



‘Golden Exotics successfully improving and increasing women’s employment in banana export production’

Improving & increasing women’s employment at GEL

Progress report: January 2020

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Background

Since 2017, Banana Link and the IUF have worked in partnership with Golden Exotics Limited and parent company, Compagnie Fruitiere, to address low levels of women’s employment at their banana plantation in Ghana. In January 2018, all partners came together in a series of workshops with workers, their unions and management to respond to the findings of Banana Link commissioned research undertaken in the second half of 2017 to better understand how women in local communities felt about employment in banana production as well as working conditions for those women currently employed at GEL. The workshops concluded with a collectively agreed action plan of how to *‘Improve and increase women’s employment’*. The project was launched with an Advisory Committee¹ established to monitor progress and Banana Link and the IUF agreeing to an annual evaluative role, as part of active partnership in the project.

Methodology

In 2018, Banana Link and the IUF documented their evaluation of project progress in film - <https://vimeo.com/310164257>. During our visit in late September 2019 to evaluate the second year of project activity, IUF Africa and Banana Link conducted structured interviews with 49 women, interviewed 2 women supervisors, participated in a short field visit, and analysed feedback from 31 participants in a Fairtrade Africa funded Women’s Leadership training course. It should be noted that many of the recommendations in this summary evaluation report are based on discussions with these women, who were keen to offer solutions to the problems that they identified. GEL management were also very supportive during the visit. A subsequent field visit in November enabled Banana Link to view building at the creche site and to meet with the project Advisory Committee to discuss the full evaluation report.

Summary of findings

Sexual harassment

There is a very notable culture shift in terms of attitude towards sexual harassment. Throughout our visit we clearly felt – including during training sessions with 90 workers – that sexual harassment is now acknowledged as a genuine workplace issue at GEL. Sexual harassment was the number one concern reported in 2018 and this time all but 2 interviewees stated understanding how to make a complaint, with

¹ Members include the IUF, GEL management, members of the union Women’s Committee, General Agricultural Workers Union of Ghana TUC (GAWU), the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), Fairtrade Africa and Volta Rivers Estates Ltd (VREL)



some explaining how they had received education about this in the workplace. It is excellent that GEL has introduced its sexual harassment policy at workplace level although the policy could provide greater clarity on the complainant being able to tell anyone in the first instance that they trust, the importance of immediate action, the right to appeal and protection from retaliation as well as reference to strict timelines. It is unclear whether data about complaints is being analysed and reported to enable understanding of how effectively the policy is being implemented and whether workers feel safe to submit complaints when needed. There is also an opportunity for a revised policy to reflect and recognise the new ILO Convention 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the workplace.

Respect

In general, workers report being respected and treated equally in the workplace. Almost all say that they know how to raise a complaint or grievance in the workplace. We would however recommend introducing and communicating a gender policy that clearly states that women must – at all levels of employment – be treated with respect and that failure to do so will not be tolerated. *'Jokes are expensive'* was the observation of one of the interviewees who reported sexist attitudes in the workplace. Changing culturally embedded attitudes towards women will undoubtedly take time but it is imperative to consistently educate workers and most importantly their supervisors from induction onwards, to ensure that all understand and realise the company's clear commitment to gender equity. In Year 1 of the project the fact that women achieved parity with or surpassed men in terms of productivity was communicated and the business case for gender equity should continue to be promoted.

Occupational health and safety (H&S)

The majority believe that they are safe at work and are keen to try new tasks, although a notable number are happy where they are, including in organic production. It has been a pleasure to meet and talk with women who have recently started work in Golden Organics Limited (GOL). However, the H&S risks women reported are primarily in organic production, including challenges from irrigation and a lack of eye protection, which we note are being addressed by the H&S Committee and management as a whole. The gender data gap, whereby most of our data and therefore equipment is based around the male body, is reflected in complaints about inappropriately sized PPE provided to women. Sufficient access to, and the conditions, of washroom facilities (including showers) are an issue. GEL are increasingly responding to gendered health and safety risks for directly and subcontracted workers. It is welcomed that the bridging of drains continues for example, as does the refurbishment of all washroom facilities. Further adaptation of packhouses, with external ergonomic expertise and using the excellent model of Packhouse 23, can not only reduce health and safety risks for women (and men) workers but expand the possibilities of greater task rotation which could help address the risk of repetitive strain disorder and other health problems.

Participation in the Banana Occupational Health & Safety Initiative (BOHESI) extension programme in Ghana is already having an impact. In November, 26 GEL workers and supervisors participated in a 'Women in Health & Safety' training course with plans for this training to be rolled out at farm level and new gender guidelines are due to be adopted as part of the BOHESI manual being published in early 2020.

Most workers report being content working 40 hours, or between 40-48 hours a week although some were unsure given the variance in finishing times. A significant number of interviewees reported very late finishing, particularly in the organic packhouses. Given the significant unpaid hours of work before starting



and at the close of the day, it is imperative that closing times are not excessively late. Long hours are considered by workers to contribute to back pain, irregular menstruation and other health problems. Late completion also means women feeling unsafe on the way home from transport points. We recognise that GEL is striving to manage finishing times including commissioning and showing a film to incentivise earlier finishing, as well as introducing a bonus system.

Women in leadership roles

New employees reported being aware, including from existing workers, that GEL proactively recruits women (supervisors); *'Understood wanted fairness and to employ more women'*. 48 out of 49 women strongly agreed that they wanted to see more women in leadership roles; women believe that other women will understand their needs better than a male dominated supervisory and management structure. There are now 10 women in supervisory roles, with 2 of these managing a team of workers in the field/packhouse. As more women are recruited into supervisory roles it will be important to review how to ensure retention. This includes a good maternity package, offering sufficient training and the opportunity for women in supervisory and management roles to meet together to provide peer support.

Having interviewed the majority of women in supervisory roles it is clear that GEL is recruiting some very capable and talented women. A next step would be to the appointment of a woman AFM who can then identify women for internal promotion to the role of supervisor. Many workers are keen that existing employees have this opportunity *'Women have potential, they need a little encouragement or empowerment, then they are on top'*.

The second stage of Women's Leadership training went well and there was a marked increase in the confidence of participants however the key challenge is enabling women to use their training to identify and achieve collective goals in the workplace. Consequently, we are not yet seeing an action driven Women's Committee.

Union membership

One in five women reported not belonging to a union. This may be partly due to the disproportionate number of supervisors interviewed (7) but also reflects the need for unions to recruit new women employed in organic production, although we understand GAWU has recently been recruiting in GOL. More than one third of members report being unable to play an active role in their union and the majority do not think that they are consulted by the union in advance of CBA negotiations. This latter finding will make it particularly challenging to get gender clauses into CBAs.

Single women headed households

Only a third of women who described their households to us, and told us they had children, reported living with their husbands. We understand that this disproportionately high number of women as single heads of households is a particular demographic feature of this area. One suggestion of how the company can respond to women trying to track down absent fathers at GEL and to ease the financial constraints on women who are single heads of household, is to provide education about parental responsibilities. 33 interviewees reported 2-4 hours or more unpaid labour in the home every day. Few had anyone else contributing unpaid labour in their home.



Pregnancy and breastfeeding

There are some non-negotiables in work to improve women's employment, including meeting the needs of breastfeeding women especially given the increasing number of (young) women employees. Four women reported weaning their children early (before WHO recommended guidelines) because of a lack of access to breastfeeding when working. We are therefore delighted that an impressive creche facility is nearing completion with management working hard to ensure good professional childcare, underpinned by effective transport provision for parents and children. The new maternity policy will be an important tool for both workers and supervisors to address the negative attitude that some pregnant women report experiencing and to ensure that all are clear about maternity protection, including leave to attend antenatal classes. We recommend that GEL track pregnancies to understand what childcare provision could be required and how to best provide alternative but decent work tasks for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

Education

We remain consistent in our belief that providing functioning literacy (and English courses) would not only be a valuable investment in worker development but would also have significant impact at family and community level. We welcome the support offered by Fairtrade Africa to support the provision of functioning literacy classes at GEL in 2020.

Conclusion

GEL is making significant progress towards gender equity however as change is implemented new challenges and unintended consequences become apparent. The clear commitment from management to continue to consistently meet these demands is very impressive. The employment figures illustrate the impact of this commitment; in 2 years GEL has increased women's employment by 50%, from 8-12% of the overall banana workforce. In the organic production (GOL) women now represent more than 20% of workers, more than double the percentage in January 2018.

We encourage management to continue to make the best use of the expertise within the constituencies and organisations represented on the Advisory Committee, as well as from external stakeholders to achieve its goals. Collecting a range of appropriate data to measure the effectiveness of a strategic approach to gender equity is vital; undertaking a gender pay gap analysis could be a good way for GEL gauging improved workplace opportunities for women.

A next step could be for Compagnie Fruitière to explore whether the model of research and workshops to analyse and respond to barriers to gender equity used in devising this project could be adapted for use at their subsidiary, SCB, in Côte d'Ivoire.

The GEL project is an outstanding example of how an innovative management, working in collaboration with workers and their unions, can begin to build a more equitable workplace for all. This good practice should be learnt from for the benefit of the whole industry.