowerment can be nurtured, and 3) the benefits of collaboration in enabling women's employment and empowerment processes.

3. Presentation of panellists

The webinar featured contributions from expert panellists from Banacol (Colombia), SINTRAINAGRO (Colombia), Karen Roses (Kenya), and FARMCOOP (Philippines). Feedback was also shared by other participants whose questions and related experiences on the issue of women's employment and empowerment in the banana industry further enriched the discussions.



Ms Ledis Garcia Morales, Human Resource and Corporate Responsibility Manager, GreenLand/Banacol (Colombia) described how Banacol works hand in hand with SINTRAINAGRO, Colombia's agricultural workers' union. She stated that Banacol is a company with a philosophy focused on environmental and social sustainability. One fundamental pillar of this philosophy is equality of opportunity and gender equity.

At the end of 2019, Banacol invited both SINTRAINAGRO (the largest trade union in this region) and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) to unite to collectively work toward the goal of bringing into the industry, through Banacol's plantations, 400 women workers over a one-year period. In this way, women's participation on Banacol's plantations would double from 10 to 20 percent. While initially there was a good response, in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, the rhythm of activities slowed, but the company still managed to hire 270 women. Banacol's collaboration with SINTRAINAGRO has been key to these efforts, said **Ms Garcia Morales**.



Ms Adela Torres, General Secretary, SINTRAINAGRO (Colombia) explained that the agricultural workers' union SINTRAINAGRO is a founding member of the Latin American component of the WBF. It is active on women's issues, in particular working towards more female participation and inclusion in the agricultural sector. It enjoys a good relationship with Banacol, working together with women in favour of women. For example, **Ms Torres** explained, they have signed agreements on a pre-defined number of women to be hired each year, reiterating what was heard from **Ms Garcia Morales** on the hiring of 400 women, a goal which will be achieved this year.

The aim is to continue to increase the number of women workers on banana plantations with guaranteed wages and conditions, and with dignity. Through SINTRAINAGRO women's issues remain at the forefront of a global forum, and women can be active in collective bargaining agreements to help ensure work. **Ms Torres** emphasized that many women workers are heads of households, with children and other family members who require care. In many cases, these women workers are survivors of domestic violence or armed conflict.



Ms Agnes Chebii, Team Leader and Chairwoman of the Fairtrade-Gender Committee/Karen Roses (Kenya) then introduced the Kenya-based company that supplies quality cut flowers around the world. Through the Karen Roses' corporate social responsibility programs, the organization continues to strategically support the livelihoods of the local community. In recent years, the company has continuously improved its social and environmental aspects hence getting globally accredited with highly recognized accreditations including that of Fairtrade. **Ms Chebii** explained that the company has a Gender Committee whose purpose is to champion women's rights, including employment of women, equity in the workplace and gender rights.



Ms Kahlil Apuzen-Ito, Technical Advisor and Trainer, FARMCOOP (Philippines) leads the sustainability and resilience program under the non-profit Foundation for Agrarian Reform Cooperatives in Mindanao (FARMCOOP). FARMCOOP serves 32 partner members of small family farmer cooperatives and associations. It works with over 6 000 smallholder family farmers, of which 4 000 to 5 000 are in the banana industry, and 2 000 in the coconut industry. Of the 900 women farmers who work with FARMCOOP, most are in the coconut industry. FARMCOOP's sustainability and resilience program was launched in 2014 to promote and strengthen small family farmers on issues of sustainability and resilience, with gender equity and women empowerment being cross-sectional themes.

Women farmers are actively involved throughout the project life cycle as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of FARMCOOP projects. **Ms Apuzen-Ito** explained that pilot projects range from food sovereignty to food security, from community health to gender equity, from water issues to sustainable agriculture and agroecology. Gender equity and women empowerment cut across all these themes.

In terms of women empowerment, her role is to access funds for the program; work with various teams that address barriers facing women farmers and small family farmers; co-facilitate participatory women meeting spaces; and co-design capacity building trainings for women farmers. Overall, **Ms Apuzen-Ito** emphasized that FARMCOOP helps women become better organizers in their communities, by supporting livelihood projects related to farming not only bananas, but also cacao, coffee and coconuts. In addition, she mentors women farmers and cofacilitates trainings for them.



4. Panel interview questions

Question 1: What are the key barriers for enabling women's employment and empowerment, and how have they been addressed to ensure the success of the initiative?

Ms Garcia Morales stated that she would not call them barriers, but rather additional challenges. For example, there is a need to attract women to an industry, which has traditionally been male. Not only in Colombia but around the world. Banacol actively seeks applications from women who may not have experience since they have a training program to integrate them into the workforce and feel like they are part of the work team. Since 50 percent are mothers who are heads of households, a key challenge is how children will be cared for while they are at work.

Ms Torres explained that over the years women have faced many barriers. For instance, many companies did not want to hire mothers. Banacol is one of the companies with the will to hire women and has recently signed agreements to continue to do so. She also stated that it is important to keep up the work on empowering women so they may have opportunities such as: being union leaders at their companies; continuing to support other women joining the sector; owning their own homes; and obtaining the necessary skills training.


Mr Crescenti asked the panellists more specifically whether there were any cultural barriers. Have there been any experiences to share on working with men? Any issues related to motherhood and work?

Ms Garcia Morales noted that organizations need to be convinced about the purpose and the importance of women's participation in a company's productive processes. Human resources teams, at all levels, need to actively facilitate conditions for women to successfully integrate into the labour market—which has been a challenge so far. As part of this initiative, Banacol has some trainings geared towards men, in both administrative and operational positions, including those that foster an environment of mutual respect.

In reference to **Ms Torres'** remarks, **Ms Garcia Morales** said that since many working women are also mothers, Banacol has started providing breastfeeding areas on farms. Banacol is working on a set of defined action plans with foundations to promote nutritional programs, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers' programs, programs for babies and children, as well as housing programs, together with its GreenLand Foundation.

Ms Torres further responded by stating that cultural patterns have proven difficult to navigate, and as a result many women colleagues and co-workers face barriers to adapt to different companies. Often they are accused of not adapting, or not quickly enough, to new work environments. Learning new processes takes time, and some have felt unmotivated to continue. SINTRAINAGRO spoke to men workers in the industry, urging them to understand the process, and that women deserve the same opportunities as men. This discussion softened the situation and has led many men to begin to understand.

Ms Chebii stated that the main cultural barriers to gender equity and women's empowerment in Africa, generally speaking, are: 1) women are not allowed to inherit property, and 2) it is widely held that women's place is in the household performing chores, rather than outside of the home earning money. She noted that in her experience, women could not even own a farm. Now with Fairtrade gender standards, cultural barriers are being overcome, with more education programs that support women by way of premiums such as, scholarships abroad, and subsidized education credits. She noted that 58 percent of Karen Roses' workforce are women—constituting about 700 women workers. Through the Fairtrade standards, not only has their market grown, but employment numbers have grown from just 200 women in 2004. The Fairtrade Gender Committee champions women's employment, mainly empowering them through education within the company. As a result of the Gender Committee, there is now female participation at the board level, including a sales and marketing manager.



Ms Apuzen-Ito (via video recording) stated that, in her experience, the barriers to women empowerment and gender equity depend on the location of the farms, the crops, the history, and the culture of the community, and thus require different levels of interventions. Barriers can be economic, a lack of institutional, technical and financial support for the small family farmers and women, a lack of market support, or the unrecognized work of women in the home and on the farm. Structural barriers include poor roads, irrigation systems, lack of access to good potable water, a lack of healthcare in rural communities, and poor sanitation. Other structural barriers surface when men dominate the decision-making in cooperatives or associations. In addition, cultural and social barriers include multiple burdens on women like teenage pregnancy or early marriage.

Ms Apuzen-Ito then detailed how FARMCOOP is working with different teams that are working on agroecological approaches to improve farm production, in order to address women's issues. International and local teams are working on barriers to market such as quality of produce and farm management. Water councils and water conservation teams are also active. Specifically, women's health skills, organic gardening that addresses nutrition, work with local governments, improvement of capacity building trainings, gender action learnings for sustainability which incorporates family visioning, improvement of strategic planning, and the training and coaching of women farmers are being targeted. In terms of the gender based violence social barrier, FARMCOOP has worked with government agencies to introduce a gender and development (GAD) program to stop violence against women and children in the home, and to improve communication in the home.

Based on the responses provided by the panellists, **Mr Crescenti** noted that a spark is needed to start women's empowerment. He posed the question: How important is it to involve communities or other actors to be the spark needed to tackle the challenges such as awareness-raising or opportunity-creation for women in the banana industry?


Ms Torres responded saying that communities are actively involved in the process of women empowerment and gender equity. SINTRAINAGRO trains people in municipalities where up to 80 percent are employed in the banana industry. For the past three years, **Ms Torres** has been working with companies on a project called 'It's my turn' in which 18 to 22 year-olds from the community are trained to work in the banana industry, but also taught life skills such as managing money and reconciliation. The project has trained more than 550 young people, 176 of whom are working at banana companies including Banacol, and 70 percent of them are women.

Other webinar participants added to the discussion by posing questions. A participant asked whether there are benefits for businesses who hire women and implement the programs mentioned on breastfeeding and nutrition.

Ms Garcia Morales responded that Banacol neither looks for nor has received any economic benefit for its women empowerment and gender equity programs. While it is an investment, Banacol carries out these programs with a social purpose in mind and a firm conviction in equal opportunities. Women working in packaging plants, for instance, present a major benefit for the company given that they tend to have the skills and attention to detail. Overall, it is part of Banacol's social commitment.

Mr Crescenti followed up with a question for **Ms Torres**: what were the arguments made by SINTRAINAGRO and the IUF to convince Banacol to include the objective to employ more women and carry out these important efforts?

Ms Torres responded that the arguments are clear. Whenever SINTRAINAGRO negotiated with business owners, (a single negotiation for all farms), they always incorporated women's issues. It wasn't difficult, since Banacol knew the issues well and SINTRAINAGRO made a proposal to the men. All parties agreed they valued women's work and wanted them to work more in the industry.



Question 2: How has the initiative ensured the continuous process of empowerment and professional/personal growth for women workers and farmers?

Mr Crescenti posed the question to **Ms Chebii**: You mentioned that Fairtrade was the spark championing gender initiatives on your farm. Besides training, how do you ensure there is progress and momentum to continue policies of women empowerment and gender equity?

Ms Chebii responded that the Gender Committee at Karen Roses is composed of elected members who go out and train the community, support groups for people living with HIV, and conduct other trainings. Karen Roses would like to take the project to schools since access to education leads to better jobs. There are women on workers' committees, unions where women are prominent, and women who form part of the leadership of the Fairtrade Premium Committee hired by workers themselves to ensure Fairtrade standards and decide how to spend the premium money for their goals. Management and field production teams include women. Standards of living at home have improved through programs. There is an edu-credit program from the Premium for women. She emphasized that women lead on all these fronts, at all levels in the hierarchy.

Karen Roses has trained communities other than its own, and has a reputation for gender empowerment. For instance, it has a program for screening cervical cancer across all five farms of Karen Roses, including workers at the pack house and management levels, as well as a support group for those who are HIV positive. She added, any employee can get tested. The support group is obtaining funds from the Premium to, for example, care for and support HIV positive people with healthy foods, as well as to provide access to funds for their medication. Also, people living with diabetes can access materials to measure their blood sugar levels.

Ms Chebii stated that Karen Roses aims to do more to empower women, employing new ideas.

Mr Crescenti followed up with the question: How was the Gender Committee selected? Have any issues been aggravated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and if so, does the Gender Committee play a role in it?


Ms Chebii explained that the Gender Committee was selected by the workers, which was a requirement of the Fairtrade standards. Workers elect the gender committees. On COVID-19, she responded that gender was included in the Fairtrade Premium Committees, and that the Gender Committees helped the company ensure COVID-19 rules were being followed. Karen Roses had received some premiums for COVID and the gender committees were on the frontline, making sure that there was no discrimination.

Mr Crescenti, referring to questions posed by participants in the webinar chat, asked **Ms Chebii** what the gender composition of the Gender Committee is.

Ms Chebii replied that out of every ten members, 8 are women. Overall there are more women working in the field, thus the higher number of women representatives. Gender Committee members are elected based on their humility, leadership skills, listening skills, and being bold enough to take critical issues to a higher level.

Mr Crescenti then asked **Ms Garcia Morales** what structures are in place to keep the momentum of women empowerment and gender equity at Banacol.

Ms Garcia Morales replied that ensuring continuity of technical training is key, as are interpersonal relationships and personal development. On the technical side there are three stages: 1) hiring a specialist, external to the company, to provide training to women in an environment similar to that of a farm, hand in hand with internal support departments; 2) an onboarding process, so that women have the whole context of the work and the company - they join the production process as an employee in training, with permanent accompaniment, to develop her skills; and ultimately; 3) women are then fully integrated as part of the production process team.



Additionally, a series of trainings focused mainly on the well-being of women are provided, so that hired women know their role, not only within the company, but also in the family and society. She also identified the need for trainings for men to support household work and chores.

Ms Garcia Morales further mentioned the Women's Committee at Banacol, composed of 35 women from both the field and the management departments, which was created in 2018 with the objective of promoting activities aimed at improving human development and technical skills for women, among these, to assist the company in its drive to recruit women. Though last year was complicated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several virtual events were held. And while the aim is to hire 400 women over a year, Banacol wants to work with SINTRAINAGRO to forge a path to hire many more.

She noted that currently the retention rate is 67 percent, but they are working to achieve an even higher percentage. She would like women to view Banacol as a place where they can grow professionally. As an internal policy, the company gives priority to those who are already part of the work team when it comes to promotions. Working hand in hand with a trade union, and sharing the same philosophy, has allowed Banacol and SINTRAINAGRO to build together and grow as a sector.


Ms Iris Munguia, COLSIBA/FESTAGRO commented on the discussion, and was glad to see best practices being shared. She noted that SINTRAINAGRO was moving forward in this work, participation seemed to be growing, and further noted that in Colombia, today many more women are working in packing plants compared to the past.

On the subject of gender equality and equity, **Ms Munguia** noted that it can be a daily struggle for a woman, simply leaving the house to work. Typically, women have to wake up at 4:00 am, prepare food, return from work at 8:00 pm and prepare food again. In contrast, typically, men get up, get dressed, leave for work, return from work, eat, and go to sleep. She stated that these stereotypes and cultural customs should be eliminated since they disproportionately impact women. This is why safe and dignified employment for women are such key issues.

In terms of ensuring work stability for women, she noted the importance of guaranteeing that a woman worker is replaced with another woman worker when she leaves a job. She posed the questions: how do we ensure women's work rights? Guarantee a fair wage? Equal pay? How can we ensure that when women give birth, there will be child care? Who do you leave your child with? How can women ensure there will be no sexual harassment? **Ms Munguia** stated that the empowerment of women is the place to start to find answers to these questions. At COLSIBA, she noted, there is experience with women's platforms for agreements and action. For example, no woman or man living with HIV can be discriminated against, since there is an agreement that guarantees this. COLSIBA has been able to reach this and other agreements with companies. It has been an arduous road, but with good results, she said.

Ms Apuzen-Ito (via video recording) concluded this round by responding to the question about how to keep momentum. She stated that pilot projects in FARMCOOP's sustainability and resilience program were self-sustaining because they ran without funding and were relevant to the community. Women gained more prominence in their community and made more connections with other government agencies. In terms of the economic and ecological sustainability of smallholder farmers, including women, she states that barriers need to be tackled. In this, there is a market component. She worked with 2 100 coconut farmers, 900 of which are women, helping them to fundraise and find markets for their products. FARMCOOP has also worked with women farmers who grow cacao, coffee and banana. She noted that women have improved their capacity and their agency to break down social barriers. She also noted that women have increasingly greater experience, and are looking at the challenges they face in a more holistic way.

Mr Crescenti then proceeded to ask the final question to all panellists.



Question 3: What are the benefits of collaboration between industry stakeholders to support women's employment and empowerment processes in the banana industry and beyond?

Ms Garcia Morales responded that the main benefit is to ensure the success and achievement of the objective we all seek, that is, synergies between actors. Having synergy among the main actors is fundamental since no organization alone can achieve women's empowerment and gender equity with regards to employment. Each organization has its strength. For Banacol and SINTRAINAGRO, people are the engine. Working with the same purpose, in this case with women and with sustainability as a goal, is the main benefit. All actors must work together to achieve more participation by women in production activities.

Mr Crescenti asked **Ms Chebii**: what is the main benefit of empowering women in Kenya? Are there advantages for employers as well?

Ms Chebii responded that collaboration among industry stakeholders is critical. Gender equity leads to happy employees and increases profitability. In the case of Karen Roses, the union provides the conditions of work such as standards, policies for breastfeeding mothers and paternity leave, etc. Fairtrade provides the standards on women's employment and empowerment. Championing such policies and support for women improves the living standards of workers, their children, and the community as a whole.


Ms Torres concluded by stating that one process that requires more work, and continued insistence, is that of achieving agreements between unions and the companies. We must keep working to reach additional agreements like the one reached with Banacol. Governments could support this through their participation and follow-up, including evaluation of whether initiatives are working or not. Governments can help by sharing our achievements, getting communities more involved, and acknowledging and receiving the benefits of what we are doing.

Ms Apuzen-Ito (via video recording) concluded by speaking about barriers to women's empowerment in the small family farm context. She stated it will take time to transform the environment to become more in line with women's equity. So far there has been some support on some issues, but it is imperative that the collaboration is inclusive and participatory. Multi-stakeholder collaboration can be beneficial for all sectors, not just for women empowerment and gender equity. The key benefit of such collaboration is the learning that takes place across all sectors. And to achieve this, women in every stakeholder group must be empowered.

5. Conclusions and final remarks

Mr Crescenti concluded the webinar by highlighting the examples discussed by panellists from across the world of how women are being empowered and how their employers are also benefitting from such efforts. **Ms Garcia Morales** from Banacol and **Ms Torres** from SINTRAINAGRO impressed participants by demonstrating how their work is integrated. From Kenya, **Ms Chebii** showed us what a gender committee can accomplish, and that Fairtrade is meaningful because of the people in the field. **Ms Apuzen-Ito** detailed how women have taken up the mission to improve their situation and skills and are actively seeking to be present at all levels of management.

Mr Crescenti also noted the discussions about the need for women vacating positions in the banana industry to be replaced by other women, as well as the policy process which should be participatory and involve all stakeholders. When a woman is empowered, the whole community benefits. While it is true that violence against women and discrimination still exist, as **Ms Munguia** emphasized, and there is still a lot of work to do, it is encouraging to learn where and how panellists and participants are successfully tackling issues related to employment—which contributes to best practices for women's empowerment and gender equity in the banana industry and beyond.



Ms Reinhardt Hurtado thanked the panellists and participants for their thoughtful and practical interventions. She thanked the members of WBF Secretariat for supporting the activities of the GE-TF and Fairtrade Germany for making this webinar possible.

She noted that this year's series will continue with a webinar in late June, and one in late September. Topics are yet to be defined with the GE-TF, and all who participated in this first webinar will be invited to the future webinars.

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