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Pathways to empowerment?: Dynamics of women's participation in Global Value Chains.

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Abstract

Gender plays an important role in shaping the outcomes of participation within Global Value Chains (GVCs). Employment in GVCs may have potential to empower women, but little is known about the dynamics by which GVCs bring about empowerment, rather studies highlight abuse of women's rights and on-going gender-based discrimination. This paper considers whether and how employment within GVCs empowers women workers. By drawing from an in-depth empirical study of women workers employed in the Kenyan tea and cut-flower industries, it develops three interlinked pathways to empowerment through employment in GVCs. These pathways based on 'being', 'doing' and 'sharing' offer some positive changes from the women workers' perspectives. In so doing, we offer a more nuanced perspective on employment for women in GVCs in African agriculture, acknowledging the constraints but also noting the potential for positive outcomes.

Keywords: Global Value Chains, Women Workers, Empowerment, Governance, Agriculture, Tea, Floriculture, Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Across global agriculture, the expansion of production for the global market has been associated with increases in women's employment. Alongside this is a growing realisation of the important role played by gender in shaping the outcomes of participation within chains. However, knowledge about gendered dimensions of value chains amongst both researchers and practitioners is inadequate to fully understand the dynamics at play, especially with respect to women's empowerment, particularly in an African context (Riisgaard, et al., 2010).¹ However, several studies across sectors with significant female employment have highlighted the opposite, painting a picture of poor health and safety and endemic labour rights violations, with a differential experience for men and women (Bain, 2010, Dolan, 2004, ETI, 2005, Hale and Opondo, 2005, Smith, et al., 2004, Tallontire, et al., 2005). More broadly the feminisation of labour in GVCs has been associated with greater insecurity, flexibilisation and precarious work (Palpacuer, 2008, Raworth and Kidder, 2009). However, employment of women in firms participating in global value chains may provide economic independence, an alternative to domestic labour and previously unimagined opportunities (Kabeer, 1994). This suggests that the reality from the perspective of women employed in these chains is more nuanced.

Drawing from a study of women workers in Kenyan tea and cut-flower industries supplying European retailers and brands, this paper examines employment experiences and asks how and indeed if female empowerment is generated through employment in GVCs. In particular we develop three interlinked pathways to empowerment and highlight how these may facilitate, or indeed constrain, the potential for employment in GVCs to empower women workers.

The paper begins by highlighting the limited consideration of labour and gender in GVC approaches and briefly considering how 'empowerment' has been conceptualised. It goes on to explain our methodology and provides a context for the study before unpacking the meaning of empowerment for women working in tea and cut-flowers by basing our analysis on three pathways of change. Finally we reflect on how empowerment may be fostered in these GVCs before drawing some wider conclusions.

¹ However, see collection edited by Dunaway (2013) for example across the world. Note her work is largely in the context of Global Commodity Chain and World Systems theory (cf Wallerstein 1995) rather than the Global Value Chains approach, (see Gereffi 1994), which is the tradition within which we situate our work.

2. BRINGING EMPOWERMENT INTO GLOBAL VALUE CHAIN ANALYSIS

The analysis of GVCs² highlights the process of economic development (upgrading), the co-ordination of production along a chain, power relations involved (governance) and the influence of institutions (Dolan and Humphrey, 2000, Gereffi, 1994). GVC analysis has highlighted how powerful buyers such as food retailers and global clothing brands 'govern from a distance' using quality standards, which increasingly include social and environmental dimensions which have implications for how rents are distributed within chains and also shape the experience of suppliers (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004, Gibbon and Ponte, 2005, Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Conventionally, GVC analysis focuses on the firm, but increasingly it is argued that it is important to open the 'black box' of the firm and examine how particular workers or communities benefit from integration in the global value chain (Barrientos, et al., 2003, Bolwig, et al., 2010). Several studies have highlighted the problems facing workers employed at the base of global value chains; some related to weak labour regulation or global processes of de-regulation associated with neo-liberalism (Barrientos and Dolan, 2003, Barrientos, et al., 2011, Barrientos and Kritzing, 2004, Palpacuer, 2008) and others indirectly related to purchasing practices of global retailers and brands (Hale and Opondo, 2005, Hughes, et al., 2010, Oxfam, 2004, Raworth and Kidder, 2009). More recently researchers have asked about whether workers and communities benefit from efforts by producers at the bottom of the chain to integrate into GVCs, i.e. does global market access and product and process upgrading enhance 'social upgrading' (Barrientos et al., 2011, Bolwig et al., 2010).

Until recently, while the majority of studies on workers within the GVC literature looked at gender in some form (Barrientos, 2002, Barrientos, et al., 2000, Dolan and Sutherland, 2002, Hale and Opondo, 2005, Lund and Srinivas, 2000), few had gone beyond looking at workers' experiences in the workplace and an acknowledgement of the gendered nature of the labour economy, to also look at how women's employment impacts on household dynamics and structures, particularly in an African context, while extensive work has been undertaken in Latin American agriculture and clothing (e.g. Bain, 2013).

Nevertheless, one study looking at the effectiveness of value chain interventions in terms of their impacts on gender highlighted the scarcity of such studies and widened its scope to also include interventions that did not target gender

² Particularly within economic sociology, economic geography and development studies, (Bair, 2005, Bair 2009, Boons and Mendoza 2010)

specifically (Riisgaard et al., 2010). Looking at studies on Kenyan women workers, with the notable exception of Dolan (2001, 2002) and also Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) (2012), analysis concentrates within the workplace rather than household dynamics and how participation within GVCs interacts with this. The word 'empowerment' is surprisingly absent, exceptions being Riisgaard who talks of 'empowerment' as 'worker self-representation' within trade unions (Riisgaard, 2009a, b:33) and the KHRC which uses the word once when stating that "patriarchal systems...inhibit the empowerment of women" (KHRC, 2008:39).

Regardless, various proponents of the sector make claims that employment within it is empowering (representative of Kenya Flower Council (KFC), 2009). Employment in the flower sector has grown, including for women. In the more 'traditional' tea sector the employment of women has been more recent (only since 1989 for Company A) (Said-Allsopp, 2013:80). Thus the sectors investigated here can be seen as part of a broader process of feminisation of agricultural labour across Africa (Dolan and Sorby, 2003, Langan, 2011, Tallontire et al., 2005).

3. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Women's empowerment has been analysed in depth within development studies. While the term 'empowerment' has gained considerable currency in recent times within development dialogue, there remain issues with how 'empowerment' has been conceptualised, analysed and assessed; few academics or development agencies can agree on the exact meaning of the term (McEwan and Bek, 2006, Rowlands, 1995, Rowlands, 1997). Rowlands claims that "the term may be used merely to communicate good intentions, and to imply some unspecified recognition of the need for changes in the distribution of power" (Rowlands, 1997:7). This vagueness is related to the multi-faceted, context-defined and specific nature of empowerment processes, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to define universally. Nevertheless, we can unpack some underlying concepts.

The term 'empowerment' hints at a transfer or acquisition of power, be it by an individual or by a group (Kabeer, 1999, Kabeer, 2000, McEwan and Bek, 2006, Rowlands, 1995, Rowlands, 1997) and for those focusing on citizenship, it is "the process of awareness and capacity-building, which increases the participation and decision-making power of citizens and may potentially lead to transformative action" (Andersen and Siim, 2004). More theoretically, empowerment has been conceptualized as resulting from four different kinds of power. The most common meaning power is given is influence or 'power over' (McEwan and Bek, 2006,

Rowlands, 1995, Rowlands, 1997). Other forms of power are 'power to' which is decision-making power, also referred to as "generative or productive power"; 'power with' which is collective power; and 'power within' which is personal power (Rowlands, 1997:13).

The concept of 'power to' is closely linked with the concept of agency and an increase in the amount of 'power to' occurs as people's ability to make choices and the amount of choices available to them expands. This is seen as a positive approach to power, contrasting with negative power, whereby an actor uses their power to force or coerce others to do what they want; this is controlling power or 'power over'. 'Power to', 'power with' and 'power within' contrast with this and can all be conceptualised as positive forms of power (Crawford and Andreassen, 2012:13).

Women's choices can further contribute to practical or strategic gender needs (Molyneux, 1985:232, Moser, 1989). Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordinate position in society, achievement of which can alleviate their position within society (e.g. the removal of institutional forms of discrimination) (Molyneux, 1985:232). Practical gender needs (e.g. food, clothing and shelter) are "given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor" (Molyneux, 1985:233).

Questions have been raised about the linkage between women's paid employment and their empowerment and whether the former can in fact bring the latter. Women's triple burdens within society as reproducers, producers and community managers (Moser, 1989) mean that "earning money may extend women's options, but may also intensify their workload and responsibilities without necessarily increasing their autonomy" (Ngai, 2004, Pearson, 2007:207). It is for this reason that it becomes important to not only study women's experiences within the workplace and how this is shaped by the GVC, but also to look at how their employment interacts with women's understanding of their roles in the home and community

Kenyan tea and horticulture firms' positions as significant employers of women mean that they have great *potential* to bring about the empowerment of women, both individually and collectively, which makes them instructive case studies.

The conceptualisation of empowerment used here was developed by examining women workers' experiences both at the workplace and at home through focus groups and semi-structured interviews (Said-Allsopp, 2013). While being framed by broader debates within the empowerment literature, including an understanding of capabilities, our conceptualisation emphasises participants' views and was grounded in their stories. For women workers in our sample, for employment to facilitate empowerment, it must contribute to an increase in women's

positive forms of power – ‘power within’, ‘power to’ and ‘power with’ – while strengthening their ability to overcome other people’s exercise of negative ‘power over’ them.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data analysed in this paper is the opinions and experiences, collected through interviews, of women workers employed by two Kenyan companies.

Company A has both tea and floricultural operations while Company B is solely a horticultural one. They were selected as case studies for this research because they have articulated corporate social responsibility strategies and are regarded within the industry as leaders in the adoption of worker welfare programmes and sustainability standards (e.g. Fairtrade). Moreover, if empowerment were to be found, this would more likely be in better practice companies rather than those that continue to be the target of campaigners (e.g. those highlighted by KHRC (2012)).

Both companies are integrated into the global marketplace largely through direct links with UK supermarkets, though auctions play a more important role in other strands of the respective value chains (Hornberger, et al., 2007). As a result of buyer requirements, the two companies investigated were audited against a variety of sustainability/social standards or codes of conduct such as Fairtrade, the Kenya Flower Council’s standard, Rainforest Alliance, (which is becoming more widespread across Kenyan tea as a result of commitments by major buyers (Ochieng, et al., 2013)), and the Ethical Tea Partnership’s Global Standard³.

To provide a representative sample, women workers were selected using stratified random sampling according to job categories and were interviewed in two phases. Phase I (2008) consisted of 14 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 163 women workers in Nairobi (vegetables), Naivasha (cut-flowers) and Kericho (cut-flowers and tea), in which women were asked about the changes (both at work and at home) that they had experienced since they began working on these farms, what changes they would like to see in the future, and how they could help themselves achieve these goals. FGDs generated lists of factors that women workers found to be important in terms of their empowerment. Phase II (2009) involved semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with 78 women workers in Naivasha and Kericho and examined worker experiences in more depth. During interviews, participants were asked to

³ <http://www.ethicalteapartnership.org/our-work/monitoring-cert/>

focus only on the impact of their employment at the sites belonging to Company A or B, which, for the majority of participants, was their first employment.

The data gathered from interviews and FGDs was analysed in a grounded way via coding using NVivo. The purpose of coding was to reduce data to manageable proportions and to establish links between the data (for more detail, see Said-Allsopp, 2013).

The data was analysed to better understand, for example, what factors can facilitate the process of empowerment and what were the pathways of change that women employed to overcome the obstacles they faced in their daily lives. In this stage of analysis we referred to our understanding of empowerment and drew on a number of stakeholder interviews, including local and international NGOs, trade union officials and the employers.

5. WOMEN'S POWER AND EMPOWERMENT WITHIN GVCS

In order to understand the extent to which employment is empowering workers, we draw from women's stories about the changes they have seen in their lives since they began working on the farms with respect to both positive and negative forms of power.

Beginning with 'power within', women workers' outlooks on life have changed since they started working: "I was so scared when I came here I didn't even used to talk. I thought I wasn't even in Kenya anymore and I had got lost", said one woman worker (Naivasha, 2009), a sentiment echoed by the predominantly migrant participants.

Whether women's fear was of their bosses, husbands, colleagues or people in the wider community, employment increased their self-confidence and allowed them to participate more fully in all arenas of their lives. Employment can help to foster women's 'power within', which allows them to imagine new ways of being and doing (McEwan and Bek, 2006) and in turn helps them to exercise both 'power to' and 'power with': "I used to be very shy" said a packhouse supervisor in Naivasha, "Not anymore. I am a lot more confident now and can even speak in front of large groups of people".

Conversely, for some workers, the change involved moving from the other extreme and becoming *less* aggressive towards each other. One Kericho tea worker recounted how she frequently used to get into physical fights with other women workers and was put on notice at work as a result: "I have learned that we have to follow the rules of work, behave well and not shout...[I] stopped fighting with people".

For her, this was an important outcome that allowed her to make friends with her neighbours and colleagues. Being able to make friends with co-workers is important as it helps to encourage unity and cohesiveness amongst women workers, a crucial component in exercising 'power with' or collective power.

Women workers' employment has facilitated their ability to form, join or participate with women's groups; enhancing their 'power with'. At the workplace, the main form of association for women workers were the gender committees, instituted by the companies as part of the requirements of the KFC Standard, with the aim of dealing with 'women's problems' on their sites of operation (Dolan, et al., 2003, Said-Allsopp and Tallontire, 2014). Women workers outside of the formal structure of gender committees mainly formed groups such as rotating savings and credit associations. Women exercised 'power with' to overcome obstacles they faced collectively. Many of the women workers interviewed saw the trade union as being largely ineffective, and many of those who were members, did not really value it. They said they joined so that the union might fight for them in the event of an unfair dismissal, but no mention was made of the union's role in obtaining better employment quality or in helping them deal with day-to-day issues they faced.

Increases in women's 'power to' manifested most clearly through greater self-reliance and financial independence and ability to purchase both small items like clothes and more culturally significant items such as plots of land or livestock. Most importantly, many women spoke of how they were able to better resist men's domination and transform their relationships with their husbands. One said "Me? I have freedom. My husband...sees my worth because he sees the benefits of all the things I have done" (General Worker, tea, Kericho, 2009).

Empowerment is however not only about increasing women's positive power, but also their ability to resist the exercise of negative power. 'Power as domination' is exercised over women workers in two arenas: the workplace and at home. At work, 'power over' is transmitted through the value chain in the form of rules and procedures relating to production, through buying strategies and operation of lead firms, as well as contractual employment relations. This transmission of power is felt more keenly in floriculture value chains, where linkages between suppliers and their buyers are tight and have more specifications and was often felt more by women than men because of the sexual division of labour in the workplace (i.e. women concentrated in packhouses). In tea, the relationship between buyers and suppliers is looser with fewer quality and delivery specifications, even where the tea is supplied through direct linkages to UK supermarkets. While the impact of the transmission of power down GVCs is felt by both male and female workers, it is felt more keenly by

women due to their position within society (Elson, 1999) as women's experiences of work are also shaped via their relationships with the men they work with and for, who are influenced by cultural and societal factors such as patriarchy and perpetuate them within the workplace through mechanisms such as sexual discrimination and harassment (both sexual and other).

At home, men's 'power over' is exercised through structures of patriarchy that serve to limit options available to women and constrain their ability to exercise their rights. The most transformative impact of employment for women worker's power lies in how it has given them tools to challenge gender structures that are unfavourable to them, opened their minds to wider possibilities than they would have encountered had they not found work, and significantly elevated their status within the home (interviews with women workers, 2008 and 2009). These changes all strengthened women workers' ability to overcome obstacles posed by the exercise of 'power over' at work (e.g. women workers campaigned to have a woman supervisor elected) as well as at home (e.g. women renegotiating their bargaining positions within the home and being able to make more decisions). They are crucial in terms of understanding the link between the women workers' employment and their empowerment. But how can women's power and their exercising of it be fostered within value chains? To answer this question, we present below three pathways of change that were found to contribute to women workers' empowerment.

6. PATHWAYS OF CHANGE

When developing strategies to overcome obstacles faced in their lives, women workers sought and found inspiration through three main pathways as identified by the data analysis:

1. Different ways of being
2. Different ways of doing
3. Sharing experiences

These pathways are examined below.

6.1. Different Ways of Being

This pathway operates through women seeing alternative possibilities with respect to gender relations. It can be seen to encompass 'power within' as it allows women to "contemplate alternative ways of existing and generating a belief in their own abilities to have some role in enacting change" (McEwan and Bek, 2006:1025).

As 97% of the women workers interviewed were migrants, this was their first experience of 'different ways of being'. While migration can complicate women's lives by removing kinship ties and support networks that helped them meet their reproductive, productive and community managing duties, it also had a positive benefit by weakening women's ties with *mila* (the norms and rules that serve to proscribe and prescribe a 'good' woman's behaviour within society). Regardless of which geographical location or tribal group women workers had migrated from, they all spoke of the constraints placed upon them by patriarchal structures that were their *mila*.⁴

Women workers who had made 'non-traditional' choices that went against *mila* spoke of how employment has given them the courage to do previously unimaginable things such as setting up a business or buying property. A common sentiment amongst participants was "the way I think about things and life in general has changed considerably."

Those who had started to overcome restrictions placed upon them by *mila* cited employment as the main reason for this. This process of weakening *mila* is amplified according to the environment in which women work. Women workers, who at home are still seen as inferiors to men, are working in environments where there is greater equality between the sexes than in society more broadly (as exemplified by the presence of both male and female supervisors). For women, it was more nuanced than the wages they earned buying them a seat at the bargaining table in the household: "Before, I couldn't work because my husband said he was everything in the house...Now we women are at the same level as these men. I can do budgeting myself and sit down with a pen, which I couldn't do before. This job has opened our ears and we know that we women can own land too and do things that men can do." (Packhouse supervisor, Kericho, 2009).

The 'Being' pathway is about 'power within' and being able to conceive of oneself as able to exercise agency and leads to women 'Doing'.

6.2. Different Ways of Doing

Women's employment has exposed them to how other people within the company as well as outside it have surmounted the obstacles that they face, effectively exposing them to 'different ways of doing'. 'Different ways of doing' is a pathway that can evolve bottom up, or be shaped through the adoption of standards.

⁴ See Said-Allsopp 2013

Women workers were found to be capable and creative when trying to overcome the obstacles that they face in daily life, what was needed to catalyse this process was new ideas. In one example, when women workers at a neighbouring non-Fairtrade tea factory saw that flower farm workers had used Fairtrade premiums to build a crèche, they decided to fundraise to set up a cooperative crèche so they could benefit also. They asked all workers, male and female, to donate K.Shs. 50 each to help in establishing it and management donated an empty building to house it. Subsequently, staff salaries and running expenses were paid through contributions from parents. This success motivated the group of women to launch new projects including starting a hotel and bee-keeping.

In these examples, new ideas came from other sectors within the same company, but they could also come from outside the company through training by the Companies, Trade Union or NGOs (while training was provided by the two companies, it was not found to facilitate this pathway, although the potential does exist). This pathway is connected with women's 'power with' or collective power. Women acting together have succeeded in achieving changes that would have been impossible working alone. However, simple exposure to new ideas and forms of organising does not inevitably lead to such outcomes. In the interviews, several examples of project ideas that were short-lived emerged (e.g. eco-stoves for workers).

So why did this pathway appear to work for one group of women workers but not another? Just because women see alternative possibilities, it does not mean that:

1. *They will be inspired to bring about change in their own lives in order to achieve these possibilities.* While women acted as a group, individual women's awareness of their own capabilities and 'power within' played a crucial role. Initial success proved a spur to further activities, while early failure (e.g. the eco-stoves project) had detrimental effects on women's self-confidence and belief in themselves as agents of change. Or:
2. *They will be able to obtain the necessary support from their employers to be able to action their projects.* Comparison of women workers' group achievements across sites identified that the most successful had the support of a dynamic, enthusiastic, female senior manager who was prepared to champion the women's projects.

Our finding is that a supportive management structure is crucial, as otherwise success will be severely constrained. This finding echoes that of Nelson, et al. (2007) who found supplier's attitudes to be crucial components for ensuring positive impacts for workers through standards. The relative power of the supplier in relation to the buyer, and indeed in terms of competing suppliers (i.e. the extent to which they are regarded as a preferred or strategic supplier), can also be a factor in terms of the relative space afforded to support worker initiatives. Companies A and B were vertically integrated with a UK-based importer, which had as we note below, strong links to retailers. Given concerns to maintain company reputation, subject to there being a 'business case', HR managers were encouraged to find means of ensuring good labour rights practice on farm. So the nature of the company's integration into the global value chain, and the specific trading relations in a particular value chain can affect the extent to which a particular empowerment pathway can lead to change for women workers.

Lead firms' exercise of 'power over' their supply chains has been seized on by campaigners as having the potential to foster positive change through raising standards throughout supply chains (Oxfam, 2004, 2010). This could in turn encourage workers to develop 'power to' by exposing them to 'different ways of doing' (and 'being'). However, this potential is often counteracted by the purchasing practices of these same lead firms which constrain suppliers' scope for manoeuvring and have become *de facto* justification for issues such as excessive working hours within GVCs (Oxfam, 2004, Raworth and Kidder, 2009). For example, company B management cited late orders or fluctuations in order sizes as key reasons why workers were sometimes required to work excessive hours.

Thus, the ability of standards to expose workers to or facilitate 'different ways of doing' is limited when they only address outcomes such as adherence to minimum wages, working hours or provision of protective equipment as opposed to tackling process rights. This is because, while these outcome standards do improve employment quality, they neither address nor challenge the status quo within labour relations or gender relations more broadly and do not 'provide a route to the negotiation of and access to other entitlements' (Barrientos and Smith, 2007:716).

6.3. Sharing Experiences

The third pathway of 'sharing' is a catalyst and is inextricably linked with the other two pathways of 'being' and 'doing'. We found that women workers who were provided with a forum in which to share their experiences were far more likely to act

to bring about empowering changes in their lives than those who did not have such opportunities. Mutual support and sharing of experiences, by exercising 'power with', can make women realise that they too possess 'power to' and in turn contributes to an increase in 'power within'. The sharing of experiences can both kick start the other two pathways, and make them operate more efficiently.

A major obstacle to women workers empowering themselves was a lack of awareness of their own potential or the possibilities that exist to bring about change in their own lives. During the FGDs, which involved participants sharing their experiences and proposing ways in which they could achieve their aspirations, women workers often they expressed amorphous ideas of 'what it would be lovely to have' but rarely had concrete ideas about what they could do themselves to reach these goals. Their instinctive first responses were "if we get a higher salary then we could...": they saw themselves as powerless to effect change. However, the experience of seeing what their colleagues had achieved with the same salary opened their eyes to possibilities and served as inspiration for many. This is an example of how mutual support and sharing of experiences, by exercising 'power with', can make women realise that they too possess 'power to' and in turn contributes to an increase in 'power within'.

While each of the three pathways above may operate individually and independently from each other, they also serve to reinforce and facilitate each other. A woman worker *can* experience the being and doing pathways without experiencing sharing, but sharing experiences acts as a catalyst that strengthens the other two pathways. Sharing can lead to different 'doings' or 'beings' but this is also dependent on whether changes are seen as possible and whether women can conceive of themselves as agents of change (their level of 'power within'). Different ways of being can strengthen women's 'power within', thus helping them to conceive of new ways of doing, be it individually by exercising 'power to' or collectively by exercising 'power with'. 'Different ways of doing' does not necessarily lead to change, but the sharing of successes by women who face similar constraints can help them overcome the barrier of internalised beliefs of their powerlessness and lead to them adopting new ways of doing. In turn, women's successes in 'doing' at a collective level help them to 'do' at an individual level within the household and hence, show them different ways of 'being'. In this way, empowerment of women workers at the individual level and collective levels are reinforcing and, to a certain extent, mutually dependent.

Even though the achievement of success in all three pathways is not necessary, it may be conceptualised as being the difference between 'the situation of empowerment', where all three occur, and 'an empowering situation' where only one

or two of these has been achieved or are in the process of being developed (McWhirter, 1991; cited by Rowlands , 1997:15). Power in this context can be seen to have a multiplier effect whereby the possession of one form of power, facilitates women's access to and exercise of other forms of power, a positive power spiral and women's achievement of these can facilitate their empowerment.

7. FOSTERING EMPOWERMENT

In analysing the empowering potential of employment for women workers in the case study companies, four factors emerged as being crucial in fostering empowerment. These were: good employment quality; secure employment; the ability to organise and form groups; and a supportive management structure.

The first prerequisite contributing to empowerment is good employment quality. Standards and certification are one way in which worker rights could be protected and good employment quality delivered. Some notable examples of the impact of standards on workers can be seen in the way that the gender committees (instituted as a requirement of the KFC standard) have significantly improved outcomes for women at the farm level⁵. Women in Company B who had been employed by other firms with worse practices or who had worked for the company for more than ten years frequently spoke of the improvements made in working conditions since they started, changes that coincided with the widespread adoption of certification schemes within the horticultural industry. Issues such as sexual harassment were less prevalent, compared to even six years previously when “you could only get a job in flowers if you...[slept]...with the supervisor” (packhouse worker, Naivasha, 2009, see also KHRC, (2012)) The result of this was that their employment was more empowering for them than previously.

However, limitations of standards in enhancing process rights (which have been seen as key to the sustainable improvement of working conditions and well-being of workers) and promoting worker empowerment within GVCs have received increasing attention (Barrientos and Smith, 2007, Nelson, et al., 2005). For example, the lack of living wages in both sectors and pervasive sexual discrimination in the tea

⁵ It is important to recognise that the Gender Committee is workplace specific and instituted only with the agreement of management. Unlike trade unions, there is no basis in labour law for their existence and in practice there are no mechanisms for Gender Committees to organise across sites or companies. They are therefore subject to the same critique as worker committees sanctioned by management, i.e. they are highly contingent (Eade and Leather 2005).

industry are two areas which standards have failed to tackle (Oxfam and ETP, 2013, Said-Allsopp, 2013).

The second factor cited by workers was stability of employment, with women who have more stable working environments and permanent contracts being more able to maximise the benefits derived from employment, for example through increased access to credit and the ability to educate their children. A recent worker survey found a high degree of worker stability within Kenyan floriculture with 75% of their sample having spent 2 years or more in employment (with 11.9% having been employed for 14 years or more) (Gibbon and Riisgaard, 2014: 109), a finding that was echoed by our own fieldwork.

Stable employment created an environment where women workers were able to form associations and cooperate to achieve strategic goals; a crucial component of empowerment as it encompasses women's 'power with' and allows women to challenge existing gender structures, overcome obstacles that they face collectively and set the agenda; effectively allowing them to exercise 'power to' overcome common barriers.

The most important factor however for employment to be empowering was found to be a supportive management structure. Both companies succeeded in creating channels for workers to voice their complaints and have shown their willingness to listen. In terms of management action, this varied between sites with greater successes being enjoyed by gender committees who had champions amongst the management.

At the sampled flower farms, the presence and strength of the gender committees (something that has been fostered by the management) has meant that sexual harassment was not found during our fieldwork and broader issues that are of importance to women workers (such as family planning or forming savings and credit associations) were also being addressed by the Gender Committees which have proved to be an excellent medium for disseminating information to workers (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire, 2014).

8. CONCLUSION

Through analysing worker experiences, three different pathways of change were presented that can facilitate the empowerment of women workers: different ways of being; different ways of doing; and sharing experiences. While these three pathways were found to be able to operate individually, women's ability to achieve positive outcomes was multiplied when they were able to utilise more than one

pathway. Empowerment was therefore found to be a sequential process in which possession of one form of power can increase women's ability to exercise other forms of power and create a 'positive power spiral'.

It was found that most of the significant positive changes grounded in women workers' testimony that contributed to their empowerment have occurred as a result of their employment. Our analysis does not suggest a causal relationship between specific strategies and policies implemented by the management of these two companies and empowerment, but we would argue that they have nonetheless created an environment at the farm level that is conducive to the empowerment of women workers (in particular through paying higher than average wages, tackling issues such as sexual harassment and health and safety issues within the workplace, as well as giving workers stable employment). Moreover, some practices such as the gender committees have evolved as a result of horizontal governance processes within the value chain, specifically for floriculture where the KFC code calls for the introduction of these committees (Tallontire, et al., 2011) and which company A has now adopted in tea.

However, it is important to counter this observation with the recognition that floriculture has flourished in Kenya because of the global sourcing strategies of buyers looking for a low cost product. The economics of Kenyan floriculture and indeed traditional export crops such as tea are founded on an abundance of cheap labour, and employment (and indeed empowerment) opportunities are constrained by this. Moreover, the empowerment of women workers depends on trends (good employment quality; secure employment; the ability to organise and form groups; and a supportive management structure) that are counter to those prevalent in global value chains which have been characterised by flexibilisation and buyer pressures on suppliers which constrain abilities to support site-level empowerment processes (Oxfam, 2004, Palpacuer, 2008). Moreover, an important caveat needs to be made regarding the empowerment pathways that have emerged from our analysis: they are framed entirely at the local level. This is partly due to the research design, which was focused at the farm level and as such the findings have focused on what women are doing in a specific location. However, it is also context specific and related to the limited ability of the trade unions to advocate for women's rights in Kenyan cut-flowers and tea (Nelson and Tallontire, Forthcoming, Tallontire et al., 2011). Moreover, despite the success of national and international civil society networks in galvanising support for the implementation of social standards in cut flowers in particular (Barrientos, 2013, Dolan and Opondo, 2005, Hale and Opondo, 2005),

women workers did not identify them as part of their strategies to realise their ambitions in the workplace.

What this research has found is a seemingly paradoxical situation in that employment within global value chains, which rely on the utilisation (some would say exploitation) of cheap labour, also has within it the potential for empowerment. Even for those women for whom the changes have been small, employment has still created a platform from which seeking out more favourable outcomes becomes an increasingly viable option. Regardless of whether or not empowerment has occurred for all the women interviewed, empowerment is more likely to happen in the lives of women who are employed (be it in a GVC or not) than in those of women who are not employed. However, the extent to which empowerment is able to happen depends on the employment quality workers enjoy and this is turn dependent on the governance structures that are in place within the workplace and, in the case of Companies A and B, is driven by the requirements of standards and buyers within the value chain.

Overall, our study found that, by their own criterion, women workers were more empowered than they had been before they became employed. However, questions remain about how barriers to empowerment (e.g. patriarchy and buyer strategies) can be overcome, and what the long-term sustainability of this 'empowerment' is, given that it relies upon employment within GVCs founded on the exploitation of resources (human, environmental and capital) and whose products are integrated into global markets as (relatively) undifferentiated, substitutable goods.

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