



Deceptive Beauty

**GLOBAL
CITIZENS
FOR A
GLOBAL ERA**

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 5

***A LOOK AT THE
GLOBAL FLOWER
INDUSTRY***

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A Look At The Global Flower Industry

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Workers, the Environment and the Flower Industry

Flowers Are Big Business

We often mark a special event—a birthday, an anniversary, a graduation—with a gift of flowers. Holidays like Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day are times when giving flowers seems especially appropriate. Flowers brighten a hospital room, grace a banquet table, add dignified beauty to a funeral and are indispensable at weddings. Flowers mean love, respect, recognition, celebration...

Rarely, however, do we think about where the flowers we buy come from. While we may perceive them as a fragile and beautiful gift of nature, most commercially sold flowers are produced through an artificial, labour-intensive process where every step, from farm to store, is carefully planned and managed. The rose you buy from a Vancouver florist was probably harvested several days earlier in Colombia. It was then tightly rolled and semi-dehydrated by women working in a refrigerated warehouse, dipped in a preserving chemical bath, packed in a box with dozens of other roses, flown to Miami, inspected by specially trained customs agents, shipped to an auction near Toronto and later rehydrated in another chemical solution at the shop where you bought it.

The international flower trade is big business in the global economy. The variety, quantity, colour and size of the flowers for sale all reflect the changing demands of the world market. The need to produce huge quantities of high-quality flowers all year round means that most of the roses, carnations and other

varieties we buy are grown in countries in Latin America and Africa, where the hours of sunlight are long and labour costs are low.

International cooperation agencies, like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and institutions like the World Bank, have promoted export flower cultivation as a solution for countries in economic crisis.¹ But while flower production, or “floriculture,” as it is technically called, has been promoted to developing countries as an ideal solution for economic problems,



the price tag it carries can be a high one.

The cut flower industry is a good example of the way globalization of the economy operates. Countries of the South, with low wages and weak environmental laws, produce the goods, while countries in the North hold a monopoly on the necessary technology and know-how, and control the market.²

The hub of the global flower industry is the Netherlands. This

tiny European country leads all others in flower production and exports. It is the home of the world’s largest flower auction, where 19 million cut flowers are sold during an average day.³ Farmers in the Netherlands began perfecting floriculture over 300 years ago. During the 17th century, Dutch tulips were already being exported at high prices to wealthy people in other parts of Europe. By 1637, the Dutch flower auction had been established.⁴ Growing and breeding techniques developed in the Netherlands have been exported around the world, along with the bedding plants used for propagating flower crops in the newer producer countries. Dutch technology and standards have set the pace for commercial floriculture wherever it is practised.

Today, the Netherlands exports 50 percent of the flowers sold on the world market. The second largest flower exporting country is Colombia, with 11 percent of the market.⁵ The number of flowers grown in the South has been

increasing since the 1960's. Kenya, Ecuador, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Zambia are all mass exporters of cut flowers.⁶ Israel also exports large quantities of flowers, especially to Europe.

In 1999, Colombia and Ecuador shipped 134,000 tons of flowers, worth about US\$470 million, through Miami.⁷ About 3 percent of these flowers ended up in Canada.⁸

The international flower trade is organized along regional lines. Asia-Pacific countries are the biggest suppliers to Japan and Hong Kong. Africa and Latin America supply the European Union, which buys 67.5 percent of the world's flowers, with the biggest share coming from Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Zambia. The United States and Canada buy most of their flowers from Latin America, especially Colombia and Ecuador.⁹

Ninety-two percent of carnations imported to the U.S. and Canada were produced in Colombia.¹⁰

Workers in the Flower Industry

Flowers need long hours of sunlight, a stable, moderate climate and lots of water. Flower production involves many delicate operations that must be carried out by hand for every plant. Flowers do not need particularly fertile soil, but they can only be raised in quantity where there is available land on which to build large greenhouses. Ready access to an international airport is a must so that flowers can be shipped to their destination before any freshness is lost. And since flower production requires a lot of labour, it is important to have a large workforce near the plantations.

Most flower workers are exposed to grave risks in their jobs and have little or no ability to safely defend themselves from abuse. Often flower workers live in rural areas where few income-earning jobs are available. They may be landless peasants or unemployed city dwellers who migrate from other parts of the country to work in the flower industry. While they may have farming

experience, flower workers generally lack the training and education that could qualify them for other types of work. For many, floriculture is their first entry into the paid labour force.

Producing flowers in the massive quantities needed for commercial export can have negative effects for workers and the environment.

In the countries of the South, between 65 and 70 percent of flower workers are women.

Although they are the majority, they are often subject to discrimination. In some African countries, women can be seen working without any protective clothing next to male workers who wear full protective uniforms. One of the



Kenyan Flower Worker

biggest problems women flower workers face is sexual harassment. They must often submit to a pregnancy test before being hired. Women who are heads of families must work in situations where it is impossible for them to take time off to attend to their children's school or medical needs.¹¹

Flower workers are employed on short, fixed-term contracts, or as "temporary" or "casual" workers in most parts of Latin America and Africa, even though they

may work at the same farm for years. They have no job security and often do not receive any benefits. They are usually paid only minimum wage—which in many countries is extremely low—and are expected to work overtime when required. They sometimes work excessively long shifts—fifty or sixty hours per week at peak seasons. Flower workers have little choice but to accept these conditions if they want to keep their jobs. They are under strict surveillance in the

workplace, and those who cannot keep up with the pace of the work, or who complain about conditions, are fired.

Few flower workers belong to unions and in most countries the industry does everything it can to prevent workers from organizing. In some countries, the owners themselves have set up “company” unions, which exist on paper but do little to help workers.

Kenya has the oldest and strongest flower industry in Africa. It has produced roses and carnations for the European market for twenty years. In 1999, Kenya exported over US\$140 million worth of flowers, of which over 90 percent went to Europe. The Kenyan flower industry employs approximately 40,000 people on about 120 farms. The world’s biggest flower farm, employing over 10,000 people, is located in Kenya.¹²

About 65 percent of Kenyan flower workers are employed as “casuals”—sometimes for years. They are not entitled to any social benefits, including maternity leave. Many farms cancel the contract of any woman worker who becomes pregnant. Despite the heavy use of pesticides and other chemicals, casual workers are usually not issued protective clothing. It is impossible for a casual worker to join a union.¹³

For workers, the flower industry represents the total erosion of labour standards, with short contracts, job instability, low wages, and lack of social protection.

The flower industry refers to the use of casual labour as having a “flexible” work force. But in reality it often describes a workforce where workers are forced to work for low pay under bad conditions. Many owners have “bent” the laws protecting workers for so long, it is hard to enforce any standards at all.

Flowers Are A Health Hazard

The greatest danger flower workers face is exposure to harmful pesticides and other chemicals in the industry. The countries that import flowers insist these flowers be completely free of insects and disease. One hint of either can cause an entire shipment to be sent back. To meet these standards (which are called phytosanitary regulations) growers rely on heavy use of toxic pesticides, fungicides and other chemicals.

Each crop of flowers begins with workers using steam and chemical fumigation to disinfect the soil in which the seedlings will be planted. This process kills off all of the bacteria in the soil. Later, artificially produced fertilizers are

pumped into the soil in order to provide nutrients for the growing plants.

During the planting process, workers kneel on the damp ground of raised beds, quickly setting out seedlings imported from the Netherlands, Germany or the United States. The planting is computer-monitored and calculated right down to the ideal date for supplying specific market destinations. Once the flowers begin to grow, workers string netting to support the plants, pinch back lateral buds, “comb” the plants to ensure uniform growth, and cover them with plastic to prevent early blooming. After the flowers are harvested, selection and classification for shipping is done in refrigerated packing rooms.¹⁴

Many flower workers experience physical and emotional problems related to their jobs. They are subject to drastic temperature changes, a polluted environment, a heavy work-

load and psychological stress. The most common health complaints are respiratory illness, skin diseases, varicose veins and ulcers.¹⁵ Since floriculture requires people to spend long periods of time working in awkward and uncomfortable



South American Flower Worker Spraying

positions, many suffer chronic back and muscle pain. Kneeling for hours on damp ground causes a variety of leg and knee problems.¹⁶

Most flower workers are not given protective clothing or masks, and companies provide little or no training on how to decrease risk when handling and applying pesticides. One-fifth of the chemicals used in flower production in the countries of the South have been proven to produce cancer and have been restricted or banned in Europe and North America.¹⁷ Yet, in some cases, workers do not even have a place to wash their hands before eating lunch.

Dust from fumigation causes dizziness, headaches, cramps and other long-term symptoms. Workers are also vulnerable to severe respiratory infections due to exposure to temperature changes and high humidity levels in the greenhouses.

Marco is a sixteen-year-old Ecuadorian flower worker. He has worked at the same company for one year, and has been fumigating for the last six months. The pesticides he uses are mixed in a 200-litre tank. While he is working, Marco wears a uniform with a hood. He does not wear a mask or gloves. His mouth and nose are unprotected. Marco is one of four fumigators who work with pesticides all day long. Under their uniforms, they wear their own clothing, which they then wear back to their homes at night. Marco believes the chemicals he is using are dangerous, because they are very strong. They inflame his throat and make him cough. He says he always feels tired, has headaches, and is experiencing strange personality changes. "Before I started working here," says Marco, "I was more easygoing. Now I am often angry and tense. I don't even know what I'm angry about."¹⁸

Damage to workers' health from pesticide exposure has been a problem for years. Workers are reluctant to complain for fear of losing their jobs. The problem was reported as early as 1993 in an article about the Zimbabwean horticultural industry:

"Harare, Zimbabwe, March 25, 1993

Last year, Leave Ndlovu's life mysteriously began to fall to pieces. His wife and workmates at a horticultural farm near Harare noticed that the thirty-year-old pesticide mixer was developing strange behaviour. Ndlovu's eyes ran incessantly, he complained of debilitating dizziness, nausea and disorientation, and his speech became slurred to the point of incoherence. In October he spent two weeks in hospital, where doctors puzzled over his symptoms. Only after he was fired was the cause of his illness—chronic pesticide poisoning—properly diagnosed. Ndlovu, unemployed, ailing and divorced, is now waiting at his village home for the results of a union-led action for a disability pension from his former employer.

According to Sammy Chaikosa, the health and safety officer of the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ), Ndlovu is part of the first wave of victims of occupational hazards in the young horticultural industry. Many others suffer in silence...

In the new era of structural adjustment, the government looks favourably on the flower industry and has diverted substantial amounts of foreign currency into the sector. Farmers say a good chunk of that money goes towards importing a wide range of pesticides, fungicides and fertilizers essential to the industry's highly capital-intensive production. Some of the chemicals are extremely toxic...

'The sprayers come through while we are working', says a man with badly scarred hands. 'We can smell those chemicals. We know that it is bad for us. Many suffer from headaches and sore eyes. My hands get pricked, and those chemicals get into my body. But if you complain, you have no job. Complainers get fired.'"¹⁹

Women are even more at risk than men. One study in Tanzania found that pregnant and nursing mothers were exposed to the same chemical risks as

other workers. The same study found that most workers did not know what chemicals they were handling, or the dangers associated with them.²⁰

Even in the Netherlands, where there is control over pesticide use, it was found that 43 percent of sprayers do not use safety protection when they work, and that 23 percent eat, drink or smoke while preparing toxic mixtures.²¹

Despite an expanding flower industry, Bolivia has no regulations on pesticide use. In Tipicaya, the centre of the Bolivian flower industry, 3.79 percent of babies born in 2000 had some form of birth defect. That same year, over 8 percent of the patients at the local hospital were women with miscarriages. Researchers and activists at the local university, Nuestra Señora de Paz, are demanding strict regulations on the most dangerous pesticides.²² However, without support from lawmakers and the public, this will be hard to achieve.

In Colombia, the flower industry uses 200 kilos of pesticide per hectare of land, which is double the amount used in the Netherlands.²³ A study of over 8000 workers on flower plantations near Bogota found that the workers were exposed to 127 different pesticides, three of which the World Health Organization has considered to be extremely toxic. About 20 percent of the pesticides are banned or not registered for use in the United States or Canada because they are carcinogenic and extremely toxic.²⁴

According to one report, nearly two-thirds of Colombian flower workers suffer from one or more floriculture-related health problems, including headaches, nausea, impaired vision, conjunctivitis, rashes, asthma, stillbirths, miscarriages, congenital malformations and respiratory and neurological problems.²⁵

Interviews with fumigation workers in Colombia revealed that although they were using masks, they had not been informed that the mask filters need to be changed frequently. Without this step, the equipment provides only minimal protection.²⁶ Eyewitnesses have testified that greenhouses are not always completely cleared of people while fumigation is going on, and that workers sometimes return to greenhouses too early after fumigation has taken place.²⁷ Workers do not receive enough instruction on how to handle pesticides properly; nor

are they always informed about the types of pesticides being used. Not all farms keep toxicological records of stored pesticides, and the quantities used are not always registered. Secure showers are not available at the workplace, so workers cannot wash off pesticide residues before going home. Many companies do not have a doctor for emergencies or the capacity to respond to accidents at the worksite.²⁸

Doctors in flower-producing areas of Colombia report up to five cases of acute pesticide poisoning per day.²⁹

“It started with an allergy. My skin started to blister and break out because of the heat and humidity in the plastic greenhouses and the chemicals that stay in the air. Then my hair started to fall out. I had appetite loss and lost a lot of weight over a short period of time. I have had terrible aches and pains in my legs and one of my arms. A lot of people here have been sick in one way or another.” Colombian Flower Worker³⁰

Flowers and the Environment

This heavy use of pesticides also creates a danger for the communities where the plantations are located. Although some municipalities have rulings prohibiting greenhouses from being placed close to neighbourhoods where people live, this rule is often violated. In most flower producing countries in Africa, workers live on the plantations, where they are exposed to even greater risk.

The high levels of toxic chemicals used in the flower industry contaminate soil and water in flower-growing regions. When not properly treated, the run-off water from the irrigation process is laced with pesticides and as it soaks into the ground it creates a zone of toxic soil. In Colombia, pesticides have contaminated the water table and the subsoil in the flower producing zone. Nearby rivers are also seriously affected. In Ecuador, pollution is causing the extinction of some species of flora and fauna, destabilizing the ecological balance and posing a risk for the food farmers remaining in the region.³¹



Greenhouses near Bogota, Columbia

contaminated milk from these cows was sold in the surrounding towns and in the capital city. Although the practice is now illegal, it is still going on in some places.

Disposal of solid waste generated by the industry is also a problem. Plant stocks, rejected flowers and pesticide containers are all contaminated and need to be safely disposed. Until recently, farmers in Colombia were feeding their cattle rejected carnation stalks that were sold or given away by the plantations. The

The flower industry is responsible for polluting the areas where the plantations are located, creating a risky situation for those who live nearby. In Ecuador, it was found that:

- Local farmers use discarded plastic from the greenhouses to build animal shelters or to repair their houses.
- People use scraps from demolished greenhouses for firewood, creating a toxic situation inside their homes.
- People sometimes use abandoned pesticide containers to store things in.
- Stalks and rejected flowers are used for compost.
- Flower workers' pesticide-covered clothing is washed with the family laundry.
- Local farmers have started using pesticides on their crops without access to information about how to handle, store and mix them.³²

Retailers' desire to market new and special varieties of flowers has led some growers to experiment with genetic alterations. Flower genes are being manipulated to make the plants resistant to insects and disease, to increase the output of blooms and to make flowers last longer after they are cut. Producing flowers in colours not found in nature is also a goal for vendors who want to have something different to sell.

There is growing concern everywhere about the environmental and health effects of manipulating life forms in this way. In 2000, at an international meeting in Colombia, over forty workers, human rights and environmental organizations signed a statement protesting the introduction of genetic alterations in the flower and food industries.

In May 2000, the first genetically modified flower was approved for the Colombian flower industry. The Blue Carnation contains genes derived from petunias, which provide its new artificial colour.³³

Genetically altered plants are good business for the companies that develop them because they receive royalties each time the plants are used.³⁴ However, many people around the world are concerned about the short-term and long-term effects of transgenetic agriculture, and flower workers have joined in this movement.

Cultural Values Threatened

Ecuador began to produce cut flowers in the early 1980s. By 1998, flowers comprised 3.5 percent of the country's total exports. Ecuador is becoming known for its excellent roses, which fetch the best market prices. Many of the flower companies in Ecuador belong to Colombians who have brought their expertise, along with their labour practices, to this neighbouring country.

In the regions where flowers are grown, floriculture has replaced farming for food crops. The flower growing zone of Colombia was once prime farmland. Today food must be imported. The same is true for Ecuador.³⁵

In Ecuador, most flower production takes place in Cayambe, a region where many of the flower workers belong to traditional indigenous communities. For local peasant families, floriculture has become a welcome source of cash in a bankrupt farming economy. However, the long hours people spend working for wages have begun to take their toll on the culture. People no longer have time to participate in the communal work parties and local festivals that are important to cultural identity and community solidarity. Since both women and men are employed at the plantations, children now receive less care and attention because the adults have less time to spend with them. Elders fear that this could greatly weaken their culture, as traditional practices and values are not being shared with the next generation.³⁶