



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

World Banana Forum (WBF)

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

WEBINAR

'The healthy and safe employment of women workers in the banana industry'

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

Thursday, 23 July 2020

1. Welcome by the WBF Secretariat

On behalf of the World Banana Forum (WBF) and its Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF), hosted by FAO through the WBF Secretariat, **Ms Camila Reinhardt Hurtado** welcomed participants to the webinar. She emphasized the critical role of supply chain actors in the banana sector in promoting sustainable production and trade of bananas.

Ms Reinhardt Hurtado provided a brief overview of the WBF and the GE-TF¹. Established in 2009, the WBF's mission is to enable collaboration between stakeholders to work towards pragmatic outcomes for the betterment of the banana industry; and to achieve consensus on best practices regarding workplace issues, gender equity, environmental impact, sustainable production and economic issues.

Since the inception of the WBF, gender equity has been central to its activities which have included the production of regional economic reports to highlight working conditions for women workers as well as global meetings focused on enabling women's representation along the supply chain.

The most recent of these international meetings was held in Geneva in November 2017, together with the Third Global Conference of the WBF, where the following five key priorities were identified:

- ♀ women's employment opportunities
- ♀ women's empowerment
- ♀ gender pay gap
- ♀ sexual harassment and gender-based violence
- ♀ occupational health and safety of women workers.

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

Originally, the next international meeting on gender equity was to be held this year together with the Fourth Global Conference of the WBF. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting will now be held in 2021. In 2020, a series of webinars have been planned to continue discussions on priority areas.

This webinar, being the first of a series of four, discussed women workers and their occupational health and safety (OHS). The next three webinars will focus on: implementing the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) (September 2020); integrating the gender pay gap element into living wage and living income activities (October 2020); and the impacts of COVID-19 on women workers in the banana industry (November 2020).

2. Introduction by the chairperson and coordinator of the GE-TF

Ms Anna Cooper, Banana Link, introduced the issue of health and safety for women workers: always a priority issue for the WBF Working Group on Labour Rights and its GE-TF. A specific workshop was held on OHS during the International Meeting on Gender Equity that took place just prior to the Third Conference of WBF in Geneva in November 2017. One of the key outcomes of this meeting was the proposal to develop a 'gender annex' for the Manual on Health and Safety in the Banana Industry developed under the WBF's Banana Occupational Health and Safety Initiative² (BOHESI) – to provide specific guidelines on the healthy and safe employment of women workers. It would then be used to feed into specific future project activities, including trainings with company and worker representatives at plantation level.



Photo: © Banana Link/Paul Lievens

Following the successful implementation of the BOHESI pilot project in Ecuador from 2014 to 2018, new activities were launched with local industry partners in Cameroon and an additional project was in the process of development for Ghana, to be coordinated by Banana Link in collaboration with the WBF, IUF and local industry partners, including the Banana Producers Association and local trade unions GAWU and ICU. Due to the political disruption in Cameroon, BOHESI activities there were put on hold and therefore efforts were focused in Ghana for the development of the gender guidelines, with the idea of adapting these guidelines for use in other countries.

² For more information, refer to <http://www.fao.org/world-banana-forum/projects/bohesi/en/>

3. Summary of panel discussions

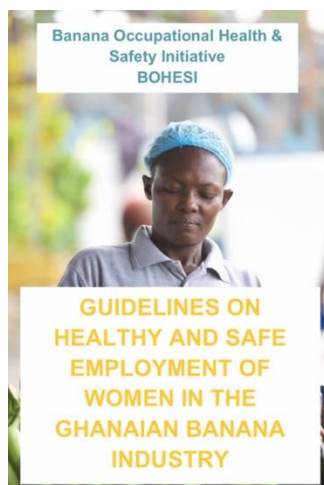
3.1 Introduction to the main OHS issues and prevention and control measures outlined in the BOHESI gender guidelines for Ghana³

By Susan Murray, Trade Union Health and Safety Consultant for UNITE and IUF

During the COVID-19 emergency, women workers are on the front line, whether they work in food production and distribution, health and social care services, or care for elderly family members at home.

According to **Ms Susan Murray** a key concern is lack of recognition, understanding or research into women's OHS. For instance, gender segregation in jobs is common and women are not always well represented in workplaces.

She emphasized that employers have the primary duty to ensure their workers' health and safety and should take a gender-responsive approach to occupational health and safety. Ms Murray noted that women's participation and involvement is essential in all aspects of OHS such as participation in joint health and safety committees, on OHS policy and procedures and through their membership in independent trade unions.



The BOHESI gender guidelines cover hazards and risks for women working in the banana industry including:

- ♀ exposure to chemicals such as pesticides, which can have devastating health effects on women and on unborn children;
- ♀ biological hazards such as malaria, poor food hygiene, and contaminated water;
- ♀ musculoskeletal disorders;
- ♀ equipment and workstations;
- ♀ violence and sexual harassment – including a sample sexual harassment policy;
- ♀ stress; and
- ♀ the need for personal protective equipment, if it is required.

The guidelines describe health conditions which might affect women at work. They are conditions which tend to be ignored, or not discussed, thereby putting women at risk. The guidelines target pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and cover issues like menstruation, fibroids, endometriosis, perimenopause and menopause. They also describe many other conditions for which women may need support from their employer at work including miscarriage, breast cancer, and mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Ms Murray emphasized the importance of employers going through a process of joint trade union/worker and employer discussion and agreement. These may include joint health and safety committees; health and safety and awareness training; and support to trade union investigative initiatives in the workplace. Also important is the collection of sex-disaggregated data on occupational ill health and incidents to identify issues affecting women, and men, so that effective action can be discussed, agreed and implemented.

Ms Murray closed by mentioning that violence and harassment in the world of work can constitute a human rights violation or abuse, and are a threat to equal opportunities. They are unacceptable and incompatible with decent work, and therefore it is essential to campaign for the ratification and implementation by governments of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) to respect, promote and realize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

³ For more information, refer to the document [Guidelines on healthy and safe employment of women in the Ghanaian banana industry](#)

3.2 Experiences from the field / delivery of OHS training on women's issues using the BOHESI gender guidelines

By Abena Amponsah Awuah, Assistant Manager for Certifications and Gender Officer, Golden Exotics Ltd (GEL)

Golden Exotics Ltd (GEL) is the largest banana producer in Ghana and a subsidiary of the French multinational fruit company Compagnie Fruitière. GEL has worked in collaboration with Banana Link, the IUF, and the WBF for several years on the issues of health and safety as well as on gender, including collaborative research and training activities to improve women's employment and conditions for both women and men in the workplace.


GEL participated in the Third Global Conference of the WBF held in Geneva in 2017. Two years later, in 2019, explained **Ms Abena Amponsah Awuah**, the BOHESI project was launched in Ghana in collaboration with GEL and the two other Ghanaian banana producing companies, Volta River Estate Limited (VREL) and Musahmahat. All together these companies form the Banana Producers Association of Ghana. Working alongside Banana Link, local trade unions GAWU and ICU, and the international trade union IUF, GEL carried out a series of training workshops with worker and company representatives on OHS, and particularly on issues for women workers.



Photo: © Banana Link/Paul Lievens

Using the ten BOHESI guidelines on gender mainstreaming as a guide for gender sensitive OHS practice at the workplace, GEL has addressed many of the issues raised at the workshops. These include the urgency of ratifying the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and examining activities that can impact women who are pregnant or nursing, in particular. For example, there are measures to support mothers who breastfeed while at work.

Lessons from the BOHESI project have enabled GEL to enhance its systems in the areas of designing new processing and packaging facilities and procurement of personal protective equipment among others. For example, at Golden Organics Limited (GOL), a subsidiary of GEL, the heights of sinks in pack houses have been designed to address gender-based differences so that they do not cause abdominal pains for women.



Training workshops, seminars, etc. have been organized to educate and inform women on health hazards and the interventions in place. Occasionally, consultation programmes with women committee representatives are organized to assess the impact and adequacy of the mitigation actions currently implemented.

GEL takes a gender approach to ensuring equality for both men and women. The high participation of male workers in these gender-focused training workshops, as well as the ever growing participation of women workers in health and safety committees according to the BOHESI guidelines, are just two examples.

Ms Amponsah Awuah noted that whereas previously issues of women's personal hygiene and menstruation were not discussed at work, now they are. Another interesting development has been early closing time, which is generally advantageous for women, that is now incentivized through more pay for workers who finish their work early.

Ms Amponsah Awuah concluded that ensuring a gender perspective with regard to OHS at the workplace benefits everyone, male and female.

3.3 OHS of women workers in Latin America and next steps to adapt the BOHESI gender guidelines and training in the Latin American region

By Adela Torres Valoy, General Secretary of SINTRAINAGRO (Colombian Union of Banana and Agro-industrial Workers), an affiliate of the Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana and Agro-industrial Workers (COLSIBA)


COLSIBA is the Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana and Agro-industrial Workers in Latin America. **Ms Adela Torres Valoy**, together with other participants from COLSIBA including Iris Munguia, Selfa Sandoval and Gloria Garcia, have been key actors in the WBF since its creation. She began by stating that SINTRAINAGRO marks its 45th birthday this year.

Ms Torres Valoy noted that, overall, in the banana and agrobusiness sector in Latin America women face difficult work conditions, despite the existence of trade unions in most countries. COLSIBA is made up of some 65 000 members across Central and South America, of which only about 6 000 are women. Ms Torres Valoy commented that this number is low and that COLSIBA seeks ways to increase it.

An assessment related to women's health carried out by COLSIBA revealed that the most common health and safety issues that women suffered from were lower abdominal pain during menstruation, frequent headaches, varicose veins and altered veins, fungal infections in the hands, irritated/itchy skin and musculoskeletal pain.

In order to help women leaders negotiate for improvements on these and wider workplace issues COLSIBA has created a Platform for the Defence of Women Banana Workers (PDWBW). The PDWBW has developed 29 gender specific clauses that can be used as a model for women leaders while negotiating with employers and which aim to benefit women workers and respond to their social, labour, and health related needs. These include :

- ♀ Women who give birth to twins should be given a total of two hours to breastfeed/express milk with full salary paid (in almost all Latin American countries the legal requirement is only one hour);
- ♀ Women who give birth through caesarean section should be guaranteed 60 days of maternity leave post-birth with full salary (in most countries the law stipulates only 54 days);
- ♀ All female workers must be guaranteed time off for a pap test / cervical smear when needed;
- ♀ When women are required to take sick leave for any reason, the company should pay 25 percent above the statutory sick pay.



Other clauses refer to the provision of women-appropriate personal protective equipment and specific company policy and grievance mechanisms to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

The model PDWBW clauses have been successfully negotiated into collective bargaining agreements in Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala and Panama. COLSIBA are supporting their affiliates in other countries to negotiate these clauses into worker-employer agreements and contracts wherever possible.

COLSIBA work can be applied across the banana industry as well as in other sectors and countries. Ms Torres Valoy explained that currently, COLSIBA is working on a campaign on the uptake of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and looking for ways to influence its labour centres to seek ratification across Latin American countries.

In terms of next steps for adapting the BOHESI manual guidelines and training in the Latin American region, there are some specific proposals. In July, women members of Federation of Agricultural Workers' Unions of Honduras (FESTAGO) began to carry out a review of agricultural occupational health in the banana industry of Northern Honduras. There will be a review and analyses of risk statistics for banana workers of the Northwest Zone of Honduras including injuries and causes with loss of functional capacity. In addition, proposals are being elaborated for preventive occupational health programs in the banana agro-industrial area.

4. Q&A

Thus far, panellists and participants noted that issues relating to women's OHS are even more pronounced as all countries face the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Ms Martha Anker, Anker Analytics LLC**, asked what the gender implications for COVID-19 are. Are infections being tracked? Are those who test positive for the virus allowed to recover? Are they spreading it? And finally, since women are often implicated in infectious diseases as caretakers in the family, what are the implications for pregnancies?

Ms Adwoa Sakyi, IUF Africa, responded to **Ms Anker's** question with regard to Ghana, whose Ministry of Health monitors the issue. The banana industry there, by and large, was considered essential and efforts were made to ensure employers respect WHO's COVID-19 guidelines. Ghana's parliament is also reviewing the country's health and safety bill in light of the pandemic.


Ms Cooper added that a specific conference call of the GE-TF about COVID-19 impacts on women workers and producers took place in June, to feed into the WBF's Exceptional Session of the Steering Committee (SC18) on the impacts of COVID-19 on the banana industry. She added that restrictions related to the pandemic have exposed issues of domestic violence, particularly for those families who are not able to go to work.

Ms Amponsah Awuah added that with the outbreak of the pandemic, GEL management respected protocols to protect the lives of workers, including women workers. For instance, she noted, they ensured proper handwashing facilities and they provided masks for 3 000 workers. In an attempt to respect social distancing, the number of buses taking workers home was increased by about 50 percent.

Ms Madison Hopper, Equifruit, asked how effective Fairtrade Certification is in offering any specific benefits or protections for women in the banana sector (specifically plantation workers). Also, how do those efforts compare to those made by the in-house sustainability programs of banana companies?

Mr George Kporye, Fairtrade Officer at Golden Exotics Ltd, responded that fair trade systems can complement the efforts of companies by, for example, investing in improved transportation for workers and creche facilities for workers' children. In terms of sustainability all around, there are specific protocols within Fairtrade Africa that require sustainability issues to be kept on the frontline.

Mr Victor Prada, WBF Secretariat, mentioned that the recently published BOHESI Manual on Health and Safety in the Banana Industry - Ghana is meant to support the creation of a clear strategy for achieving decent work in the



country's banana export industry. Since Ghana's parliament is poised to pass a new health and safety bill this year, **Mr Prada** asked the participants and colleagues from Ghana for any updates (also given that general elections are scheduled for December 2020).

Mr Kporye confirmed that the bill is in Ghana's parliament and has passed the first stage. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, things have slowed and the bill has lost some traction. Mr Kporye remarked that, however, an election year could be a good opportunity to step up pressure and get it passed before the voting.

Ms Iris Munguia, COLSIBA/FESTAGRO, reinforced the importance of discussing taboo issues related to women at work which are not currently on trade union agendas, work agendas, nor on company agendas. Many participants agreed that methodology needs to be changed: not only do taboo issues need to be discussed at work among women but also between men and women in mixed workshops. Discussions at home are also critical so that changes can be accepted and implemented in the family context.

Ms Shruti Patidar, IUF Asia/Pacific, asked whether there are any specific safety measures in place for the aerial spraying of pesticides practiced in many Latin American countries. **Mr Alistair Smith, Banana Link**, responded citing a recent study in Costa Rica on the effects of aerially sprayed fungicides on women's reproductive health. **Mr Kporye** added that in his experience the aerial spray is limited to the weekends when no workers are in the field. **Ms Munguia** shared that in the past they also carried out aerial spraying only during weekends. Now, however, the spraying is programmed throughout the week making sure workers are not present in the area being sprayed. She added that so far it has been a positive achievement.

Another participant added that areas where food is consumed must also avoid aerial spraying. Another noted that aerial spraying when workers are in the field tends to happen in situations in which trade unions are absent.

Participants discussed how women's participation in the workplace can extend to several activities, like post-harvest and other tasks.

One participant mentioned that at COLSIBA, women are encouraged to participate in various activities within the trade union. There are also technical trainings relevant to women. For instance, one is on hurricane response. It was noted that after hurricanes, it is women who suffer the most.


Ms Selfa Sandoval, COLSIBA/SITRABI, emphasized the key role of women's committees within COLSIBA in various countries, which empower women by teaching them skills. In fact, many women have retired from the banana industry and found other work based on the trainings provided by women's committees.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this first in a series of four webinars of the WBF's Task Force on Gender Equity was to raise awareness on key issues surrounding the health and safe employment of women workers in the banana industry. In addition, the webinar highlighted existing BOHESI gender guidelines that are already being adapted to various country and region scenarios.

These critical discussions on the health and safety concerns of women workers will reinforce the next steps and activities that will be conducted under the GE-TF's priority area.

At the next GE-TF webinar in September on sexual harassment and gender-based violence, participants will continue to work on some of the issues raised today. All participants who participated in today's webinar will be invited to all three upcoming GE-TF webinars to be held later this year.



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