



The State and Transformation of Female Wage Workers in Ethiopia: Practices from Selected Floriculture Farms

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia had been striving to transform its economy through enhancing the performances of the agricultural sector leading to growth of industries. A case in point could be the expansion of floriculture investments in the last three decades. The sector significantly benefited unemployed youths, mainly women. Economic empowerment of women through such investments led to reduced individual and household poverty, increased investment in child education and health, and growth in a country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

However, there have been distinguishable gaps regarding women’s standing in the sector. Wage gaps between men and women, assignment of women in low-skill jobs and therefore low pay, unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment, labor exploitation and increased burden of household responsibilities for women, were evident in the sector. The limited legal and policy responses in providing protection to women wage laborers in this sector posed other challenges that worsen the situations of women. The outbreak of COVID-19 further exacerbated the working and living conditions of women in the floriculture sector in terms of job security and income generation.

Hence, this brief reflects on the state, trend and changes in the working conditions of female wage workers beheld from the social, economic, political and cultural frameworks of the country. This policy brief is written based on the field research conducted in two Floriculture Farms: Joytech and Saron Farms, located at Bishoftu and Sebeta areas, respectively. The research was conducted from June 2021 to August 2021 through a survey of 453 female wage laborers and review of documentary sources.

2. Key Findings

The existence of major shifts has been reported to occur in the floriculture investments of Ethiopia. There were growing employment opportunities, income benefits, empowerment of females in management positions, protections of women’s rights, and provision of support facilities to female wage laborers.

2.1. Employment Opportunities

Cheap labor is known for being a major production factor and Ethiopia has been using it as a comparative advantage to attract foreign investors. To take advantage of this; many flower farms were established in Ethiopia in the last two decades, now reaching more than 120. This expansion meant wider opportunities of women’s employment in the flower value chain with women making up 90% of the total employments in the sector. More specifically, out of 1500 workers at Joytech Farm, 1050 were female em-

ployees while out of 500 employees at Saron flower farm, 250 were women at the time of survey. Looking at the dynamics in employment status and data of the female wage laborers, only few (6.4%) had earlier occupational experiences of working in other flower farm companies. Others had experience in farming (4%); daily laborers (11.5%), petty traders (9.5%), housemaids (3.5%), housewives (2.6%) and waiters (1.1%). Hence, most of the female workers had joined the Floriculture Farms from other jobs such as daily labor, care work, or employed in the service sector as waitresses. This confirmed the growing interest in the sector due the payments and services the Farms avail.

While creating employment opportunities, adoption of standard recruitment procedures and signing of contract agreements are much expected in the organizational practices. However, the qualitative interviews proved that recruitment of employees in Floriculture Farms is usually based on acquaintances and random selection. There have been limited practices of vacancy announcements, except for office work. Similarly,

Having worked as a contract worker for a probation period of 45 days, female wage laborers then sign an agreement and officially recognized as a 'permanent' (definite contract) employee. The descriptive data indicated that 95.1% of the sampled female wage laborers in the Farms were definite contract employees, while only 4.9% were 'contract' employees. It has to be noted, however, these numbers may vary seasonally, especially during peak season where the Flower Farms engage more daily laborers that are paid on a daily basis for certain period of time, mostly a month and so.

A significant majority of the female wage laborers (92.0%) do have contracts signed and available on their hands. Overall, regardless of the contracts, about 37.8% of female wage laborers rate the chance of losing a job likely at various degrees while 62.2% reported having no free of the likelihood of losing their job.

## **2.2. Income, Benefits, and Services**

Despite the absence of wage policies in the country, the wages of female wage laborers in the sector have been revised over the years. Yet, inflations and cost of living expenses for the wage laborers kept them

in trap of poverty. A major observation from the analysis attested that female wage laborers were not on the tables of negotiations for mutually deciding the wages and other benefits.

The analysis of income data of the female wage laborers showed that their mean initial salary was 1049.31 compared to the mean current salary of 1841.58. With all other factors, the mean initial and current salary was an indication of changes reported every year and the presence of salary increments. Even the outbreak COVID-19 did not prevent from making the usual annual salary increments.

With the intentions of assessing the changes in the livelihood of female wage laborers due earning the wage benefits, the housing ownership status of female workers was assessed. It was reported that 81% still live-in rented houses from private owners, 9.1% of them owned their own houses, 3.5% rented from kebele, 4.9% share their families' houses, and only 1.5% of them are provided houses for free. Similarly, the analysis of the asset ownership showed that sharp increments were reported on the ownership of mobile, TV, bed, Sofa and Stove after securing employment.

The analysis of the survey results also showed that about 80% of the monthly income of the female wage laborers is spent on food and housing.

Farms have taken measures towards providing transportation services, relatively better health packages and linkages, trainings and educational opportunities. Farms provide transportation services, toilets, and ensure clean water supply to their workers, with shower rooms. The Farms also operate licensed primary health clinics in the farm or outside of the farm.

## **2.3. Empowerment of Female Wage Laborers**

The capacity of female workers to assume leadership positions, involve in decisions and involvement in most affairs of respective farms and production systems has grown over years. The proportion of women who occupied leadership positions has reached about 20%. Hence, the participation of female workers both in the farm operations and management has changed over the years and demonstrated the sector's contribution to empowerment of female laborers.

Women hold leadership positions and actively participate in decision making, though they are few in number compared to their male counterparts. There has been no identified program dedicated to empowering female workers and enable them to participate in leadership and decision making. There are no affirmative supportive systems in place in both Farms. High level positions such as in management are often occupied by men whereas women are the majority in lower-level structures.

#### **2.4. COVID-19 and its Effects on the Emerging Trends of Female Wage Laborer in the Floriculture Sector of Ethiopia**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has been reported to impose impacts on the production, sale and income of the floriculture farms exacerbating the already prevailing pressures and complexities in the sector. Lockdowns in Ethiopia and other countries affected the demand of flowers and thus resulted in lower production and significant loss of income within the sector. The psychological, social and economic effects of the pandemic were reported to be significant during the early phases of the occurrence of the pandemic.

To lessen the impact of the pandemic, both on the production systems and the workers including female wage laborers, a combination of measures were taken by the farms in close collaboration with relevant government bodies and workers themselves, including providing facemasks, encouraging handwashing and providing facilities for the same, and providing hand sanitizers. Farm management also introduced a shift system to reduce the number of female workers at a time. Nonetheless, the pandemic has jeopardized the progress intended to be achieved in the working conditions of female wage laborers.

### **3. Policy Recommendations**

**Embark on Extensive Advocacy for Setting Minimum Wages in the Ethiopian Horticulture Sector:** the absence of concrete measures regarding setting minimum wage in Ethiopia continues to limit the benefits that can be gained from women's employment in the sector. The importance of setting minimum wages should be seen from the perspectives of respecting and promoting the rights of women workers and improving their livelihood.

The efforts made by the Ethiopian Horticultural Producers and Exporters Association (EHPEA) in terms of introducing cluster-based wages could be scaled up and considered as a benchmark for other sectors as well. Yet, such practices still require strong backing by law and regulatory environments to ensure that the practice is not open to abuse and is sustainable.

**Training and Promotion of Female Wage Laborers at Floriculture Farms:** all forms of development start with building human capital. Farms could harvest more benefits if and only if the capacity of its workers, both in skills and financial terms, significantly improves. While formal training and education may demand large investments, on job trainings could be designed and implemented with small cost to help new recruits gain knowledge and develop the skills to handle tasks in the farms. Such training, if organized on continuous basis, could also empower female wage laborers in pursuing their rights and responsibilities.

In addition, provision of leadership training needs to be mandatory to help female wage laborers develop visionary leadership and management skills. Despite past trends and meagre and fragmented practices, the incorporation of female workers capacity enhancement in strategic planning and human resources policies of the companies constitute essential focus area ultimately influencing higher productivity, business and generation of revenues.

The prevailing poorly designed promotion procedures and guidelines in the Farms had discouraged female workers from aspiring for higher positions. Firms need to design clear and fair promotion guidelines that support women's aspirations and enable them to attain leadership positions.

**Ensure Workplace Safety:** workplace safety standards need to be strictly met by the management and workers themselves. While there are some efforts in this regard, more stringent monitoring and supervision guidelines, institutional enforcing mechanisms and frequent health assessment are needed to ensure worker's safety.

As one of the key units, the labor unions within the farms need to be robust and work with the farms to ensure the presence of a safe work environment and protect the rights of female wage laborers. In



addition, large investments such as Floriculture Farms need to introduce health insurances for their workers.

**Strengthen Gender Empowerment Units at Floriculture Farms of Ethiopia:** Since the practice of having a gender focal person alone may not help to achieve the goals of empowering female workers at flower farms, well-organized gender units should be established. A full-scale gender mainstreaming effort across departments in flower farms demands commitment from the management, female workers and the presence of experts working on this direction.

Reforms in the establishment of strengthened gender units at farms can help to facilitate coordination between female laborers and the management and help to understand the specific needs of female workers. The unit should work in close collaboration with labor and skill development office in each district and town administration where the Farms

are located. The gender mainstreaming unit could also host and work with health and family planning officers, HIV/AIDSs officers and marriage counsellors. The business-as-usual practice of having just one focal person would not induce any significant step forward as the trend in the past shows it well.

Under the gender empowerment units, it is also recommendable to have a legal advisor and expert who could guide female workers whenever they encounter gender-based violence, harassment and discriminations. Improving the overall system and how individuals within the flower farms deliver justice is important for the sustainability and reputation of the company within and outside of farms.

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