

# Workers' conditions in the cut flower industry

ETI media briefing for Valentine's Day

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**6 February 2008**

## **Introduction**

This briefing from the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) provides media information on the conditions of flower workers in the run up to Valentine's day and Mother's Day (3 March) 2008.

We provide some key facts and FAQs on this issue, and contact details for spokespeople. We also describe how some of our members have worked together to make a difference to the lives of flower workers in Kenya and Colombia.

If you would like further information please contact **Julia Hawkins, ETI media relations manager** on 020 7841 5180 or [julia@eti.org.uk](mailto:julia@eti.org.uk)

## **Common Questions**

### ***Why do reports on flower workers' conditions always focus on Kenya?***

Around one in four of the flowers we buy for our nearest and dearest on Valentine's Day come from Kenya, as it provides ideal growing conditions for the roses, carnations, and other flowers loved by Western consumers. Other major flower exporters include Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Ethiopia as well as Colombia. Conditions for workers across all these countries are likely to be fairly similar.

### ***How important is the flower industry in Kenya and Colombia?***

Until the recent troubles, the Kenyan cut flower industry had been growing rapidly. It provides vital income for up to two million poor people and is its second largest agricultural foreign exchange earner (after tea) at more than \$250 million a year. Colombia is the largest flower exporter in the world after Holland, generating an income for around 800,000 people.

### ***Are workers' conditions in the flower industry worse than any other?***

Like many other industries that rely on a large supply of cheap labour, a lot of the jobs involved in the flower industry - such as grading, packing, harvesting, tending beds, watering and so on - require limited skills. Many of the workers employed in the industry are poor and so vulnerable to exploitation. Research carried out by ETI members into some flower farms in Kenya revealed widespread discrimination against women workers, as well as workers kept on rolling temporary contracts; poor health and safety (workers inadequately provided with adequate personal protective equipment), low wages, long hours and low levels of union representation. Many of these issues for workers are found in the supply chains of other consumer goods, including food and garments.

### ***What should retailers be doing to improve the conditions of flower workers?***

We believe retailers should adopt credible strategies to implement the ETI Base Code, including:

- carefully checking working conditions in flower farms, which includes carrying out in-depth interviews with workers;
- working closely with their suppliers to explain why workers' rights are important and to help them change their labour practices;
- making sure the price they pay to suppliers for their flowers allows the suppliers to pay their workers a wage they can live on
- making sure lead times for farmers reduce the pressure on workers to work unreasonably long hours

### ***What has ETI done to tackle flower workers' conditions?***

ETI and our members have been working together to address problems in the flower industry for several years. We were alerted to serious violations of the ETI Base Code in the Kenyan flower industry in 2002 and in the Autumn of that year a group of our members visited Kenya to meet workers at first hand and hear their stories, and to talk to other players in the flower industry.

We then facilitated collective action by ETI retailer, supplier and NGO members to address some of the most pressing issues for workers. A full account of this work can be found at [www.ethicaltrade.org/d/kenyaflowers](http://www.ethicaltrade.org/d/kenyaflowers).

### ***What improvements have been made to workers' conditions?***

While there is still work to be done, recent improvements for workers in Kenya include: more permanent contracts; the establishment of worker welfare and gender committees; better provision of protective equipment; stricter pesticide controls and extensive improvements in housing facilities. More women now have access to daycare facilities for their children and agreed breaks for breastfeeding, and there is general acceptance that pregnant women should be given light duties. With ETI's help, Kenyans themselves established a body to tackle flower workers' conditions, the Horticultural Ethical Business Initiative.

Our members have also been seeking to share lessons learnt in East Africa with their colleagues in Colombian trade unions, NGOs, growers and industry bodies. Last April, ETI brought Colombian flower exporters, trade unions, and companies sourcing from Colombia to the discussion table for the first time. All parties agreed to establish the first-ever multi-stakeholder forum for addressing workers' rights in the floriculture industry. A report of this meeting can be found at [www.ethicaltrade.org/d/colombia](http://www.ethicaltrade.org/d/colombia)

### ***What can consumers do?***

Consumer concern about how flowers are produced has already brought benefits to Kenyan flower workers. People buying roses for their loved ones on Valentine's Day can make sure flower workers' conditions stay on the corporate agenda by:

- **showing you care.** You can write to supermarkets and ask them questions about how the workers who grow, pick and pack their flowers are treated.
- **joining a campaign.** Some organisations, including ETI NGO member Women Working Worldwide and War on Want campaign specifically about the conditions of workers in the flower industry.

- **becoming better informed about the issues.** The ETI website contains a wealth of information about the challenges companies face in improving working conditions in their supply chain, and we have a factsheet for consumers at [www.ethicaltrade.org/d/factsheets](http://www.ethicaltrade.org/d/factsheets)

### ***Shouldn't we be buying locally sourced flowers?***

Research published by Cranfield University in December 2006 showed that carbon emissions from Kenyan flowers, including air freight, were nearly **six times lower** than for Dutch flowers. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that Kenya has optimal growing conditions and a ready supply of natural heat and light, while growers in Holland rely on significant inputs of gas and electricity.

### ***What are the implications for flower workers of the current turmoil in Kenya?***

The situation in Kenya is extremely distressing for all those involved in the flower industry – not least flower workers themselves. The violence, which started further north in Eldoret, has spread to the flower-growing centres of Naivasha and Nakuru. Many flower workers have fled the violence and some flower farms have had to close down. However, as at 6 February, we understand that many farms are operating almost as normal and that the supply of roses for Valentine's day is unlikely to be affected.

### **Key facts and figures - Kenya**

<b>\$250 million</b>	the value of the Kenyan cut flower industry
<b>2 million</b>	the number of Kenyans who indirectly depend on the flower industry for their livelihood. Around 55,000 mainly young women, are directly employed in the industry.
<b>25%</b>	The proportion of cut flowers sold in the EU that come from Kenya
<b>One third</b>	of all flowers from Kenya are exported to the UK.
<b>35%</b>	Annual growth rate of the Kenyan flower industry

### **Key facts and figures - Colombia**

<b>US\$700 million</b>	The value of Colombian flower exports
<b>800,000</b>	The number of Colombians who depend on the flower industry for their livelihood. Around 90,000 are directly employed.
<b>15%</b>	Proportion of workers in the floriculture industry who are members of a union – compared to a national average of 5%
<b>65%</b>	Proportion of flower workers who are women
<b>85%</b>	The proportion of flower exports destined for the US

### **Available spokespeople**

- Dan Rees, ETI Director 0207 841 5180
- Alan Roberts, ETI Chairman – please contact Julia on 0207 841 5180
- World Flowers: Jim Floor 01256 709802