

Case Study

The Panama Project and Implementation of the COLSIBA/Chiquita/IUF Sexual Harassment Clause

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ORGANISATIONAL OVERVIEW



COLSIBA, the Coordinating Body of Latin American Agro-industrial Unions established in 1993, is composed of unions in the banana and other agricultural industries such as sugarcane, cut flowers, coffee and palm oil, in Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Currently their union members represent over 70,000 workers.



Chiquita Brands International (originally called the United Fruit Company) was founded in 1899 and was the first major multinational banana company. Chiquita has operations in 70 countries worldwide in a wide range of products and employs over 20,000 people.



The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) is an international federation of trade unions representing workers employed in agriculture and plantations; the preparation and manufacture of food and beverages; hotels, restaurants and catering services; all stages of tobacco processing. The IUF is composed of 418 affiliated trade unions in 128 countries representing over 10 million workers.

SUMMARY

An international framework agreement was signed in 2001 by COLSIBA, Chiquita and the [International Union of Foodworkers](#) (IUF) on freedom of association, minimum labour standards and employment in Latin American banana operations. Various committees were established to monitor the agreement, including a Women's Committee which sought to seek solutions to common issues faced by women banana workers and their union representatives, namely; limited employment opportunities and sexual harassment. An annex to the framework agreement on sexual harassment was signed in 2013 to promote and strengthen a safe working environment, free of harassment, exclusion and inequality.

Chiquita operate in many Latin American countries but found through research, that Panama had the lowest levels of women in employment across their plantations with women making up just 9.7% of the Panamanian banana workforce in 2013. To address this issue, the Panama pilot project began in 2015 with the strategic aim of increasing the number of women in the workforce and varying the roles occupied by women through capacity building. 486 women were employed across many positions and on a variety of contract types at a time when Chiquita were looking to rejuvenate a lot of their farms in Panama.

An increased presence of women in the workforce has been maintained and continues to grow yearly, in fact between 2013 and 2017 Chiquita's female workforce grew by 54% in Panama. With an increase of women in the workforce it became imperative to monitor the implementation of the sexual harassment clause, along with Chiquita's code of conduct explicitly prohibiting harassment of any kind. The in-depth version of this case study looks at the measures Chiquita has put in place to tackle sexual harassment and how COLSIBA and local union, SITRAIBANA are raising rights awareness and work in collaboration with the company. A monitoring workshop was held in July 2018 by Iris Munguia (Coordinator of COLSIBA) and Rosalba Beker (Women's Coordinator of local union, SITRAIBANA) as part of this project.



WHAT DID & DID NOT WORK?

The project has succeeded with its aim to engage more women in work and has improved the finances of many families. It is also clear that Chiquita's engagement with COLSIBA on these issues is a successful result of the framework agreement.

Women taking part in a project evaluation workshop made the following comments about what has and has not worked from their perspective on the ground:

- They considered the pilot project had successfully created additional employment opportunities for local women. It is noted however that women have no control over household income making it harder for women to determine how their income is spent to benefit themselves and/or their households.
- Serious concern was voiced about sexual harassment in the workplace, specifically the targeting of temporary workers. COLSIBA and the women workers agree that temporary contracts leave women vulnerable to harassment under the threat of having contracts ended/not renewed. Chiquita report they have actively dealt with any reports of sexual harassment and after thorough investigation, there have been cases of dismissal of perpetrators and others have been reprimanded.
- Women working alone are also overly exposed to harassment by male co-workers.

There is a need to search for alternatives to improve the way in which women are employed, so that they can have stable jobs; COLSIBA see permanent positions as the only solution. This would secure the improvement experienced by their families and would also likely reduce the workplace sexual harassment and vulnerability to manipulation.

Chiquita and COLSIBA identified how challenging it is to redefine gender roles in Panama given the extremely patriarchal societal norms where Domestic violence is commonplace, exacerbated by high levels of alcohol dependency among men. Traditionally a women's role in Panama, as in many other Latin American countries, is to be a caregiver and take responsibility for domestic tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

COLSIBA say:

It is essential to understand local and cultural context before developing and implementing any initiative. It is almost imperative for women not only to be at the decision-making table but to also have the skills and confidence to voice their needs and represent others. A clear learning from this project is that women employed on temporary contracts are instantly vulnerable to discrimination and sexual harassment and with responsibility for the home predominantly falling to women, it is essential to create stable jobs which allow for childcare responsibilities to be met. All job roles should be available to women, not only "women's jobs." Furthermore, it is of the

utmost importance to involve and empower women employees and educate them on gender issues so that in the future they can lead and develop union and labour strategy.

Chiquita recommend:

- Collaboration between companies and unions is incredibly important.
- Education must be delivered to both men and women workers especially in cultures where gender roles are clearly defined, and a women's role is seen to be as a career and homemaker.
- There should be multiple channels to report grievances but first and foremost there should be confidence among workers that they can report directly to their line managers.
- Facilitate a women's committee on the ground who have a presence in the workplace.

Photos: COLSIBA

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