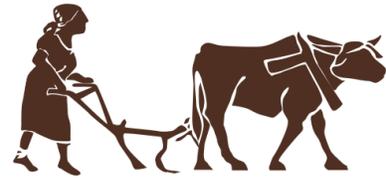


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Victims of their Bodies: Capitalism and Exploitation of Women's Labour on Floricultural Farms in Uganda

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Victims of their Bodies: Capitalism and Exploitation of Women's Labour on Floricultural Farms in Uganda

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricacies in the employment of women on floricultural farms in Uganda. Globally, floricultural farms employ predominantly women. However, women workers on the flower farms appear to be 'victims of their bodies' in that the socio-cultural construction of their bodies as feminine, informs the tasks they are allocated, their working conditions and remuneration. The key arguments advanced based on findings from JP Cuttings reveal that capitalism exploits women's labour by riding on the back of social and cultural construction of their bodies: flexible, delicate, meticulous and neat. These qualities are required to handle flowers that are delicate in nature and this makes women fit for labour-intensive but less-rewarding 'feminine' tasks. While some departments at JP Cuttings, such as harvesters, where the embedded tasks were categorised as 'light' and required an eye for detail, appeared to be reserved for women, other departments, for example, maintenance, construction and repair were dominated by men because the underlying roles and responsibilities seem to rhyme with the masculine cultural description. There was not a single woman in the maintenance, construction and repair department. Similarly, not a single man was involved in the harvesting of flowers. Although socio-cultural dynamics lie on the periphery of capitalism, they are either directly or indirectly intertwined in the wider capitalistic economy. Overall, women flower farm workers were assigned work, not based on their individual abilities, but on the dictates of society and culture, particularly the ways in which the 'feminine' bodies are constructed.

Keywords: women; labour; flowers; capitalism; Uganda; social; victims; culture

Introduction

Flower cuttings are like babies. They are tender and have soft tissues. So, it is only women who know how to nurse flower cuttings as they have tender and soft hands. Harvesting flowers is similar to nursing babies in the home. Men are not suited for this role. They have rough hands and are only gentle in their hearts.¹

Women undertake diverse tasks in both private and public, formal and informal, spaces. However, the majority of the roles and responsibilities which women engage in, and are allocated, at workplaces, often mirror their everyday domestic responsibilities in the household. The allocation of tasks to women is often informed by societal norms, practices and

¹A manager at JP Cuttings describing the suitability of women to engage in the harvesting of flowers and cuttings. Interview, 15 October 2020.

stereotypes. It is rarely based on their individual abilities and merit. Indeed, the quote above illustrates how gendered employment dynamics unfold in the floriculture industry particularly the ways in which socio-cultural stereotypes determine women's work. It also epitomises gender discrimination in the labour market, especially how sexist discrimination does not end in the private spaces, but follows them to the public sphere (Charles et al., 2018). Moreover, it highlights the contribution of capitalism to 'women labour unfreedom' as the majority of women are not at liberty to make labour-related choices or to intervene in how their lack of freedom invariably determines labour-market outcomes (Charles et al., 2018; LeBaron, 2015).

Debates on women's work in traditional rural communities, the changing nature of work in globalised production systems and working conditions under liberalised economic systems are on the rise (Ferguson, 1999; Fraser, 2016; Mezzadri, 2016). Women contribute to social reproduction and economic production in most developing countries in diverse and profound ways. They are the "real cultivators of the soil" in many households in the rural countryside of developing countries (Mafeje, 1973:4). They provide much of the labour on the agricultural fields in and out of the domestic sphere, produce food for household subsistence and avail the surplus on local, national and international markets.

Women also engage in the production of export commodities. Although this is often the case, the marketing of the farm produce is usually under the control of men. This is because men own the primary means of production (land), and also 'own the women' themselves particularly after payment of bride price. In many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, especially in the colonial and immediate post-independence periods, women were instrumental in the production of traditional low-value export crops: coffee, cotton, tea and sugar, on which most economies in developing countries depended (Patel-Campillo, 2010). In addition to the provision of on- and off-farm employment and livelihood for the majority of the population, the traditional agricultural products were the primary sources of revenue and foreign exchange for many developing countries. Even when agricultural production systems changed in the 1980s with the introduction of major structural transformations in agricultural production systems in developing countries based on the dictates of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Williamson, 2003), women continued to play a pivotal (but peripheral) role in agriculture.

However, the restructuring of economic systems in developing countries continues to invariably transform the socio-economic and political relations of production and reproduction in many areas. Neoliberalism, and particularly economic liberalisation, have had profound implications on farming and marketing systems, labour regimes, food value chains and consumption patterns in developing countries. On a micro-scale, Bernstein envisions how farming that was an "extremely *localised* activity and way of life" in many countryside communities of most developing countries, gradually changed to agriculture and the agricultural sector (Bernstein, 2010:64, emphasis original). Similarly, the meaning and framing of production systems have significantly changed, in that 'farming' is currently dubbed as 'agribusiness' and is no longer under the control of families/households. In most areas, "family farming has been taken over by agribusinesses" (Harvey, 2003:146). Presently, most traditional seed varieties have been patented, farming practices follow internally-set standards and marketing frameworks are no longer localised. Agribusinesses are governed by international laws and regulations, under the control of transnational agri-food value chains that are headquartered in the global north. Further, labour, production systems and means of exchange that were often context-specific, rural-based and controlled by the families and households, have progressively been intertwined into global circuits of capital.

The fusion of local and national agricultural processes within global production systems and networks has had dramatic effects on the different socio-economic classes, systems of production and the varieties of crops cultivated. Many developing countries have shifted their attention from low value and traditional crops to high value and modern non-traditional crops (flowers, fruits, vegetables) as the latter fetch higher prices and are in high demand on the international markets in the global north (Patel-Campillo, 2010). While the new globalised and corporate production processes are providing opportunities for some social classes of people—for instance in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia where women constitute about 75% of the total work force (Bianchi, 2018)—they are invariably disenfranchising many people in the countryside of developing countries (Bianchi, 2018; Soni-Sinha, 2010). What is evident in many areas that are producing the new crop varieties, is that most of the women work in specific sectors such as harvesting, sorting and grading because these tasks are compatible with the physiology of women’s bodies. Soni-Sinha (2010) argues that women’s bodies are able to bend in particular ways and for long hours compared to those of men, and that women have nimble fingers that are able to outperform those of men in specific tasks (Soni-Sinha, 2010). The high numbers of women are also attributed to the fact that many often accept low payment and do not challenge poor working conditions, compared to men who often demand better, higher, payment (Soni-Sinha, 2010).

Other scholars have argued that poor working conditions, meagre pay, sexual harassment and undervaluation of women labour characterise the new globalised production systems (see for example, Mezzadri, 2016). As Soni-Sinha (2010:266) argues, “the oppression of women [is] functional to capitalism”. Indeed, the disproportionately high numbers of women in less-rewarding, lower-remunerating but highly demanding sectors, and not others, is hinged to the ways in which capitalism operates. The key characteristics of capital are that it operates unevenly, as it takes advantage of socio-cultural norms and practices in some cases, and capitalises on social reproduction in other cases, or a mix of both. The ultimate outcome is the exploitation of women’s labour in furtherance of capital accumulation in export-oriented production areas that are similar to the flower farms in most developing countries.

The objectives of this study are fourfold: first, to describe the key features of the flower cutting industry in Uganda. Second, to explain the gendered nature of employment on flower cutting farms in Uganda. Third, to describe and analyse the socio-economic consequences of the highly gendered dynamics of employment on flower cutting farms, in relation to wages, working conditions, health and safety, and the work undertaken by women in the domestic sphere. Fourth, to assess the agency of female workers on flower cutting farms, including how women are responding to and navigating the challenges they experience. The paper is organised as follows: section one introduces and puts the study in context. Section two provides the theoretical orientation on which this study is grounded. Section three contains the methodology. The fourth section presents the study findings. The fifth and final section presents the conclusion.

Women, Social Reproduction and Capitalism: A Theoretical Orientation

Women are key actors in the agricultural sector in most developing countries as they provide much of the labour and perform most of the everyday activities on the farms (Mekonnen, 2017; Woldeyohannes, 2015). While women make up about 60% of the total work force in some cases (Patel-Campillo, 2010), they constitute about 75% of the labourers on the agricultural farms (Bianchi, 2018). For Uganda, the share of women on flower farms is up to 80% (Alanyo 2019; *Daily Monitor*, 2020). Yet, despite the heavy involvement of women in agriculture with

their numbers often exceeding those of men on some farms as indicated above, the majority occupy peripheral positions (Patel-Campillo, 2010). More often, women are remunerated less, even in instances where they shoulder more responsibilities and work for more hours than men. Understanding these contradictions in light of the invaluable and continued contribution of women—although often not recognised as productive work, regularly unpaid and frequently regarded as free labour—requires an in-depth examination of the nexus between women’s work and social reproduction in the labyrinth of capitalism and the dictates of socio-cultural norms and practices.

The first part of the theory examines the nexus between women, culture and social reproduction. The highlight of the section is that the “social construction of the feminine body” (Mezzadri, 2016:1878) provides numerous spaces for the victimisation of women in that culturally informed patriarchal norms dictate the activities which women can, and cannot engage in, both in the private spaces and the public sphere. Cultural attributes also determine the value (often less valued) and the price tag (often non-monetary) attached to women’s work. In many multinational companies, labourers do not have the freedom to determine the activities they would like to engage in, duration of the work and have no space to negotiate their remuneration. The multiple deprivations, human rights violations and lack of freedom to engage in these key issues rhyme with LeBaron’s (2015) assertion that global production chains depend largely on “unfree” labour. Women labourers are exploited by social forces that are controlled by the global value chains.

The second part of the theory focuses on the ways in which capitalism rides on the back of socio-cultural constructions of feminine bodies to manipulate and exploit women in its quest to further capital accumulation. Global production chains use the “social construction of gender to their advantage” to provide low wages and adverse working conditions to women (Soni-Sinha, 2010:266).

Women, culture and social reproduction

The differences between men and women are not naturally determined but emanate from processes of social and cultural construction (Butler, 1990a; Moser, 1993). For this reason, Butler (1990b:7) argues that “gender is the cultural interpretation of sex” as one is not born but becomes either a man or a woman (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The social and cultural construction of gender entails the ascription of labels and assignment of stereotypes to both men and women: a man as the breadwinner versus a woman as the housewife and homemaker, weak woman versus strong man, and superior man versus inferior woman (Moser, 1993). It also involves notions of class and social differentiation in the sense that society places men and women on different scales and categories. The categories that are socially and culturally constructed are, in turn, assigned contrasting roles, responsibilities and rights with men and women enjoying varying privileges, power and rights (Siu et al., 2012). While socio-cultural norms and practices accord better privileges, power and rights to men — for instance taking on productive work in the formal public labour market and land ownership — women are accorded less privileges, power and rights: they cannot own land, have less control over farm produce, engage in and have secondary rights.

Socio-cultural norms and practices delineate social reproduction—“birthing, raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally”—as women’s work (Fraser, 2016:99). From the capitalist perspective, social reproduction is “concerned with maintenance and replacement of workers who have died or withdrawn from the active work force” (Vogel, 1983:144). Women

reproduce labour power and re-define the social and “human relations associated with creating and maintaining the social order” (Young, 2003: 107). The social relations entail the ascription of labels and stereotypes which are, in turn, extended to workplaces. Many firms have clearly defined demarcations between the tasks allocated to men and women.

Social structures and cultural norms define “what constitutes men’s work and women’s work, the conditions in which they work and the value attributed to their work” (Siu et al., 2012:2). Most societies do not define household social reproduction roles and responsibilities shouldered by women as productive work (Moser, 1993:22). Instead, it is defined as unproductive and thus unpaid. But in a few cases where some form of recognition of the roles played by women in production is done, there is segregation of “productive work undertaken by men and women”, with activities done by women less valued in some cases, and not accorded any “monetized value and treated as if they were free” in other cases (Fraser, 2016:101).

Further, reproductive work done by women has frequently been separated from economic production done by men in that women’s work is often contextualised as an extension of the activities performed in the domestic sphere (child-bearing, nursing the sick and elderly, cooking, washing and other household chores) and thus remunerated “in the coin of love and virtue” (Fraser, 2016:101). Undervaluation of women’s work denotes that it is less important and of less value. Meanwhile, defining the activities which men engage in as productive work and “remunerating it with money” means that capitalistic socialites either directly or indirectly created a basis for women’s exploitation and subordination (Fraser, 2016:101).

Women account for 75% of the labour force on most flower farms (Bianchi, 2018). Despite the heavy involvement of women in flower farming and even when they bear the brunt of negative impacts, society does not appreciate their contribution as work. The bulk of the activities which women engage in at the flower farms are often regarded as ‘unproductive support work’. Non-recognition, undervaluation and in some cases total disregard of women’s work while paying full recognition to the work done by men, emanates from the social and cultural norms which shape and inform society. The prohibitive and constraining socio-cultural practices which underpin women’s work in society, in turn, determine the extent of their engagement and the activities done by women at the flower farms. In many ways, the responsibilities and tasks performed by women at the flower farms (harvesting, sorting and grading) mirror and are extensions of the activities performed in the domestic sphere: cooking, washing and other household chores. The argument here is that the social construction of women (often in a disempowering manner) mirrors the tasks assigned, value attributed to and remuneration that comes with these processes.

Nexus between social reproduction and capitalism

There is an inextricable relationship between social reproduction and capitalism for it is through the process of social reproduction that women reproduce labour power. Whereas Vogel (1983:144) argues that reproduction of “labour-power is a condition of production for it *reposit*s or *replac*es the labour-power necessary for production”. Ferguson (1999:6) contends that “women are not mere breeding machines, spitting out future laborers for capitalists to exploit. Rather, women’s reproductive labor and household relations in general are as much a part” of capital accumulation processes. Since capitalism (as conceptualised in a broad sense) encompasses both economic and “non-economic background conditions”, it denotes that it either directly or indirectly embodies social reproduction (Fraser, 2016:101). It has been argued elsewhere that “capitalism has historically involved diverse modalities of labour, characterised

by different forms of surplus extraction and distinctive forms and degrees of exploitation, immobility, devaluation and coercion and shaped by distinct hierarchies and gender orders” (LeBaron, 2015:4). What is clear is that labour is central in the production of surplus at household level. It also plays a key role in the furtherance of capitalism both in history—as seen on the large-scale colonial tea, cotton and sugarcane plantations in the global South during the slave trade period—and in the contemporary period under liberalised economies and transnational production chains.

The exploitative and unfree labour regimes, particularly for women, was accentuated by the “capitalist separation between the productive and reproductive activities of everyday life” (LeBaron, 2015:6). This historic moment saw the allotment of productive roles and responsibilities to men, and reproductive ones to women. Yet, although women’s social reproductive contribution is often unrecognised, undervalued and totally disregarded in some cases (while paying full recognition to the work done by men), the outcomes of women’s labour both directly and indirectly feed into and are intertwined in the broader capitalistic processes. Capitalism cannot exist without

... housework, child-rearing, schooling, affective care and a host of other activities which serve to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings. Social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production in a capitalist society (Fraser, 2016:102).

Although the logic of capital accumulation and ensuing economic production processes often take precedence and are prioritised in most societies (given that they are rewarded with money), social reproduction (often seen as unproductive and non-economic even when it is the primary ‘source’ of labour) is very important in the capital accumulation processes. “Without social reproduction, there could be no culture, no economy, no political organisation. No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long” (Fraser, 2016:99). Capitalism rides on the back of “social reproductive activities of provisioning, care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds” (Fraser, 2016:101). Women often police, organise society and socialise future workers into behaving in specific ways, and in so doing, they either directly or indirectly further capital accumulation.

Women’s labour in global capitalism is often limited to and revolve around specific roles that are not determined by women themselves but dictated by the broader socio-economic and capitalistic forces. Scholars have deployed the notion of ‘unfree labour’ to describe the ways in which working conditions (unpaid, low wages, unusual and extended labour hours) in multinational production networks are determined by forces that are out of control of the labourers/workers (Tallontire et al., 2005). The capitalistic exploitation of labour under inhumane conditions, especially that provided by women, has been dubbed by some human rights scholars as “modern-day slavery” (LeBaron, 2015:3). Women engagement in capital accumulation processes including the unequal rewards and conditions under which they work, particularly in floriculture, has been widely documented (Bee, 2000; Patel-Campillo, 2010). For instance, Tallontire et al. (2005) have examined the gender value chains and ethical trade in African horticulture with specific focus on flowers in Kenya, South African fruits, and the Zambian flower and vegetable industry. The findings show that women have not reasonably benefitted from these processes and the jobs have not necessarily resulted in better living conditions. They suggest that “it is only by addressing the local gendered economy that the employment conditions of all workers, including those of marginal workers and women, are likely to improve” (Tallontire et al., 2005: 559).

Scholarship on employment dynamics within the flower farms reveals that although women engagement in waged employment on the non-traditional agricultural export farms is increasing in countries such as Chile and Colombia (Bee, 2000), with their numbers constituting up to about 60% of the total labour force (Patel-Campillo, 2010), many encounter multiple obstacles which impede them from making much progress (Hale and Opondo, 2005). Many women are employed in low-skill jobs which, in turn, come with less remuneration when compared to the jobs taken on by men. Moreover, women are allocated low status roles and responsibilities on the flower farms: cutting, sorting and packaging, tasks which seem to be extensions of their domestic responsibilities in the domestic sphere (Patel-Campillo, 2010). Under these conditions, many women labourers on the flower farms are often unpaid despite working for long hours and under deplorable conditions (Hale and Opondo, 2005). Some of the tasks are allocated to women not only because of their feminine identity but due to the perception that the tasks are closer to their everyday responsibilities in the household.

Although the widespread perception is that women are better at social reproduction and not economic reproduction, this study argues that women's labour should not be seen as outside of the modern capital accumulation process but as constitutive to it. Women are central in the furtherance of capital accumulation through the direct provision of labour and the (social) production of future labour that is ultimately absorbed in the industries and the agricultural sector.

Floriculture in Uganda

Historical literature on floriculture indicates that Ugandans were not engaged in flower farming in the pre-colonial and the immediate post-colonial periods. However, pockets of flower farms started to emerge in the 1970s and early 1980s with very few Ugandans, and no foreigners, involved in the floriculture. But even the few Ugandans who engaged in flower farming produced only for the local market, with nothing exported out of the country. The overall percentage share of floriculture to the broader agricultural sector and its contribution to the social and economic development of the country was insignificant. The lack of interest to engage in flower farming by local and foreign players could be attributed to a number of reasons. The first was the priorities of the Ugandan government. The focus of the Ugandan state was largely on "historical" and traditional agricultural commodities that were dubbed as "foreign exchange earners" (Agona and Muyinza, 2008). Similar to many countries on the African continent, the historical and traditional agricultural crops, coffee, cotton, cocoa, tea and sugarcane, were introduced in most countries by colonial governments (Jorgensen, 1981; Mafeje, 1973). In Uganda, flowers were not under the category of "foreign exchange earners" and thus did not attract much attention from the government (Agona and Muyinza, 2008).

Second, the closed nature of many developing countries, as their key economic sectors, particularly agriculture, were run and controlled exclusively by the central governments and their extensions (marketing boards, comparatives and other parastatals), with very limited (only in some areas) or no involvement of private players. In Uganda, for example, agriculture was under government-controlled marketing boards, such as the Coffee Marketing Board, Lint Marketing Boards, etc. In particular, the Coffee Marketing Board (CMB) and the Lint Marketing Board (LMB) were in charge of the marketing of coffee and cotton in Uganda, respectively. Similar processes were in place in other countries such as Ghana, where the Cocoa Marketing Board controlled the marketing of cocoa and in Cameroon where the Arabica Coffee Marketing Board controlled the Arabica coffee market processes in the country (World Bank, 1981).

However, there was gradual but progressive change in Uganda's agricultural sector after the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over power in 1986. Because the successive civil wars and military regimes in the immediate post-independence period had ruined the Ugandan economy, the proceeds from agriculture reduced substantially. This affected the exports and foreign exchange earnings. Although the ruling NRM government anchored the economic rebuilding processes on a mix of both traditional and non-traditional commodities, the latter were more emphasised. Emphasis on non-traditional crops such as flower farming was accelerated, especially because of the collapse of prices of traditional and main export commodities in the 1970s and early 1980s. The reduction in prices of coffee, cotton, tea, and sugar kindled the need to diversify the economy and investment in other non-traditional crops, such as fish, vanilla, dry fruits and flowers (Agona and Muyinza, 2008).

More importantly, diversification of agriculture coincided with the global neoliberalism discourse (also dubbed the Washington consensus) (Williamson, 2003), which involved the introduction of specific macro-economic policies in developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa in the 1980s and implemented under the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) (Ferguson, 2006; Naim, 2000; Shivji, 2006). The macro-economic policies targeted specific sectors which the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) deemed important for the stimulation of economic growth in developing countries. Although neoliberalism targeted the state as a whole and the institutions therein, the agricultural sector was the most affected in terms of farming systems and actors involved, nature and types of crops grown and the marketing systems. Opening up of the economy resulted in the entry of both local and foreign private individuals and companies in the agricultural sector. It also resulted in structural changes in global food markets, intertwining of local food value chains in transnational value chains, transformation of agriculture into agribusiness, and increased investment in non-traditional crops such as flowers.

In the 1990s, investment in non-traditional crops increased as Uganda exported non-traditional crops worth \$20 million (Dijkstra, 2001). In the same period, flower farming begun to take root in the country. The first commercial flower farm that was owned by Ugandans of Asian origin (the Hudda family) started growing flowers for export in 1992, with exports commencing a year later (Leo et al., 2016). In a period of 5 years (1992-1997), the number of flower farms in Uganda increased from 2 to 19 (Munyuli, 2014). Similarly, the size of land under flower farming increased from 2 hectares in 1992 to 192.1 hectares in 2009 (Floriculture Sector Brief, 2009). Floriculture is the third largest non-traditional export commodity after fish and gold, and the seventh largest export earner. Overall, about 260 hectares are under floriculture and varieties of flowers are grown including Sweetheart Roses and Intermediate Roses.

Previous figures reveal that the tonnage from Uganda's flower industry has been increasing over the years, from 1,150 metric tonnes in 1995 to 7,000 metric tonnes in 2015 and 7,500 metric tonnes in 2018. Similarly, revenue from flower exports has progressively increased from \$2.3m to \$40m and \$55m (Bwambale, 2020; *Daily Monitor*, 2020). Women comprise 70% of the total work force on Uganda's flower farms (*Daily Monitor*, 2020). In Africa, Uganda occupies the third position in flower production, with Kenya and Ethiopia coming first and second respectively. It is argued that non-traditional crops have been key in restoring the country's balance of payment, increased export earnings, and buffers the country from reduction in exports (Dijkstra, 2001). Although the floriculture industry is growing, the proportion of Ugandans involved in the industry remains low. Most of the key players are foreign, with a few Ugandans of Indian origin involved in floriculture.

More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has grossly slowed down the proceeds from floriculture, with multiple and varied impacts. In addition to causing a significant drop in the revenue from flower farming by about 90%, the prices of flowers have dropped by 50% (*Daily Monitor*, 2020). Moreover, reduction in revenues and the fears over the surge in the pandemic has resulted in loss of employment. More than 30% of the total work force, most of whom are rural workers, lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Women have been affected by these processes since they constitute up to 70% of the labour force on most flower farms (*Daily Monitor*, 2020). The next section examines the flower farming experiences from Kenya.

Flower farming experiences in Kenya

While Uganda's floriculture industry has registered progress over the years, the country compares unfavourably with some of its neighbours. When flower farming in Uganda was just starting in the 1990s, Kenya had already registered significant progress. Kenya's cut flower industry is the oldest on the African continent (Dolan et al., 2012:13) as it "dates to the early days of British [colonial] rule" (Whitaker and Kolavalli, 2006:339). Flower farming in Kenya was highly shaped by the form and nature of British colonial rule. While the colonial government treated other countries as natural resource extraction reserves where the resources were extracted and shipped to Europe, Kenya was structured along a different development pathway, given that it was a settler colony. For Kenya, the British colonial government established long-term production enclaves where specific agricultural products (tea, fruits, vegetables, and flowers) that were on demand in Europe, were grown.

According to Whitaker and Kolavalli (2006:340):

In 1952, European farmers set up the Horticultural Cooperative Union (HCU) to facilitate the marketing and export of fresh produce. [Through the HCU, Kenya exported] fresh produce on a small scale by air to the United Kingdom for the winter off-season market.

However, production of cut flowers in Kenya commenced before the country gained independence from Britain in 1963, with some reports indicating that floriculture could have started around the 1950s by the colonial European settlers and farmers. "Cut flowers were ... produced by European farmers and exported [to Europe] by air on a very small scale, while some smallholder African farmers were growing cut flowers for the local market" (Whitaker and Kolavalli, 2006:340).

There has been an exponential increase in flower farming in Kenya from the 1950s. Presently, Kenya is the leading producer and exporter of cut flowers in sub-Saharan Africa. Globally, it is the leading "off-season supplier of cut flowers in the world" (Dolan et al., 2012:14). It is also the number one supplier to the European Union, as its flower exports account for 58% of all cut flower exports to the region (Dolan et al., 2012:14). Kenya's flower industry has registered over 200 farmers and has been expanding at an annual rate of 200 hectares (Bolo, 2008). In 2005, the flower exports from Kenya were valued at "€267 million which was over 2.6 times greater than the combined exports of its next 6 competitors in sub-Saharan Africa: €22 for Uganda, €32 for Zimbabwe, €16 for South Africa, €10 for Ethiopia, €13 for Zambia and €5 for Tanzania" (Hornberger et al., 2007:16). "In 2014, flower farming made up roughly 70% of horticulture's total export earnings of €771.12 million" (Lanari et al., 2016:1). Unlike Uganda where medium-sized farms dominate the flower farm industry with no small-holder farmers involved, the Kenyan flower farming industry is comprised of over 500 farmers, and a mix of

both small-, medium- and large-scale farmers. The revenue from flowers is equivalent to income obtained from other traditional export earners such as coffee, tea, and tourism.

Available information shows that most of the floricultural farms across Africa adopted the idea of flower farming on a commercial scale from Kenya and many are extensions of the larger farms in Kenya (Kintu, 2010). Many Kenyan flower farm managers, technical experts and supervisors have moved to other countries on the African continent, such as Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Uganda, to offer consultancy services, establish new farms or take on jobs in already established flower farms (Dijkstra, 2001). This appears to be the case at our study site, JP Cuttings flower farm, where we established that some of the top managers are from Kenya. However, although significant social and economic progress has been registered in Kenya, the industry still grapples with a number of problems. Scholars report deplorable working conditions characterised by meagre pay, long work hours and harassment of farm workers, especially women (Lanari et al., 2016). Women are allocated tasks that require “dexterity and conscientiousness but that also tend to be low or unskilled, such as grading, packing, and harvesting” (Lanari et al., 2016:2).

Methodology

This qualitative study builds on ethnographic data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and personal narratives. A total of 35 in-depth interviews were conducted with top managers, departmental managers, labourers (both women and men) at JP Cuttings flower farm, and the local communities around the flower farm. In addition, a total of 5 focus group discussions (2 with women alone, 2 with men alone, and 1 with both men and women) were organised with the intention of teasing out the gender-specific experiences of flower farm workers. Furthermore, observation of the various activities in the different departments was done. The age range of all informants for this study was 18–50. While some informants had worked at JP Cuttings flower farm for months, others had been at the farm for about 13 years. Moreover, some of the informants had worked on a number of flower farms. Thus, they were believed to have diverse experience and in-depth knowledge on women’s labour in the flower farming industry.

The key informants and in-depth interview participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling applied to informants with administrative and other responsibilities at the flower farm, including top-level managers and departmental managers, and labourers (both men and women). Meanwhile, snowball sampling was employed to identify men and women who worked at multiple flower farms and in departments that were classified as either feminine or masculine. For instance, the harvester’s department was known to have mostly female workers. Thus, a few men (5) who worked in the harvester’s department that was known to be dominated by women were selected and interviewed. The essence was to capture their experiences as men in a department that was largely dominated by women. Snowball sampling was enabled by the top managers who, during an in-depth interview, indicated that there were ‘unique’ cases where some men continue to work in departments that were ‘considered’ to be for women. I followed up the informants who were identified, and after providing their narratives, identified others with whom they worked in the female-dominated sections, such as the harvester’s department.

Case study: Profile of JP Cuttings Limited²

² In this paper, I use JP Cuttings to refer to JP Cuttings Limited.

The case study, JP Cuttings Limited, is fully owned by two Dutch stakeholders: John Piet and Jeroen and Piet. The flower farm is located in Wakiso district on the shores of Lake Victoria. It covers about 10 hectares and is 20 kilometres from Entebbe International Airport.³ The stakeholders arrived in Africa around 1997. Before starting his own business, Piet first worked in some flower farms in the western part of Kenya for almost 10 years. In 2000, one of the stakeholders moved to Uganda and worked with Wagagai flower farm as a General Manager. Whilst at Wagagai flower farm, his interest to establish an individual flower farm increased. By 2005, one of the well-established rose flower farms, Belflowers, owned by Mark Graves of British origin, faced financial difficulties. Belflowers first went under receivership to Stanbic Bank of Uganda. It was later bought by the two Dutch stakeholders.

In 2000, Jeroen and Piet bought Belflowers. However, the new owners encountered two major challenges. First, Belflowers largely cultivated small sweetheart rose varieties. The challenge was that these varieties faced immense competition from the floriculture industry in Ethiopia. Thus, the continued growing of rose flowers in Uganda did not make economic sense. Second, the greenhouse structures at Belflowers were largely wooden, and thus unsustainable. That compelled the ‘new’ owners to first change the greenhouses from timber to steel. The reconstruction process took about two years. During the rebuilding process, Belflowers was renamed JP Cuttings (Jeroen and Piet Cuttings) and it produced vegetables for both local and foreign markets.

The company website shows that JP Cuttings started in 2006, with the production of unrooted flower cuttings destined for the Dutch market.⁴ As at 2020, JP Cuttings produced 10 tonnes of unrooted flower cuttings for export to a number of clients in Europe and other parts of the world. The farm employs about 600 (contract, part-time, and casual) workers apportioned in five departments (management, harvesters, construction, cleaning). While some of the workers were hired on a permanent basis, many were on contract and others were hired on a part-time/casual basis. The production managers were Kenyans and the company directors were Dutch. The company directors first worked in Kenya, and for this reason, they hired Kenyan production managers. Also, Kenya has a long history of flower farming. So, it made a lot of sense for JP Cuttings to tap into this expertise, like in many countries on the continent where most floricultural farms hire experts from Kenya. The company had a monthly budget of 100 million Euros. The company provided employment to about 2,100 people with the majority being women.

Gendered nature of employment at JP Cuttings

The available scholarship indicates that “transnational forms of production and exploitation of labor are related to class-based, racialised, gendered and sexualised aspects of labor supply and control” (Bakker and Gill, 2003:6). This is more evident in the export-oriented agriculture in the global south where employment dynamics indicate the presence of more women, than men, in some of the tasks that are constructed as ‘feminine’ and closer to the everyday responsibilities of women in the household (Soni-Sinha, 2010). Women are often preferred and placed in specific departments because of the perceived suitability of their bodies to undertake certain tasks and submissiveness, what Soni-Sinha (2010:266) describes as “naturally dexterous”.

³ <http://www.jpcuttings.com/information.html>

⁴ <http://www.jpcuttings.com/information.html>

Similar observations were made at the six departments that comprise JP Cuttings where there were more women in some departments than others. The first was the top management department, which oversees the day-to-day running of the business and gives strategic direction to the flower farm. The gender disaggregation at the top management level revealed 10 men and 5 women. It was observable that all managers were foreign: some were Dutch and others were of Kenyan origin. This observation aptly rhymes with the literature which indicates that Kenya is a major source of technical expertise for countries that have recently established floricultural farms on the African continent (Dijkstra, 2001; Kintu, 2010).

The second was the maintenance, construction and repair department that involved mainly construction of new and maintenance/repair of the old greenhouses. From a gender perspective, all the workers in the maintenance, construction and repair department were men. Implicitly, there was not a single woman involved in the maintenance, construction and repair of greenhouses. Third was the fertigation and nutrition department which comprised fertilisation and irrigation of the flowers. Similar to the maintenance, construction and repair department, here all the workers (except one) were men.

The fourth was the harvester's department which entailed harvesting of flower cuttings. The gender disaggregation here was that there were 360 women and only 40 men. Yet, even the 40 men who were in the harvester's department did not actually engage in the harvesting of flowers. Instead, they were allocated other tasks such as maintenance of the flower beds, writing labels, lifting and transportation of cut and sorted flowers to and from the cold rooms as well as performing transport duties. A male informant, Alobo, aged 24,⁵ who worked in the harvester's department at the time of conducting fieldwork explained that there were only two men in the specific section of the department where he was based. He argued that his colleague, whom he described as old and feeble, could have been placed in the harvester's department because of his advanced age and perceived inability to perform the tasks in other departments, such as the maintenance, construction and repair. Although both men worked in the harvester's department, they did not engage in the actual harvesting of flower cuttings. Rather, they engaged in support 'manual' work such as cleaning and writing of labels on the flower packs. The actual harvesting of flower cuttings was done by women because they were perceived to be more suited for the harvesting tasks — swift and could bend for long (8) hours — compared to the men.⁶ A supervisor in the same department pointed out that most of the men who were recruited to work in the harvester's section did not last long on the job. Many often requested to either be allocated other tasks rather than the harvesting of cuttings, or shifted to another department, such as construction, repair and maintenance.

The fifth was the pest and disease control department, which encompassed the spraying of flowers with chemicals to control the pests and diseases. There were no women in the pest and disease control department. The sixth was the grading, sorting and packaging department where there were only 6 men as compared to 17 women. The lower number of men compared to women in the grading, sorting and packaging section was attributed to the tasks performed there, which involve pushing trays with cuttings back and forth to the cold room. "Other men feel that the act of pushing trays back and forth is not their area of specialisation", meaning that it does not rhyme with their description of being a male. The issues which underpinned the

⁵ To adhere to the ethical principal of anonymity and confidentiality, the names in this paper are fictitious. Where positions of authority are mentioned, permission to do so was obtained from the informants while in the field.

⁶ Interview, 08 November 2020.

varied composition of men and women in some departments, and not others, are examined in detail in the latter sections of this paper.

Table 1: Gender disaggregation by department

No	Departments	Gender disaggregation	
		Men	Women
	Managers	10	5
1	Maintenance/Construction	14	0
2	Fertigation/Nutrition	11	1
3	Harvesters	40	360
4	Pest and disease control	12	0
5	Scouts	7	3
6	Grade, sort, package	6	17
Total		100	386

Key features and dynamics of the flower cuttings industry

'Politics of introduction' at recruitment

The recruitment process at JP Cuttings was informal, with most of the employees recruited through a mechanism that could be described as the 'politics of introduction'. By politics of introduction, I mean that prospective employees were informed of the opportunities available at the flower farm through relatives, friends, peers as opposed to formal recruitment processes where the available vacancies were advertised via electronic and print media channels.

Adong, a mother of two and supervisor in the harvester's department, explained that she was informed of the employment opportunities at the flower farm through her neighbour and friend. "My neighbour informed me that there were job opportunities and that registration of new staff was often done every Monday. I got ready and the next Monday I came with him. That is how I got the job." Similarly, Julia (a Senior Supervisor in the harvester's department who has worked at the flower farm for 11 years) explained that one of the managers from her home village informed her of the opportunities at the flower farm:

The previous Manager at the flower farm was from our village. When he came home for holidays, I told him that I would like to change jobs as I was a nursery teacher in one of the schools at our village. One time he collected the girls and boys from our village and

brought them to the flower farm. We were about 84 in total: 50 men and 34 girls. That is how I got a job at the flower farm.⁷

Education not a requirement for recruitment

Closely related to the politics of introduction was the discourse on recruitment that did not depend on academic qualifications, but on other non-academic criteria. Some of the workers were recruited based on first, assurance to deliver and meet the set daily target(s). Second, a commitment to meet the daily output with product specifications, such as number of leaves on a flower cutting, length and quality of the cutting. However, while the above requirements were key at recruitment, it did not mean that new recruits who were unable to fulfil the above specifics were turned away. Most of the new recruits were taken on, as long as they were able to undertake a simple count of things either in English or the local language (Luganda). Even the few workers who were unable to undertake a simple count, for instance, from 1 to 100 were given on-the-job training in addition to being mentored by the Supervisors and Quality Control Managers. This helped them to meet the demands and specifics of the customers in Europe.

An informant at top management level explained that most of the new recruits were taken on, not based on educational qualifications, but their ability to compute because it meant that they would competently know the number of flowers harvested and whether, or not, the daily target had been fulfilled. The ability to undertake simple counts was also useful in the packaging of flower cuttings for export as the packets would not be short of, or have excess, flower cuttings.

A manager explained thus:

Most job interviews often involve a simple count from 1 up to 100, either in the local language [often Luganda] that is often used at the firm, or English. This is part of the interview because workers must count the flower cuttings. Because of this, it is easy for women to join us. We send our products to Europe where there is no space for errors. If you send more, then the flowers have to be thrown away. In Europe there is no space for our clients to throw the flowers. You cannot send what the client has not ordered. So, the requirement for all workers at entry is to count from 1 to 100. It means that you will know how to count the cuttings.⁸

However, even in some departments (scouting, pest and disease control) where education would be required, emerging information showed that only basic knowledge was a prerequisite. For instance, the scouting department required basic knowledge of science as it involved the spotting of disease-infected flower cuttings. But even here, workers were required to have a basic knowledge of science and must have studied up to senior four (grade four). The key requirement here was to master the terminologies used in recording of diseases, a task which did not require higher level education.

It was at the promotion stage, for instance from general worker to supervisor or from supervisor to senior supervisor, that some basic level of education and skill was required. A manager explained that, “being a supervisor requires some level of education. One should be able to write and speak/communicate in English as it is useful in passing on information to managers, supervisors and other workers in the department”.⁹ Yet, on close interaction with some

⁷ Interview, 01 December 2020.

⁸ Interview, 20 October 2020.

⁹ Interview, 12 December 2020.

informants, I established that some of the workers, especially those from Northern Uganda (where English is the medium of communication among the local communities) easily write and communicate in English even when they do not have any academic qualification. It therefore appears that formal education and academic qualifications are useful, but not necessary for recruitment in some sections of the floricultural farms.

More women than men

The gendered employment dynamics in the floricultural sector indicate disproportionate numbers of employees, with more women than men employed at most flower farms (Soni-Sinha, 2010). More particularly, women and girls are “disproportionately concentrated in the most unfree forms of labour” in the export-oriented industries in the global south (LeBaron, 2015:2). Indeed, the discourses from the managers and flower farm workers corroborate this argument that women are more suited for ‘feminine’ tasks that rhyme with their socio-cultural constructs and stereotypes of ‘soft and tender, have nimble fingers’, etc. This was the case at JP Cuttings where there were more women in the harvester’s department compared to the maintenance/construction department where all the workers were men.

While some informants attributed the ‘large numbers of women to ease of control’, others argued that women’s physiological attributes aptly suit the tasks at the flower farms. One of the key informants explained that,

Women have tender hands and know how to nurse flowers compared to the men who are aggressive, have big and rough hands. Cuttings are often close to each other. Harvesters must ensure that they do not damage what is left in the flower bed. Women do this perfectly.¹⁰

Another informant (woman and supervisor in the harvester’s department) explained that, “it is true that the work done by women on the flower farm is a replica of their responsibility in the household”.¹¹

The literature indicates that sexism and the prevailing socio-cultural norms, practices and stereotypes to which people are exposed, affect their outcomes by partly shaping their preferences (Charles et al., 2018:2). The claims by the excerpts above appear to have been shaped and informed by the broader experiences from the private/domestic spaces where women are born and socialised. A female Senior Supervisor in the harvester’s department validated the assertion that women are more suited for this kind of work by noting that cutting flowers requires precision and tenderness: “Harvesting flowers is like cooking and washing clothes at home. A man cannot cook or wash clothes when a woman is at home”.¹² A manager at senior level reiterated that, “flowers and cuttings have soft tissues and are thus very delicate. Poor handling of flowers reduces the quality of the crop. So, they have to be handled like babies, which is a more natural attribute for women”.¹³ A harvester (female) re-echoed the discourse that flower cutting is more suited for women by arguing that men cut flowers while standing, and because of this, the cuttings do not often meet the quality standards such as

¹⁰ Interview, 15 October 2020.

¹¹ Interview, 01 December 2020.

¹² Interview with Senior Supervisor in the harvester’s department who has worked at the flower farm for about 10 years, 15 October 2020.

¹³ Interview, 16 October 2020.

number of leaves and length. Meanwhile, women bend completely, and in so doing, they are able to meet the standards of the cuttings.¹⁴

Another woman in the harvester's department claimed that harvesting flowers requires bending for long hours, which is unfeasible for the men:

The men do not often love tasks that involve bending. It is hard to find men in the harvester section. The few men who are in this section only do it for a short time and they complain of back and chest pain. It is like being at home where you cannot tell a man to bend, wash plates and dishes. It is hard for the men. Most of the men are in the maintenance, spray and fertigation [feeding] departments. You cannot find many women in these departments. Maintenance work is hard for women. It involves climbing the tents; so the women cannot manage.¹⁵

The impacts of social and cultural attributes are evident based on the numbers of men who leave the flower farm. Available evidence shows that the overall turnover of men is far higher than that of women. Women spend more years on the flower farm than men. On average, men leave the flower farm after just one year of work compared to women who stay on the farm for many years, with some spending more than 10 years.

In addition to discourses on femininity and socio-cultural practices, other informants attributed the disproportionately high numbers of women on the flower farm, to ease of control. A manager claimed that, "some men feel that they can initiate fist-fights with you [the Manager] especially when you disagree with them. This is because of the ego of being a man".¹⁶ This is the direct opposite for women who are often calm, submissive to the male authority and do not initiate fist-fights even when in disagreement. These issues reveal the systematic unequal power relations centred around capitalism and labour in global export-oriented industries, and the notion of unfree labour, especially women's lack of freedom to choose the departments where they would like to be placed and work. It also epitomises the perceived lack of agency by women to challenge male authority even when their rights are trampled upon. Women's unfreedom and labour exploitation have been likened to "modern-day slavery" (LeBaron, 2015), as socio-cultural processes that are completely out of women's control, determine what women and girls engage in, how they engage, when they are engaged and what they get out of the labour provision (Bernstein, 2010).

Floriculture and the construction of a masculinity

Capitalism and labour buttressed around export-oriented agriculture are not neutral but rather are characterised by social, economic and political relations of power (LeBaron, 2015). In most societies, especially in the developing world, multiple sets of power relations underpin masculinity and femininity, with the former often depicted as robust, strong and with the capacity to shoulder some of the most engaging tasks. Meanwhile, the latter (femininity) is constructed in the opposite way, as weak, less intelligent, less ambitious, and unable to engage in rigorous activities. However, the observations at JP Cuttings revealed that masculinity is constructed in a manner that does not rhyme with the societal norms and practices. In most societies, men are often constructed in a more disempowered manner, as robust, strong, and

¹⁴ Interview, 8 July 2020.

¹⁵ Interview with female farm worker, 15 January 2020.

¹⁶ Interview, 15 October 2020.

with speed in comparison to women who are constructed as weak, ladylike, and unable to perform tasks that require speed and rigour.

Yet, most of the informants argued that men lack speed and precision (key requirements) to undertake burdensome tasks at the flower farm. More captivating, was that even the men on the flower farm constructed themselves as unsuitable for burdensome and robust tasks. An informant, a man, in the construction department claimed that, “women outperform and are faster than men in the harvesting of flowers”.¹⁷ Meanwhile, another person (man) claimed that, “men lack the speed that is required in the harvester’s department. The speed at which a woman cuts flowers is not the same as that of the men. Men are too slow and often damage the final product”.¹⁸ Most of the men are in the construction, repair and maintenance department, activities that women never described as rigorous and burdensome. The manner in which men are constructed on the flower farm appear to be the direct opposite of the general societal construction of women as lazy, ladylike and not robust in many of the activities that they engage in the private and public spheres. In our case study, it seems that capitalism is plausibly riding on the back of social and cultural structures and stereotypes to fully exploit women’s labour through positive construction (even when they have for long been adversely constructed). In essence, positive construction of women is facilitating economic exploitation of women with the aim of not empowering women, but furthering capital accumulation by the global capitalists.

Remuneration and working conditions

Wages

Export-oriented production zones under the neoliberal era are characterised by “very different and unequal conditions of work and labor supply and control” (Bakker and Gill, 2003:6). Most of the export-oriented processing centres, such as flower farms “are well known for being primary employers of women, but with poor working conditions and low salaries” (Ramtohul, 2008). Most of the informants complained over low wages and disparities in remuneration between departments and among workers, even those in the same section/unit. The salaries often depended on the length of stay and time spent on the farm as well as expertise gained. At the time of conducting the research, casual labourers were paid 50,000Ugx (about USD14). While the new arrivals received a monthly payment of 170,000Ugx (USD46), workers who had spent about three years on the farm received 190,000Ugx (USD52). Moreover, employees who had spent 5 years on the farm, were paid 205,000Ugx (USD56).

Furthermore, the monthly wage varied for those on permanent terms. Harvesters were paid 170,000Ugx (USD46) per month. A Supervisor in the same department was paid 470,000Ugx (USD128). It is important to note that all the payments were subject to several deductions, including social security contribution (National Social Security Fund (NSSF)), Pay as You Earn [PAYE] and contribution to the workers’ union, which is about 20,000Ugx (USD5) per month.

Most of the workers claimed that they were underpaid in relation to the tasks that they undertook on the flower farm: “The salary that we receive is not enough to take care of the family in terms of rent, medical bills, consumables and other expenses. We also pay NSSF and PAYE. In the end, we get so little and some of us postpone other key activities such as

¹⁷ Interview, 07 October 2020.

¹⁸ Interview 10 October 2020

marriage”.¹⁹ Another informant at supervisor level claimed that, in addition to their daily routine, they train the new recruits. However, they were not paid for the extra training responsibilities that they took on, on behalf of JP Cuttings: “We teach new recruits because we have the experience. We are never paid for this extra work. We do it for free”.²⁰

The processes of capital accumulation are by no means monolithic as they do not unfold in a uniform manner. Instead, a series of diverse and complex mechanisms and processes are used by capitalists to facilitate capital accumulation (coercion versus consent, varied wages for workers, free training for supervisors, etc.) Implicitly, it means that capitalists do not distinguish neatly between the labourers, and no straightforward, coherent and uniform remuneration scales are used by capitalists, but these actors draw on an array of measures and capitalise on various forms of power in their quest to accumulate more capital (Hall et al., 2011).

Sick leave

The working conditions are that employees clock in at work at 07h30 and leave at 17h00, with a break of one hour from 13h00 to 14h00. I established that workers are often granted sick leave, which often depended on the nature/type and severity of the illness. However, there appeared to be pre-defined sick leave periods for, what some informants described as common illnesses, including malaria, cold and fever. For this nature and category of illnesses, workers were often granted sick leave for three days. An employee was entitled to 12 days of sick leave in every calendar year.

The key requirement and company policy for employees to qualify for sick leave was that the nature of the illness must have been checked by the company nurse, who was often on site. For those who sought medication elsewhere, the company policy is that they have to present a medical form from the hospital, health centre or clinic from where they sought treatment. The medical form should have full contact details of the medical facility from where medication was sought including name, official stamp and phone number of the medical facility. Although this is key for weeding out false claims, it also means that employees who self-medicate and access medical services from other places such as traditional medicine-men and women do not qualify for sick leave. Employees with complicated diseases and those who require extended sick leave have to inform the management of the company before the sick leave is extended. Those with other ‘diseases’ such as fatigue, headache and backache arising out of unbearable working conditions such as bending for long periods of time (the working environment in the harvester’s department requires that women have to bend over for about 8 hours a day as they harvest the flower cuttings) did not qualify for sick leave. The women suggested that sicknesses of this nature, especially those acquired at the workplace, should be included among the categories of illnesses for which an employee qualifies for sick leave.

The key question is: what happens to the employee with a serious illness that requires extended leave periods beyond the mandatory 12 days? Normally, such an employee is given a window of two months with full payment. However, payment is often withdrawn after the third month, even when the employee is still unwell. For the capitalists, “sickness involves a costly decline in the capacity of employees as it means that they have to be maintained during the period of

¹⁹ Interview, 03 October 2020.

²⁰ Interview, 05 October 2020.

diminished contribution” (Vogel, 1983:151). The interest of JP Cuttings is not the health of the employee, but reduction of costs in order to further capital accumulation.

Annual leave and holidays

At JP Cuttings, employees are entitled to 21 days of annual leave during every calendar year. Although it is a right for all employees to take annual leave at any time in the year, I established that the company prefers that leave is taken during specific time periods. This is when the demand for flowers in Europe is at a low ebb. “We get annual leave of 21 days, often taken in the off-season when the demand for flower cuttings in Europe is low”.²¹ It means that employees are not free to take leave during a period of their choice (either during peak or off-season) in a year. Implicitly, they are forced to take leave at specific time periods.

I established that some of the employees worked on public holidays, including Christmas. On the public holidays, the employees were paid cash for each day worked, while some employees were paid 10,000Ugx (USD5) and others received 5,000Ugx (USD1.5). Remuneration for working on the public holiday depended on the work done. Some employees at a higher level were paid double at the end of the month. Normally, whenever the overall manager was on holiday in Netherlands during the festive season, the Assistant Managers were required to work on the public holiday.

Bonus and overtime

Scholarship on capitalism and surplus appropriation indicates that labour is often unfree when extra-economic means are involved in surplus appropriation (LeBaron, 2015). Surplus extraction takes two forms: absolute and relative (Mezzadri, 2016). While absolute surplus extraction is more ruthless for the workers as it involves “terribly long working hours and exhausting working rhythms, leading to horrible health implications”, relative surplus extraction is often contextualised as less lethal, as it entails a decrease in labour time (Mezzadri, 2016:7). I established that JP Cuttings hinges on absolute surplus extraction, as extra incentives are used to derive extra outputs and coerce workers into working beyond the regular work hours (overtime) and produce outputs that are beyond the regular daily outputs (production bonuses).

Although this was the case, most of the informants reported having received production bonuses, albeit rarely, as stringent conditions must be met for an employee to qualify for a bonus. The key condition was that the work must be done meticulously and the cuttings must pass all the quality checks: length, number of leaves, and not damaged. The on-season production bonus was between 40,000–50,000Ugx (USD13–14) per month. “As supervisor, and for the 10 years I have worked at the farm, I have received 50,000[Ugx] as a bonus only once”.²² The daily target was 120 packets, with each packet containing 52 items. Any extra packet qualifies the employee to receive a bonus payment. For other types of flower cuttings, each packet must have 104 cuttings. The daily output for an employee must be 60. There must not be any excess, no damaged cutting, uniform sizes of cuttings without mixing big and small ones. In other words, the work must be executed meticulously. An informant summed it up thus: “Yes, this is your real sweat that is added on your basic salary. Bonus is valued”.²³

²¹Interview, 08 September 2020.

²² Interview, 01 October 2020.

²³ Interview, 01 October 2020.

While the production bonus and overtime allowances were part of the company policy, I established that women rarely received overtime allowances, an issue which the informants attributed to the speed which they use to accomplish the daily assignments within regular work hours. “Women have got the required speed and precision. So, there is no need for overtime allowances”, explained one key informant at management level.²⁴ It means that bonuses and overtime do not necessarily translate into increased take-home incomes, and thus improved welfare, for women, even when they work beyond their daily targets. Implicitly, bonuses and overtime work to the advantage of JP Cuttings in terms of profit maximisation. Moreover, overtime and remuneration for work on irregular days such as Christmas, Easter and other public holidays, is often done during on-season. Since this is a period for maximising output, it means that it works in favour of JP Cuttings, as more output denotes more profit. Furthermore, studies elsewhere indicate that women workers are far less keen on overtime (Mezzadri, 2016). Indeed, this appears to be the case for JP Cuttings, since women rarely receive overtime and production bonuses, because they meet their daily targets and include extra production within the regular work hours.

Occupational health and safety

The work setting for the women who engage mainly in the cutting of flowers, is that they have to bend while cutting and packaging the flowers. Many complained that they stand for about 8 hours a day without any provision for them to either sit or rest during the work hours. Other workers explained that they are not provided with protective gear, including overcoats and jackets. Most of them have aprons and protective boots. Many of the workers explained that they would have loved to have long-sleeved jackets or overalls to prevent skin rashes and irritation caused by the chemicals used to spray the flower farm and the flower cuttings. Furthermore, I observed that JP Cuttings caters for the dietary needs of the employees. Food is provided to all employees between 12h00 and 13h00. However, I observed that the menu for supervisors and managers was different from that of other staff (casual workers and other categories). The employees also explained that the menu was changed only twice in a calendar year.

Additionally, JP Cuttings has established a clinic within its establishment. The nurse at the centre indicated that they provide treatment and first-aid to the workers who either become sick or are injured whilst at work. In essence, the idea is to have a healthy work force that provides labour to the flower farm, uninterruptedly.

Day-care, maternity and paternity leave

There was a day-care centre where lactating mothers can have their children looked after while they work. While work places that cater for the practical and strategic gender needs lessen the burden shouldered by women, the availability of day-care services at JP Cuttings has to be analysed in the context of social reproduction, particularly how the children at the day-care are the future workers who will ultimately replace the current work force “who [would] have died or withdrawn from the active work force” (Vogel, 1983:144). The day-care also furthers the marginalisation of women, heightens the triple roles (production, reproduction and nurturing) (Moser, 1993), and accentuates capital accumulation through uninterrupted labour provision.

From a capitalist perspective, it therefore means that the primary objective of the day-care facility is not to minimise the burden shouldered by women. The aim is to have an unlimited

²⁴ Interview, 12 October 2020.

supply of labour by women and not to lose hours of work, by women staying at home to look after the children. For JP Cuttings, lost work hours mean loss of capital. In essence, this is double exploitation of women's labour in terms of economic production and social reproduction (which Vogel (1983:144) describes as a labour-power production process that takes place in family-households). Furthermore, children who are born by waged labourers and raised on the farms are likely to become farm workers. This denotes that the children of workers at JP Cuttings will ultimately become the work force of the future.

Additionally, JP Cuttings provides free family planning services. However, it is crucial to recognise that,

... child-bearing threatens to diminish the contribution a woman in the subordinate class can make as a direct producer and as a participant in necessary labour. Pregnancy and lactation involve, at the minimum, several months of somewhat reduced capacity to work (Vogel, 1983:151).

Similar to the day-care centre, family planning is either directly or indirectly meant to ensure uninterrupted women's labour as there would be no need for maternity leave and day-care services which cost time and resources for JP Cuttings. Although women are given maternity leave, many were encouraged to report to work because of the availability of a day-care centre where they are not charged a fee. But the issue here is that even when women continue to "participate in surplus-production, child-bearing interferes to some extent with the immediate appropriation of surplus-labour" through reduced capacity to work (Vogel, 1983:151). It also means that a woman has to be "maintained during the period of diminished contribution" (Vogel, 1983:151). Thus, family planning comes in handy as it ensures that women do not have children; therefore, no interference with the process of capital accumulation.

Agency of female workers

The mainstream literature portrays women as lacking agency and unable to challenge the status quo, especially in the public domain (Moser, 1993). Women were rarely seen in public spaces and hardly participated in social struggles that were aimed at improving their lives (Tripp, 2000). But, although the bulk of the workers appear to be vulnerable and unprotected, as this case study shows, some women have become more involved in the broader social, economic and political fabric and more particularly in matters that affect their daily lives. Indeed, women "today take an increasingly active role in revolutionary change around the world" (Vogel, 1983:141). The emerging findings indicate that many women are navigating the intricate socio-cultural spaces and exercising their agency by deploying multiple covert and overt strategies to voice their concerns and negotiate the challenges encountered at JP Cuttings.

While the management at JP Cuttings has continuously dissuaded employees from joining the workers' unions, particularly the Uganda Horticultural Industrial Services Provider and Allied Workers' Union (UHISPAWU), I established that many have defied the orders of the directors and managers. The informants explained thus: "We are told that joining workers' unions is not good for the company. So very few workers are part of the workers' unions"²⁵ Meanwhile, another informant explained that one of the managers complained that some colleagues opted to remain in the workers' union.²⁶

²⁵ Interview, 02 October 2020.

²⁶ Interview, 07 October 2020.

However, at the time of conducting the fieldwork, we established that only 160 employees out of 486 were in trade unions. The dismal number of employees in the workers' unions was attributed to dissuasion by the company owners because of their claims that joining workers' unions was not good for the company. Workers who join unions are often seen as rebels to the company. "If a 'good' worker joins the workers' union, then management will question why that worker has joined the union". This often affects their progress because questions will be raised at the promotion stage of such a worker in the workers' union. Of course, the promotion is effected, but hesitantly, compared to those who are not part of the workers' union.²⁷ An employee who was described as being 'good', is one who meets the daily production targets. Thus, this description denotes that such a worker enables the company to maximise profits and thus furtherance of capital accumulation. Many employees who are part of the workers' union are often persuaded to leave the workers' union. Despite this, many employees argued that they were still part of the workers' union because of the multiple advantages, notably that unions "periodically keep the company and the market forces in check" (Bakker, 2003:76) through defence of workers' rights as workers and advocacy for better pay and improved working conditions.

At a meso level, company-based committees, including a disciplinary committee, comprised of workers were established. However, the mode of selection of the committee members is undemocratic. The committee members are selected by the management of the company and not the workers themselves. The informants indicated that the conduct of some of the committee members appears to show that they are more interested in fostering the interests of the company as opposed to the welfare and interests of the workers.

Overall, the capital accumulation processes that are underway at JP Cuttings have provoked resistance among the employees. Many have not simply given in to the dissuasion of the directors and managers not to join the workers' union. Instead, they have exercised their agency by using what Scott (1986) calls "everyday forms of resistance", involving individual and collective, overt and covert actions, some of which were gender-specific. Resistance, according to Scott (1986:22), "is any act(s) by member(s) of the class that is (are) intended either to mitigate or to deny claims (taxes, deference) made on that class by superordinate classes (e.g. landlords, the state, owners of machinery, money lenders) or to advance its own claims (e.g. work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis these superordinate classes". The "cries of 'bread', 'land' and 'no taxes'" are often at the centre of peasant resistance because these are among the primary foundations of livelihood for most households (Scott, 1986:26).

The women who were part of the workers' union argued that the union fosters their rights in terms of just/fair remuneration, unfair dismissal and any other forms of injustices meted on them by the directors and the managers. Thus, joining the workers' union is buttressed within the broader calls for transparency, just payment, fair working conditions and rejection of adverse incorporation in the overall global floriculture production network. Because of the pressure that has come from the workers' union, the women who were on the executive explained that they are given days off to attend the executive meetings, an issue which was unheard of in the past. "In fact, management gives me days off when I have gone for union meetings without tampering with my leave days. Even this time around, we are going".²⁸

At an individual level, women are covertly challenging the socio-cultural practices (such as women not allowed to buy land) by buying land and other forms of property that were

²⁷ Interview, 15 October 2020.

²⁸ Interview, 2 November 2020

previously seen as a reserve of men. While the previous narrative has been that women lack agency and are passive recipients who often have to wait for and depend on the man to provide everything in the household, I established that the situation is gradually, but progressively, changing for the workers at JP Cuttings. It appears that women are no longer passive recipients but active participants in the development processes at family, household and community levels. For instance, Racheal explained how she has invested their salary: “I bought land in my ancestral village against the socio-cultural attribute that women do not own land”.²⁹ Also, Angella built a house for her parents in the village. Meanwhile, another woman explained how she used her salary to pay the tuition fees for her children: “I am able to pay school fees for the children. The first one is in Senior 6 [Grade 6] and the second one is in Senior 4 [Grade 4]”.³⁰

Furthermore, Atieno explained how she pays rent for the house where she lives with her husband and children:

I pay [rent] for the house where we live. It costs 60,000 [Ugx] every month. I sometimes pay half and he also pays the rest. But sometimes when he is unable to, I pay the whole amount of 60,000 [Ugx] by myself. He is a fisherman. Sometimes, he is unable to pay because of harassment from the authorities. I am also able to pay school fees for the last-born child who is in Senior 3 [Grade 3].

Other women even take loans to meet the household expenses: “We women also pay school fees for the children. At the start of the new school term, I often hear many women applying for loans to take their children back to school”.³¹

Conclusions

Export-oriented agriculture embodies complex and convoluted processes with multiple forms of power relations. While some positive outcomes have been registered in terms of employment for both women and men, the voices of discontent ‘from below’ appear to indicate that flower farming has largely served the interests of JP Cuttings in the context of furtherance of capital accumulation. The welfare of the workers and their families appears to have improved livelihoods. But, as the information shows, it has not been to the level that they anticipated at recruitment. Most women were not only allocated roles and responsibilities that are closer to their everyday responsibilities in the household, but the activities in which they engage are undervalued and thus under-remunerated.

The employment dynamics at JP Cuttings are similar to what has been observed elsewhere – there were more men than women workers. The women were largely involved in tasks that were labelled ‘feminine’ (such as harvesting, grading, sorting, and packaging of flowers), and the men were largely engaged in assignments that were labelled ‘masculine’ (such as maintenance/construction and fertigation/nutrition). Moreover, the recruitment processes were very informal, with no straightforward and clear processes followed. Most of the workers were recruited based on what I have termed, the ‘the politics of introduction’ and not based on education levels and/or academic qualifications. Although the working conditions were described by most of the informants as ‘fair’, there were complaints of the lack of protective gear and relatively low wages. These issues are shaped and informed by patriarchal rules and

²⁹ Interview, 15 October 2020.

³⁰ Interview, 7 November 2020.

³¹ Interview, 22 October 2020.

regulations that regard women as being secondary to men and ignore the meaningful contribution of women in society.

However, although the majority of the women appear to be on the fringes on the flower farms, many are exercising their agency and are actively involved in re-shaping the socio-economic conditions that aimed at improving their lives. The findings indicate that some women joined workers' unions against the advice of their employers, a distinct example of "everyday forms of peasant resistance" (Scott, 1986). These "often taken for granted" processes could progressively challenge the status quo and thus gradually transform the lives of female flower farm workers to the extent that they could, in the long run, be plausibly incorporated into the floriculture industry.

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