

## **L'organisation des travailleuses dans le secteur de l'exportation horticole : études de cas d'Afrique de l'Est**

Bénédicte Brahic, Marta Medusa Olaiya, Susie Jacobs, avec Rachel English

### *Résumé*

*Cet article examine l'œuvre de Women Working Worldwide, organisme basé au Royaume-Uni qui, en collaboration avec ses partenaires, soutient la création de stratégies de sensibilisation et de syndicalisation visant à faire reconnaître et respecter les droits des travailleuses. Les auteures explorent la question souvent négligée des travailleuses occasionnelles et de la syndicalisation dans le secteur de l'exportation horticole en Afrique de l'Est. L'article se base sur les données primaires recueillies par la recherche-action avec les travailleuses dans des exploitations horticoles en Éthiopie, en Tanzanie et en Ouganda. Les auteures démontrent qu'en mettant l'accent sur les besoins des travailleuses, la campagne féministe de syndicalisation a promu de nouvelles formes d'organisation de la main d'œuvre. L'article met en lumière les succès, les obstacles et les défis à venir.*

## **Organizing Women Workers in the Agribusiness Sector: Case Studies from East Africa**

Bénédicte Brahic, Marta Medusa Olaiya, Susie Jacobs with Rachel English<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*This article is based on the work carried out by Women Working Worldwide - a UK-based organization which supports, along with its partners, the development of advocacy and organizing strategies for the recognition and the enforcement of the rights of women workers. It explores the often overlooked question of casual women workers and labour organizing in the East African export horticultural sector. This article draws on primary action research and looks more particularly at horticultural farms in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda. It demonstrates that by putting a focus on the needs of women workers, feminist labour agitation has promoted new forms of labour organization. It highlights successes, barriers and challenges for the future.*

### **Introduction**

This article focuses on the organization of women working on a casual basis on agribusiness farms. It discusses the case of women workers in East African horticulture, a hitherto little-researched group in a sector often overlooked in social research. It argues that, despite having historically neglected women casual workers in the formal sector, trade unions promoting inclusive gender-sensitive policies and implementing gender-minded strategies can engineer change for casual women workers. This does not imply that traditional labour organizing alone can address circumstances that create gender disadvantage and subordination. In order for trade unions and other labour organizations to address the full spectrum of issues faced by women workers, gender factors – both economic and ‘extra-economic’ – must be recognized and addressed.

Our discussion is based on examples taken from activist research conducted by the NGO Women Working Worldwide (WWW) and its partner organizations in East Africa working in the horticulture sector. More specifically, this article focuses on

two programmes led by WWW and its partners, entitled *Promoting Women Workers' Rights in African Horticulture* (2005-2007) and *Developing Strategies for Change for Women Workers in African Horticulture* (April 2008-March 2011). These programmes concentrate on redressing the casualization and informalization of labour – especially women's labour – encouraged by neo-liberal processes. The article discusses organizing strategies addressing the situation of women on export-oriented horticultural estates in Africa, many of whom work without contracts. It focuses on issues raised through the research conducted, and how these have been addressed through labour organizing.

In order to locate the context of emergence of the present article, it is important to give a brief overview of the work carried out by WWW. Founded in 1983, WWW is a UK-based organization that works in partnership with other NGOs, trade unions and solidarity networks to support the development of advocacy and organizing strategies for the recognition and the enforcement of women workers' rights. In addition to providing administrative support to access resources which can be channelled proactively towards women workers, WWW provides expertise in the area of gender and work as well as links to international solidarity movements and academic networks. WWW critically works along a product supply chain and is able to negotiate with retailers and buyers in order to influence them to address key issues raised by workers. Concurrently, WWW's principal aim is to build the capacity of women workers themselves to negotiate with their employers, and represent themselves in labour negotiations. WWW has recently supported women workers in the cut flower and horticultural industries, first in Kenya and Zambia and more recently in Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Its current partners (to whom this article refers) include the Tanzania Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (TPAWU), the National Federation of Farm Plantation Fishery and Agro-Industry Trade Union (NFFPFATU) in Ethiopia, and the Uganda Workers' Education Association (UWEA), a labour organization which has been working closely with trade unions.

The article is organized into five sections. The first section reviews some key issues concerning gender and trade unions. The second part discusses WWW's action research methodology used and the third, the conditions of women employed on cut-flower farms in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania. The fourth and fifth sections

explore the organizing strategies pursued in order to reach out to and to organize casual women workers, followed by an examination of the challenges still faced.

### **Women, gender and trade unions**

In focussing on the challenges of organizing casualized women workers, it is useful to recall some of the history of relations between women workers and mainstream trade unions before considering the recent history between trade unions and women casual workers. Women and mainstream unions have often had a conflicted history. In an effort to characterize the relationship between women workers and trade unions, Colgan and Ledwith (2002) identified six strategies of challenge and resistance developed by women workers to organize their representation in labour relations. These are exclusion, demarcation, inclusion, usurpation, transformation and coalition. This article particularly focusses on inclusion (through gender mainstreaming), transformation and coalition strategies implemented by WWW's partner organizations, and supported by WWW.

Trade unions have not always been receptive to gender equality in the workplace, and the early history of some Western trade unions was marked by exclusion of women workers (Balsler, 1987, Drake 1920). Indeed, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new (male-dominated) unions were in the process of establishing themselves as key stakeholders in industrial relations. Unions representing male workers regarded women workers – relative newcomers in the waged world of work – as a burden who could potentially threaten the emergent male workers' solidarity (Cook, 1993). Societal representations of women and their role reinforced this slant, confined women to 'women's trades' and hindered their organization into a coherent force for change.

Some historians have regarded the parallel historical development of trade unions and socialist parties as a critical factor in the non-recognition of women-specific issues in labour relations, although this is a contested matter (Cook, 1993). Socialists and Marxists usually assumed that the replacement of the capitalist system with a socialist order (*ibid.*) would annihilate all inequalities (such as gender and/or race-related inequalities) and therefore, efforts should be concentrated on this goal. In his work *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels (1972) had a more nuanced

analysis of women's subordination, but assumed that they would achieve equality within the home and in society through going out to work and bringing a wage into the family. If women workers had specific needs, these should not take precedence over their demands as proletarians. Engels' perspective, however, overlooked the double oppression of women as women and as workers (Curtin, 1999).

Later on, as some Western socialist parties entered into government, they, and union partners, tended to dichotomize the handling of women's issues. Political parties saw 'women's issues' as matters appropriate for social and welfare policy, and dealt with issues such as childcare and maternity leave through formulating legislation. As a result, this meant that such matters were initially seen as falling outside the competence of trade unions (Cook, 1993). However, throughout the middle to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the world of (waged) work underwent major changes. The number of women in formal workforces throughout the world was increasing rapidly, which led unions to start focussing on issues of equity, including questions such as equal pay (Munro, 1999). This change in orientation led to the progressive unionization of women workers. In the early stages of this change, women continued to remain underrepresented in the activities and leadership of virtually all mainstream unions (Cobble, 1990). The lack of female representatives in mainstream unions was thought to have hindered the inclusion of women's concerns in labour negotiations (Heery and Kelly, 1988). In contrast, recent contributions (Colgan, Ledwith, 2002, Crain, 1994, Silvera, 2006) suggest a wider inclusion of women workers and the recognition of their specific issues by trade unions. The organization of the tertiary sector, which contains a large number of women, has contributed to the furtherance of gender mainstreaming in some trade unions (Crain, 1994).

Looking back on the history of women workers and trade unions, Balser (1987) argued that women workers have managed to create a significant union history of their own despite facing multiple obstacles. In effect, the subordinate place of women in the world of work and in the wider society inhibited their participation in trade unions (Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994 and Walby, 1986). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2000), specific expressions of women's subordination such as illiteracy, family responsibilities and/or lack of confidence in their abilities have been critical barriers to their unionization. In addition to the

external challenges described above, a series of internal challenges associated with unions themselves have been identified as hindering the participation, organization and representation of women workers (Franzway, 2002). A male-dominant culture within mainstream unions (Silvera, 2006) meant (and often means) that it was easy to overlook women-specific issues or to consider them as “non-essential luxury items” (Crain, 1994: 243). Additionally, Munro (1999) identified both practical obstacles as well as institutional ones to women’s trade union participation: examples include inconvenient meeting times and male domination within organizations. Understanding the barriers hindering women workers in taking part in unions assists in lifting such barriers and contributes to the larger process of gender mainstreaming within labour movements.

Over the past decades, the intensification of the process of globalization and the concomitant demands of global capitalism dramatically altered the face of work. Characterized by heightened flexibilization and casualization, the global restructuring of the economy has led to the rapid ‘feminization’ of entire sectors of activity (Standing, 1989). These casual (women) workers labour at the margins of ‘normal’ employment – full-time employment with open-ended contracts (Munck, 2004). Moreover, they often work in isolation and have hitherto proven difficult to organize into a coherent force for change (Mitter, 1994). Casual women workers are doubly at risk: first, as women and, second, in regards to their disadvantaged position in the global value chain. Mimicking their initial position towards women workers, trade unions have traditionally been reluctant to engage with casual workers as these workers tend not to be union members and can represent a potential threat to unions’ power of leverage. Additionally, the existence of legal restrictions regarding the organization of casual workers as well as the specific implications of their conditions of employment (e.g. low income, high mobility and propensity to switch jobs, flexible working hours and work schedule) have hindered their organization.

As suggested previously, the history of trade unions and women workers often appears to be understood as separate from the history of trade unions and casual workers. However, an intersectional analysis is critical to understanding the complexity of contemporary industrial relations (Holgate et al., 2006); intersectional analyses should recognize differences in the employment status of workers as salient divisions in the workforce. The recognition of the complex

nature of industrial relations opens up new possibilities in terms of labour organization. Several authors such as Curtin (1999) and Kainer (2006) argue that gendering labour strategies “continues to hold out opportunities for reinvigorating labour movements, and needs to be considered in debates on the future of unions” (Kainer, 2006: 30). In other words, gendering labour issues could potentially broaden and renew the appeal of the labour movement and potentially transform it into a more powerful social movement. Concomitantly, different strategies are currently being explored to organize casual workers, some of them attempting to mainstream gender within existing unions. For instance, women workers’ committees (WWCs) have been created within trade unions; they can help to offer solutions to gender issues raised by casual workers outside a formal bargaining structure (see below). In spite of a complicated history between women, casual workers and trade unions, connections are being forged to engineer change.

Organizing female casual workers is critical to ensuring the relevance of trade unions, which, in the current economic climate, must engage with the changing face of the labour force. For trade unions, this may ultimately mean defending women workers’ *specific* needs and rights whilst also addressing their concerns as casual workers (Birchall, 2001). Highlighting the pressing nature of this issue, Gallin (2001) warns that the inclusion of women casual workers constitutes an existential challenge for labour organizations and trade unions.

## **Research methodology**

This section discusses the research methodology employed by WWW and its partners in devising strategies that promote change for women workers in African horticulture. It first highlights the relevance of action research in the work of WWW and its partners, and then provides details of the research work conducted by WWW and its partners.

Action research is understood as the production of knowledge with the logic of action (Wills and Hurley, 2005). Typically, action research is a process that combines research, education and advocacy (Hale, 1996, Reid, 2004). Crucially, action research entails the continued collaborative and cooperative work done by partner organizations and target groups themselves. Action research was chosen by WWW and its partners as their preferred methods of

enquiry as it presents several advantages. First, it is important to note here that the existing research on women and organizing in Africa is limited. The use of qualitative research methods such as semi-structured, in-depth interviewing enables researchers to explore the research field as there is no prior literature from which to draw their leads. Additionally, the situation in the horticultural industry is very dynamic and the design of advocacy strategies requires WWW and its partners to gain an accurate understanding of the circumstances of workers on the ground. Action research enabled a more accurate and specific understanding of women workers' concerns. The strategies devised by WWW and its partners following an initial baseline survey were aimed at initiating change in the concerns identified. The continuous interaction between researchers and participants ensures the relevance of the work conducted on the ground. Progress can be monitored and strategies adjusted accordingly. Finally, action research contributes to the general strategy of empowerment of women workers as, perhaps for the first time, the women are asked to express their views and to take control of their lives. Their voices are heard, recognized and celebrated. In the context of the programmes aiming to empower women workers in African horticulture, the use of action research has enabled WWW and its project partners first, to collate new data; second, to reach all categories of workers (particularly the most vulnerable such as women casual workers) and, third, to support education, organizing and advocacy strategically.

As Hale (1996) and others point out (see e.g. Wills and Hurley, 2005), action research is conducted using a wide a range of techniques and research methods. In order to map out the sector and highlight women workers' issues, WWW and its partner organizations used qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews with workers and managers, focus group discussions with workers, multi-stakeholder workshops, and observation. Initial research findings were verified and confirmed by the respondents through a feedback workshop. These findings were then discussed at meetings with factory managers. Both managers and WWW's partners agreed to use these as a baseline against which subsequent changes in workplace conditions could be measured. Throughout the project, changes were monitored and the strategy implemented was continuously re-evaluated to meet the needs observed by partners on the ground. Partners conducted follow-up surveys after six months: they reported on the progress made on a number of indicators

reflecting the key issues identified during the initial research phase and agreed to at the inception of the project. To ensure transparency and research quality, the data obtained and the changes observed were examined and validated by external evaluators at the end of the programme.

During these programmes, a total number of 891 workers, of whom 625 were women, on 38 farms in three countries participated in the research. In Ethiopia, researchers used a sample of 15 farms. Over the course of the programmes, 384 Ethiopian workers, including 269 women, were interviewed as well as 15 farm managers and 19 key informants, namely one Federation Leader, 6 local labour specific government officials and 12 local residents. In Tanzania, a sample of 12 farms was selected and a total of 240 respondents were interviewed. Among them were 104 women and 53 men, 48 TPAWU branch officials (27 women) including Women Workers Committee (WWC) members, 22 officials (10 women) from the Tanzania Horticulture Association (TAHA), the Labour Institutions and Arusha Regional Authority and 14 management staff or supervisors (all women). In Uganda, where 11 farms were sampled, 350 workers, including 253 women, were interviewed, in addition to 17 farm managers (3 women), 2 women union officers, 10 Union leaders (6 women), 3 Line ministry officials (including one woman) and 22 people from the communities surrounding the farms, 10 of whom were women. Interestingly, partner organizations used different sampling strategies to meet their research objectives. Whilst the Ethiopian and Ugandan partners chose randomly to select workers using attendance lists compiled by farms' human resources departments, the Tanzanian partner prioritized the representation of all categories of stakeholders (workers, management staff, union officers, government representatives etc.); TPAWU only interviewed workers on farms which already had a trade union presence. Worker interviews and focus group discussions were supplemented by interviews with management personnel, government officials and NGO and union representatives.

Action research allows flexibility and closely reflects the concerns of the population it involves. We note that the data and issues presented here are reflective of the situation on the farms at the time project partners conducted the research. Since then, follow-up surveys have shown some improvements in working conditions.

## **Background: The conditions of female casual workers on farms**

The horticultural industry in these three countries has been marked by reliance on casual labour, including part-time, temporary and seasonal work, to meet demands of ‘just in time’ production (Kumar, 1995). Women are mainly employed in insecure and labour-intensive jobs, and form the majority of the African horticultural workforce. For example, research on Ethiopian farms indicated that women represented approximately 71% of employees. At the onset of the programme, a majority were employed either as daily labourers with written contracts (28%) or else had *no* contractual terms of employment (35%). Only about 27% of the workers had permanent contracts. However, a substantial proportion of temporary workers had been working for more than six months, which indicates that workers are systematically being employed on a de-facto permanent basis without being awarded permanent contracts (NFFPFATU, 2010, WWW, 2007). In Uganda, about 60% of the workforce was female, and 45% of workers had no contracts (UWEA, 2010b: 11).

Non-permanent workers have been identified as the most disadvantaged group amongst African horticultural workers. Indeed, casualization has numerous implications for the conditions of work and workers. With some exceptions, non-permanent workers encountered similar problems in all the countries involved in the horticulture project (WWW, 2007). First, non-permanent workers had no access to employment benefits; these typically include maternity leave, paid annual leave, set working hours, overtime pay, sick leave, access to social protection schemes, medical benefits (and compensation for work-related injury), housing allowances, the right to join a union, breaks and payment during public holidays. In addition, casual workers were also excluded from any opportunities for promotion.

A key challenge for casual workers is increasing their income levels. Whilst it was found that casual workers received an identical basic wage to permanent employees in Uganda and Ethiopia, research in Tanzania revealed that workers subcontracted by external agents and not listed individually on payroll were paid less than the minimum wage and less than permanent workers were in identical job roles. In addition to blatant cases of discrimination, such as the ones observed in Tanzania, research has shown that even when receiving identical basic wages, casual workers were systematically at a disadvantage in terms of disposable income levels

in comparison to permanent staff members. Lesser income levels are not only linked to less regular employment but also stemmed from the costs associated with the lack of access to the employment benefits listed above. Lack of payment for leave and being on hourly-paid contracts (which do not include weekends for example) had a negative impact on income levels for casual workers.

In addition to low income levels, casual workers, and women in particular, experienced increased vulnerability. Insecure employment status, coupled with the lack of written contracts, means that casual workers are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse – including sexual harassment by supervisors – and to unfair dismissal. Tanzanian and Ugandan partners highlighted how high levels of unemployment, coupled with casual recruitment strategies (such as ‘recruitment at the gate’ whereby jobseekers wait at farm gates to be hired for work), made it difficult to expose abuse of workers’ rights. Even where women have rights, insecure working conditions meant that they cannot claim them.

Concerning issues of health and safety, “it (the use of pesticides and other chemicals in the production process) is a particular problem for workers in confined spaces such as green houses, where exposure tends to be high, and employment, often female” (Barrientos, 2007: 5). Health and safety procedures, in relation to the handling of pesticides and chemicals, are often negligent: workers lament the lack of provision of protective clothing to handle chemicals. The exposure of pregnant women to chemicals had serious health implications for women and their unborn children. With regard to health and safety issues, casual workers were shown once again to be more at risk than permanent workers. In Tanzania and Uganda, it was found that workers were not provided with suitable protective equipment on the grounds that these workers were deemed ‘unreliable’ by their employers (WWW, 2007). This had specific implications for women workers in regards to their reproductive health and roles.

As suggested above, the lack of maternity protection was a central concern for casual women workers who often had to choose between starting/expanding a family and retaining their jobs. In many instances, pregnancies led to the termination of employment. Employers either made pregnant women redundant or else compelled them to take redundancy as they could not cope with the physical nature of the work. In Uganda, UWEA (2010a, 2010b)

reported that casual workers often lack access to full-time maternity leave and were unable to return to work after childbirth. Some respondents indicated they were forced to choose between taking their maternity leave or retaining their temporary jobs on farms. The case of Nakawunde, a Ugandan casual worker, illustrates this situation (UWEA, 2009). After the birth of her child, Nakawunde presented her application, with supporting medical documents, to claim 60 working days maternity leave. In her interview, she clearly recalled her manager's words:

“You are a casual worker, we cannot grant you maternity leave. Go back home and never come back here. (...) You have nothing to claim here and be assured that on your return to work you have to apply for work afresh.”

As she feared the long-term financial hardship caused by a potential job loss, Nakawunde decided to resume work a week after she had given birth. As a result, she developed severe health complications. She also had to take her 10 year-old sister Joy out of school to look after the baby whilst she was at work. Within a month, the baby was emaciated, developed pneumonia and died. Nakawunde's case, which is not an isolated one, demonstrates the severe implications of casual employment for workers, their families and the community as a whole. Similarly, on Ethiopian farms, while 42% of the workers interviewed were entitled to paid maternity leave, as many as 21% disclosed that they were not aware of this entitlement. None of the farms surveyed had a day care centre for pre-school age children (NFFPFATU, 2010).

Gender bias and stereotyping contribute to keeping women in precarious employment. Action research indicated how gender discrimination in employment is embedded in social norms that consider women more compliant and better suited for certain types of horticultural work, such as picking and packing. This work is physically demanding, low-paid and has fewer training opportunities. One employer stated that he prefers to employ women because they are “less demanding, more stable and can easily be managed” (UWEA, 2010b: 14). Research conducted by TPAWU found that many respondents held that women are “docile” and therefore may be less likely to stand up to employers who withhold rights (TPAWU, 2010a: 36).

## **Organizing women casual workers**

Trade union structures, as indicated above, have generally worked with formally-employed workers and have historically neglected women workers' concerns. Nonetheless, the trade unions involved in WWW and its partners' projects have come to play an instrumental role in improving the lives of casual workers. The body of evidence produced through action research has been used as leverage in negotiations with farm management, government bodies and international buyers.

WWW's partners employ a number of strategies in their attempts to organize casual workers and to negotiate improvements in working conditions. These include the following: identifying the scale of problems and specific issues affecting non-permanent workers through research (see above); strengthening awareness of labour rights through training and awareness-raising meetings on the farms (thus enabling women to better represent themselves, to get organized and take up positions of leadership); representing workers' concerns and negotiating fairer working conditions through collective bargaining, and lobbying government for changes in practice and enforcement of existing labour laws. Training programmes help to bridge gaps in workers' knowledge about their rights. Commenting on the impact of the training on her life, a Ugandan farm worker said,

[o]ur eyes have been opened. We are now no longer going to be taken for granted by the management. They have been blindfolding us by keeping away such information from us. We are now able to stand up for our rights and face any challenges that may confront us (UWEA, 2009: 19).

While it is difficult to gauge the extent to which awareness of labour rights has translated into casual workers' involvement in union activity – or in any other form of labour activism – the evidence suggests that it has empowered workers to challenge the abuses they face within the workplace: “reporting of individual cases was a result of awareness of their rights and those reported proved right” (Moshia, 2011). For instance, Ugandan and Tanzanian partners observed a rise in the number of cases of sexual harassment and labour rights abuses (such as unfair termination and discrimination) reported to union branches and WWCs by women workers after they received labour

rights awareness training (UWEA, 2010a, 2010b; TPAWU, 2010b). As highlighted by Phillipina Mosha, Project Coordinator for WWW's Tanzanian partner TPAWU, awareness raising meetings have led to visible changes for non-permanent workers. In Tanzania, several workers were issued permanent legal contracts after demanding them. They now enjoy employment benefits and are treated equally. As a result of awareness meetings, workers also demanded that their employers provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to all workers without discrimination. Reports indicate that most farms now comply with regulations on PPE. Finally, Mosha (2011) noted a general change in former non-permanent workers' attitudes as a result of the training sessions. Their confidence had grown and they felt empowered as they could participate in trade union activities with their fellow workers. Beyond the information and the training received by individual workers, awareness strategies contributed to formation and organization of a collective body of workers.

Concurrently, the negotiation of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) has been instrumental in allowing women to voice their concerns (Dickens, 2000). As the research carried out by WWW and its partners on the East African horticultural farms demonstrates, CBAs have contributed to initiating change in the working conditions of casual women workers. More specifically, CBAs have helped to ensure farm managements' compliance with national labour laws in various countries. They have also introduced policies specifically addressing (casual) women workers' concerns: e.g. maternity rights, discrimination, working hours, health and safety issues and sexual harassment. For example, in Uganda, the signing of the sectoral CBA in August 2010 has meant that all farms in the sector are now covered by sexual harassment, harsh treatment and equal opportunities policies. Reflecting on the Tanzanian case, Phillipina Mosha (2011) highlighted how WWCs played a key role in the negotiation process leading to the signing of CBAs. The mainstreaming of WWCs via their recognition in the TPAWU constitution has empowered these women-only structures within the union to play an instrumental role in influencing negotiations concerning women's issues during CBA negotiations. However, while CBAs do not cover the rights of workers who are not union members – which includes casual workers – the trade unions working with WWW have taken an active decision to include casual workers' needs in negotiations with farm management. Unions have

successfully negotiated with employers, reducing the use of casual labour and asserting workers' rights to a written contract. For instance, in Uganda between 2008 and 2010, 49% of contracts were converted to permanent term appointments on twenty farms monitored. During the same period, on the Ethiopian farms monitored, 50% of contracts were converted from casual to seasonal and permanent contracts, while in the Tanzanian farms monitored, the percentage of workers with written contracts increased from 60% to 95% (WWW, 2010b). CBAs have also tackled issues such as sanitary conditions on farms and the use of protective clothing.

Where CBAs have not been agreed to or while they are being finalized, it has still been possible to support casual workers through strategies that address their most serious needs. WWCs within farms have played an important role. They have provided all women workers (both permanent and casual women workers) with a space where they could express their specific concerns; they have helped to voice and to seek redress for the issues and abuses reported by women. As Alice Akello, a Ugandan union organizer puts it: "Women's Committees are the only major way women can discuss, dissect and articulate their issues without being overshadowed by the men...." (WWW, 2010a). WWCs have been a leading conduit whereby casual workers' problems have been brought to the attention of farm management. One such instance is sexual harassment in the workplace: campaigning around this issue and support provided by union Women's Committees has made casual workers aware that this is not something they have to endure and that they can seek redress through complaints and grievance procedures. As these examples illustrate, throughout the duration of the project, WWCs have grown in size and have successfully become key stakeholders representing women workers in negotiations (see below).

Another initiative involves the promotion of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies (SACCOs) within the farms as a means of improving income management and providing access to credit. In 2010, there were about 1,400 registered SACCOs in Tanzania (Mosha, 2011) and 2,000 in Uganda (Amoding, 2011). They range from community-based initiatives recruiting members who work in the informal economy to workplace-based groups that provide savings and loan services to their members (ILO, 2006). SACCOs are managed by workers themselves who elect their own management committee. Both in Tanzania and Uganda, partner organizations

have organized training sessions on the procedures and conditions for establishing or joining existing SACCOs and have provided support throughout the application for official registration. These activities have seen the participation of both casual and permanent workers. At the time of writing, WWW and its partners had limited information concerning the impact of SACCOs but they are intended to increase workers' financial stability.

In addition to strategies to organize women casual workers and negotiate improvements in working conditions as outlined above, WWW and its partners develop specific approaches to directly tackle the casualization of employment in the horticultural sector. In order to do so, the body of evidence produced through research is used as leverage in negotiations with farm management. In regards to addressing the issues of casual employment, the involvement of governments is crucial to ensuring managers' compliance with labour laws. Partners have striven for labour inspectorates to fulfil their roles and to monitor the enforcement of the law within the farms. For instance, in Uganda and Tanzania, advocacy strategies are built on changes to the existing labour legislation, which bans the use of casual labour and non-contracted work. Recent labour laws in both countries (TPAWU, 2010a; UWEA, 2010a) also state that all workers, regardless of their type of contract, have equal right to employment benefits and can become union members. Partners have lobbied government officials for stricter and systematic enforcement of the law. Labour inspectorates' lack of resources has been a major hurdle to law enforcement in the countries monitored. In Tanzania, enhancing the role of labour inspectorates by promoting adherence to the law through awareness-raising on farms and with management has been a key strategy to tackle casual labour. On the Tanzanian farms monitored, awareness raising and the development of mature industrial relations (through, for example, the organization of multi-stakeholder meetings) has been vital to promoting adherence to the new legislation and contributed to the reduction in the number of casual (women) workers.

### **Obstacles to organizing casual women workers**

Casual labour in the farms is generally characterized by high turnover of workers. Workers tend to move from farm to farm in search of better – or simply available – job opportunities. Additionally, the unstable nature of their contracts, especially when combined with the

scarcity of work opportunities, means that workers may be unwilling to participate in organizing activities that may endanger their only opportunity to earn an income. Employers often take advantage of such fears. NFFPFATU's research in Ethiopia found that 47% of respondents expressed the view that "exercising their labour rights in general and being elected as an official and/or active union promoter will pose a threat to their employment" (NFFPFATU, 2010: 25). Partners in Uganda and Tanzania identified casualized recruitment practices which they termed "recruitment at the gate" as an obstacle to the organization of (casual) workers. Knowing that unemployed workers were outside the farms waiting to be hired was viewed as a threat by workers and contributed to their reluctance to claim their rights. Aware of the damaging impact of such practices in the development of mature industrial relations, trade unions regarded the eradication of casual recruitment techniques as a priority.

High turnover and weak contracts present significant challenges from a trade union perspective. WWW's partners, and unions more generally, have promoted a unified image of workers beyond the casual/permanent divide. This is similar to what Lindell describes as: "a discourse of 'sameness' ... that construes formal and informal workers as one working people" (2010: 21). Union organizers have employed different methods to mobilize this diverse workforce. General awareness meetings have been an important means of approaching workers, at least where managers can be persuaded to release workers for two-hour periods. However, this initiative has not always brought about the desired outcomes, particularly in the case of casual workers. As they are paid on a piece rate basis and normally have heavy workloads, it is not easy for casual workers to attend meetings during working hours. Thus, they remain unaware of their rights and the benefits of being unionized. Organizing is at times further complicated by management hostility towards unionism. Flavia Amoding, Uganda Project Coordinator comments:

While in search for information at the beginning of it all [i.e. the project], it was very difficult to gain access to the farms. No employer would allow us beyond the gate. We had to resort to waiting for workers outside the gate and catch up with them at the time of their coming out from the farm, usually from 5.30pm to 6.00pm. We would then gather them to some venue and conduct interviews with

them. Some workers would fear to be interviewed for fear of losing their jobs if any management staff sighted them ... (Amoding, 2010).

Management obstruction was a problem particularly on Ugandan farms. In 2005, when the UWEA attempted to gain access to the farms to conduct the research, it encountered strong hostility. Crucial to UWEA's success in overcoming initial hostility was the mobilization of established solidarity networks with international NGOs, including the German Food First Information and Action Network [FIAN]. FIAN, assisted by WWW, demanded freedom of association for horticultural workers, which improved unions' access to farms<sup>2</sup>. In 2010, the UWEA again galvanized international support in a campaign against a company which had repeatedly abused fundamental workers' rights through, for example, intimidation of trade union members, or exposing workers to chemicals, damaging health and sometimes resulting in fatalities. Pressure from labour organizations in the U.K, Germany, and Austria has persuaded farm management to comply with demands to improve working conditions and to respect workers' rights. The ability to campaign globally perhaps indicates – at least potentially – a more positive side to globalization.

### **Embedding feminist awareness within trade unions**

Women workers, independent of their employment status, often find that their issues are best represented and fought for by women leaders. The literature suggests that when women sit at the negotiating table, gender issues are much more likely to be included in collective bargaining (Dickens, 2000). Previous work conducted by WWW (and particularly the projects *Women Workers and Codes of Conducts - a consultation and education project (1998-2001)* and *Core Labour Standards and the Rights of Women Workers in International Supply Chains (2003-2005)*) corroborates this argument and highlights the importance of strong women leaders in improving women's lives at work and beyond.

Increasing women's participation within unions is of strategic importance. In acknowledgement of this fact, TPAWU in Tanzania has undertaken several strategies. It has delivered training on gender issues to both male and female workers with a view to creating a work environment conducive to women taking up a

greater role within the union. It has developed a Gender Policy for the union, set up a Gender Equality Department and introduced the use of gender sensitive planning tools and the allocation of a budget to fund activities such as Women Workers Committee meetings at zone and national levels. These efforts have increased women's participation within the union and the leadership. TPAWU reports that while the number of women branch chairs has increased slightly, from five in 2008 to seven in 2010, women's union membership has increased by 66%<sup>3</sup> over three years, from 2008 to 2010. Moreover, over the past six years, 114 women's committees have been formed in 114 branches, as well as a National Women's Committee (Mosha, 2010).

In addition to increasing women's participation in the union, mainstreaming women's representation in the organizational structure of the union is of paramount importance.

“In every gender sensitive union, women committees are embedded in the union constitution and at every structural level the women committee is represented.... The purpose of the women's committee representatives sitting at different structural level committee meetings is to feed in the women's issues into the different levels of decision making as to have women's issues discussed at the mainstream and to influence decision at all levels” (Amoding, 2011).

Reflecting on the Tanzanian case, Phillipina Mosha (2011) observed the growth of WWCs and their integration within the structure of TPAWU. In addition to their constitutional recognition, WWCs have been organized to replicate the structure of the union in order to ensure the representation of women workers and their specific issues at different levels of TPAWU hierarchy. As a result, WWCs have been formed at the branch level, the zone level and the national level (mimicking the structure of TPAWU). At the branch level, the WWCs present issues to the union branch committee for action. The WWC chairperson and secretary are members of the branch committee's constitutional meetings. Also, the chairperson and secretary of the branch participate as members of the WWC constitutional meetings. This institutionalization helps to mainstream the gender policy developed by TPAWU whose constitution currently requires that one in three workers' representatives is a

woman (Mosha, 2011). Amoding (2011) indicates how additional measures could also be taken to ensure that women's issues are being represented within the union: "every gender sensitive union must mainstream gender into all its structures and activities" (Amoding, 2011). For example, in Uganda, prior to UWEA's Quinquennial Delegates Conference (QDC), a women's conference is organized to allow women to discuss and prioritize their issues so that the key issues can be slotted in the QDC agenda.

As suggested above, WWCs need to be entrenched in the union constitution as well as recognized by the union and management to wield influence at the negotiation table. WWCs also need to be provided with adequate resources, such as the financial means to perform their tasks. Training and capacity building for participants and representatives were essential to develop WWCs' influence and their negotiating power and safeguarding their autonomy. Reflecting on the relationship between WWCs and the union, Amoding (2011) argues in favour of semi-autonomous WWCs which exist within the union structure but enjoy substantial independence. In the Ugandan case, this means that the general secretary can sit in the national women committee meetings as an ex-officio member without voting rights. For Amoding (2011), the semi-autonomous situation avoids the danger of a women's committee being the sole entity which works on women's issues. At the same time, this situation ensures that the WWC is not perceived as 'a union within the union.'

In Tanzania, the situation of workers is changing rapidly. In contrast, progress has been slow in Uganda and Ethiopia. In Uganda, while over 57% of union leaders on 20 farms are women; only four women's committees were formed between 2008 and 2010. In Ethiopia, in spite of the introduction of a gender policy for the union, women's participation remained low: even though women constitute about 75% of the workforce in the industry, on the farms sampled only 20% of core union leaders were female (NFFPFAITU, 2010: 26). Partners put forward a number of reasons to explain this phenomenon. Gender stereotyping and preconceived ideas, within and outside of unions, about the role of women have discouraged them from standing for leadership roles. Alice Akello, a union organizer makes the following argument:

Men in the union tend to think that they are above the women and therefore they should be the only ones to take decisions and lead. They expect women to remain under

the carpet and just say yes and endorse every decision taken by men and, since they are always the majority in leadership, women fear to speak up (WWW, 2010a: 39).

Another important factor in explaining gender gaps in leadership is women's time poverty resulting from the 'double burden' of work. Kirton and Healy (2008) cautions that unions must not use women's responsibilities as a reason to avoid organizing for gender equity: "... too much emphasis on family and domestic responsibilities tends to 'privatize' and individualize barriers absolving the unions themselves from any culpability" (Kirton and Healy, 2008: 4). While acknowledging that household divisions of labour must not be naturalized, it is nonetheless true that gender relations within the household are not often negotiable and many of the workers interviewed were single mothers. Additionally, WWW's partners report specific challenges around the formation of WWCs. On one hand, managers may be hostile to their formation, as women who are aware of their rights are more likely to struggle for these rights. On the other hand, some unions also display a lack of enthusiasm for women's committees: e.g. some claim they are under-resourced in terms of time and personnel and cannot provide the necessary support to train women to facilitate committee formation (Amoding, 2011). It appears that it is somewhat easier to increase women's union membership than to mandate an increase in the percentage of women trade union leaders.

If organizing casual women workers has posed a number of challenges, WWW's partners have nonetheless secured some achievements. The specific, gendered focus of the project itself has helped to uncover gendered issues at work: the very process of conducting action research has provided an opportunity for participants to discuss and to articulate the main issues affecting their working lives. This may be an impetus for further change. The research findings reveal the nature of rights abuses experienced especially by casualized workers and so partner organizations made an active decision to work on these issues. WWCs have played an instrumental role in raising casual women workers' issues and working towards the betterment of their working conditions. Despite the fact that women remain under-represented in the leadership of unions, the existence of several strong women leaders has helped to shift the focus on gender and the ongoing work of embedding gendered perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the work carried out by WWW and their partners, this article has explored the often overlooked question of casual women workers and labour organizing in the East African export horticultural sector. This article has drawn on primary research conducted through action research and focussing on women workers on horticultural farms in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda. It has focussed on issues raised by women themselves on African farms and highlighted how feminist labour agitation has promoted new forms of labour organization focussing on the needs of women workers – highlighting successes but also barriers and challenges for the future.

As the article suggests, the experiences of casual women workers is characterized by the semi-hidden nature of gender disadvantage and oppression which is compounded by the vulnerability of casual workers. This makes measures promoting gender equity difficult to formulate and to enforce. Thus, formal or contractual work in some sectors is useful in that it makes women's work more visible, and this visibility in and of itself tends to raise the status of the work. It is the very invisibility of casual women workers' work that renders their situation difficult to redress. Formalized wage work, of course, does not protect against discrimination – but it can offer some forms of redress, as well as benefits such as health and safety provisions and maternity leave. Some rural trade unions and allied organizations have concentrated on diminishing the amount of casual labour on farms by converting to permanent contracts: attacking casualization of labour in itself promotes greater gender equity as it is women who are most likely to suffer its effects.

Feminist campaigning has promoted new forms of labour organization attentive to the needs of women workers. In the East African cases considered, trade unions and WWW's partner organizations have been especially proactive in organizing casual workers and in addressing gender discrimination and oppression. The examples provided in this article reveal there is a potential for labour organizations to orient themselves towards issues of gender discrimination and gender equity – marking a break with mainstream unions' tendency towards gender blindness (Cook, 1993). Crucially, this does not come automatically, but through organization and agitation targeted to issues affecting women. As suggested here, unions have tackled casualization through strategies to convert

casual contracts of employment into permanent ones. They also have attempted to reach out to casual workers in an effort to address their specific needs (for instance, through the negotiation of CBAs and the creation of SACCOS). Critically, unions have sought to understand the gendered impact of casualization through the WWCs which have also acted as a form of informal organization for casual women workers. Open to all (permanent and casual) female workers, women's committees have several benefits. They allow 'spaces' for discussion of gender issues and of discrimination against women and provide a means of raising the visibility of gender subordination and abuses. Women's committees can also educate women about any existing rights and/or can mobilize them to claim rights. The action research carried out by WWC's partners indicates that such committees have been important in fostering and promoting women leaders and have addressed the vulnerabilities of casual workers such as sexual harassment and lack of maternity leave. Although this does not constitute 'organization' as such, the committees are forums in which to address such concerns.

Over the course of these projects, follow-up surveys have shown improvements in working conditions. Access to drinking water and segregated toilets for women workers contributed to the betterment of sanitary conditions in the workplace. Concomitantly, significant progress regarding compliance with occupational health and safety regulations was achieved. Women casual workers particularly benefited from the wider use of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The provision of training regarding the handling of pesticides and dangerous chemicals also helped to create a safer working environment for workers.

At least three factors have been of importance in the growth of gender-aware labour organizing in East Africa. First, trade unions recognize that the nature of workforces has altered so that many workers are casually employed; unions have an interest in recruiting more workers as members. Second, WWC and its partners' project concerns women's lives and work and so provided an impetus for focus on gender issues; action research highlighted the disproportion of casualized workers who are female. Unions then turned to CBAs in order to ensure that the use of casual labour was decreased and practices such as pregnancy testing as a prerequisite of recruitment were prohibited. Third, the existence of strong women leaders has been crucial to raising and addressing gender issues within unions

and workplaces. However, as noted, it has proven easier to build membership among women workers than to increase the number of women leaders within the union. Where women leaders exist, however, and choose to take up feminist issues, they can have a widespread and significant impact. They have helped to ameliorate the predicaments women in the horticulture industry face and more generally, have raised awareness of gender issues.

Another central point concerns the importance of networks, including international links. In many cases alliances ‘outside’ organizations or movements themselves have been important in raising the visibility of labour issues. Trade unions regularly make alliances with government bodies to, for example, promote proper enforcement of labour legislation. Although there exist continuing conflicts over ‘local’ and ‘global’ agendas, international pressure can sometimes be mobilized to support concerns raised at the local level, as in the case of union recognition and access to farms (in Uganda) cited above. Feminist movements often cross ‘borders’ as it may be difficult to raise issues of gender discrimination and subordination within communities (Jacobs 2004; Ferree and Tripp 2006). This is true also of gendered labour organizing; issues publicized outside local contexts are more likely to be addressed; conversely, raising issues through transnational linkages may prove easier than in local contexts. This stresses the importance of solidarity networks – particularly networks with an understanding of labour and gender issues.

Thus, both ‘gender’ and ‘labour’ are crucial in analysis and organization, as these examples indicate. Issues relevant to casual workers in horticultural farms are most obviously framed by factors easily analyzed within ‘labour’ frameworks: low pay, casual, precarious work and dangerous work conditions. However, women workers’ lives are framed (among others<sup>4</sup>) by households and communities and structured through subordinate gender relations, including lack of maternity and reproductive rights, unequal household responsibilities, subordinate household status and sexual harassment and abuse at work.

In order to successfully operate in contemporary conditions, many labour organizations must look outside ‘traditional’ forms of organization to recruit members – many of whom will be women. WWW’s work in encouraging organization of hard-to-reach casualized women workers in formal workplaces is one instance.

In order to meet the needs of workforces, labour organizations are likely to have to attend to women's demands. Many barriers and challenges for the future remain. However, the cases provided indicate that at least in some cases, this has been proven possible.

## Endnotes

1. Bénédicte Brahic, Research Officer, Women Working Worldwide. E-mail: b.brahic@mmu.ac.uk;
2. Marta Medusa Olaiya, Development Officer, Women Working Worldwide. E-mail: marta.women-w@mmu.ac.uk;
3. Susie Jacobs, Reader in Comparative Sociology (Manchester Metropolitan University), Board Member on WWW's Management Committee. E-mail: s.jacobs@mmu.ac.uk; and
4. Rachel English, Project Coordinator, Women Working Worldwide. E-mail: rachel.women-ww@mmu.ac.uk.
5. Campaigners in Germany and the UK launched a letter-writing campaign targeted at the export company Uganda Flower Exporters Association (UFEA) in support of unions which were not allowed access to the farms. UFEA subsequently granted partner and union access to some farms as well as to the employers' union and helped to obtain the farm managers' acceptance of the project.
6. Note that, because of the way interviews were structured, and because casual labour was not a main focus of the research, it is difficult to extrapolate figures referring to temporary workers only.
7. The social positions of women are, of course, also framed by other factors such as ethnicity and nationality, and sexual preference and generation.

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