

# Growing Pains

The human cost of cut flowers  
in British supermarkets





# Preface

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This report forms part of War on Want's ongoing campaign for corporate accountability. It presents the results of research and consultation with workers in Colombia and Kenya who grow the cut flowers sold by the major supermarkets in the UK. This research reveals the true human cost of the flowers sold to consumers in the UK. While this report focuses on Colombia and Kenya specifically, the problems highlighted are systemic and can be found throughout the cut flowers industry.

UK supermarkets buy flowers from farms or plantations that are supposed to be committed to voluntary standards which guarantee decent working conditions and a healthy and safe working environment. Yet this report shows that these principles are regularly violated as a matter of course. This underlines one of the key points of War on Want's campaign: that voluntary codes of conduct cannot provide effective protection to the workers they are supposed to shield, and that proper regulation of multinational companies is required instead.

War on Want is proud of its long history working in partnership with grassroots organisations involved in the cut flower industry, including Cactus and Untraflores in Colombia, the National Union for Plantation

and Agricultural Workers (NUPAW) in Zambia and the Kenyan Women Workers Organisation (KEWWO). In terms of international solidarity with fellow workers overseas, we welcome the financial support of the British trade union Prospect which has made this report possible.

This report highlights the need for the UK government to adopt legislation that will make companies truly accountable for their policies and actions. This must include the ability of overseas workers affected by UK companies or their suppliers to seek redress in the UK. The report also recommends action, both to send a message to these companies and to challenge the UK government's rejection of regulation that would open up the possibility of genuine corporate accountability. This is War on Want's mission more widely: to support people in developing countries in their fight against the root causes of poverty, but also to inform and inspire people in rich countries to challenge the global structures which sustain poverty across the world.



**Louise Richards**  
**Chief Executive, War on Want**

# Say it with flowers

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We use flowers to mark every occasion. They decorate weddings and holidays, mark births and deaths, and say thank you or get well soon. They are praised for their delicate beauty and heady aroma. But the bouquets you buy are likely to have been produced by a woman being exploited on a flower plantation somewhere in the developing world.

The flowers imported into the UK are produced by intensive farming with pesticides under artificial conditions that endanger the workers involved. They are then air-freighted halfway around the world in cold storage and resuscitated with still more chemicals before reaching the supermarket shelf. The vast majority of consumers now buy their flowers at supermarkets (see box).

Shoppers are increasingly aware of the environmental damage caused by the pesticides and air miles involved in flower production. But few British consumers are aware of the price workers on flower farms pay so that they may enjoy the fleeting beauty of cut flowers.

Women workers comprise the majority of employees in the flower industry in developing countries such as Colombia and Kenya. They are exposed to a toxic cocktail of chemicals used to destroy pests and fungus, and to keep flowers fresh for the supermarket shelves. According to the Colombian National Institute of Health, women on flower farms experience higher-than-average rates of miscarriages, premature births and congenital malformations. Workers exposed to pesticides also suffer skin lesions, allergies, respiratory problems, fainting spells, headaches, eye problems and chronic asthma.<sup>1</sup>

Lilia, a Colombian flower worker and mother, told us: "If they fumigate and then an extra order comes in, they'll make us go in right after they finish spraying. They tell us 'go carefully' and 'cut and leave quickly' but people can't always stand the fumes and will faint."

During times of peak demand around Mother's Day, Valentine's Day and Christmas, workers are forced into overtime to meet demand. On flower farms in East Africa and Colombia, women report working up to 15

## Supermarket power

In European countries, supermarkets are expanding their share of the cut flower market. In the UK, fully 7 in 10 of all cut flowers purchased come from a supermarket shelf, the highest proportion in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Supermarkets are now exercising their vast market power and establishing direct contact with producers in East Africa and Colombia who are able to supply large quantities directly and quickly, as well as sourcing through Dutch auctions. Supermarkets such as Marks & Spencer and Tesco source flowers from Colombia, while Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose buy from Kenya. Supermarkets have enormous influence over flower producers and ultimately the working conditions and health and safety of flower workers themselves. It is therefore vital that supermarkets take responsibility for the treatment of their suppliers.

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hours a day to meet retailers' heavy demands. This puts enormous strain on workers, many of whom are single mothers who also have families to care for.

Working conditions on many flower farms are dismal, even on those farms with ethical certification such as Florverde in Colombia (see page 11). Workers cover long shifts at one task with only a short break per day, often resulting in physical injuries. Women are subjected to a high rate of sexual harassment due to isolated work areas, and there is often

no safe drinking water whilst on the job.

Since problems in the flower industry first came to light a decade ago, many standards and codes of conduct have been created in an effort to address these appalling working conditions and environmental impacts. However, these voluntary standards are failing to protect workers adequately for reasons such as an absence of unions to ensure that flower companies comply with the requirements, a lack of independent auditing and confusion over which standards to adhere to.



*Colombian flowers ready for distribution  
Photo: Elcio Carriço/War on Want*

# Race to the bottom

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The cut flower industry has seen remarkable growth over the last few decades, and is worth over US\$100 billion today, with recent growth estimated at 6% annually.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, the cut flowers and indoor plant industry is now worth £2.2 billion per year, which represents a 250% increase over the last 20 years.<sup>4</sup> The UK is – along with Germany – the top importer of cut flowers in the world.<sup>5</sup>

The biggest flower-exporting countries are the Netherlands, Colombia, Ecuador, Kenya and Israel. The UK's main sources of cut flowers are similar: the Netherlands (about 75%),

Colombia, Israel and Kenya. However, these figures are misleading: although the Netherlands imports many of the flowers it later exports, they are still considered Dutch flowers when they arrive in the UK.<sup>6</sup>

The flower industry has seen a shift away from traditional players like the Netherlands towards developing countries where the climate is better and production costs – particularly labour costs – are lower. Many countries are aggressively promoting the expansion of their flower export sectors, including Ethiopia, Malaysia, China, Zambia and

## Flower standards

In response to public campaigning in the 1990s, national cut flower industries developed competing sets of standards and voluntary codes of conduct to address growing concerns over the environmental impact of the industry and its appalling working conditions, particularly exposure to toxic pesticides. Kenya and Colombia each have their own national standards in the form of the Kenya Flower Council's standard and the Florverde scheme implemented by the Colombian flower exporters' association Asocolflores.<sup>7</sup>

In 1998 the voluntary International Code of Conduct for the Production of Cut Flowers (ICC) was developed by a group of trade unions and NGOs. The ICC includes the right to a living wage, a ban on child labour, the right to form unions, health and safety standards and reduced pesticide use. Two competing international schemes that incorporate the ICC – the Flower Label Programme and Fair Flowers Fair Plants – have also been launched in recent years. But despite more than 10 years of campaigning, there is still no agreement on a common international standard for the flower industry, and confusing and conflicting standards are rife.

Moreover, this web of codes fails to protect workers because the standards are not monitored properly. Colombian flower workers report that plantation owners are given advance notice of inspections, coach their workers about what to say, and don't allow workers to speak to auditors without a supervisor present. "When there's going to be an audit, everything's prepared perfectly in advance so the company will get its certification," said one worker. These ineffectual voluntary standards highlight the need for regulation that will protect workers.

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Tanzania, while more established producers like Colombia and Kenya continue to increase their exports to Europe.

The flower industry operates on very thin margins with demanding quality standards and a very fragile and time-sensitive product. Many flowers can survive storage for only 1-3 days, so must arrive on shelves as quickly as possible. With these fixed overheads built in to the cost of producing cut flowers, one of the few variables farm owners have control over is the wage they pay their workforce. As a result, the flower industry is in a race to the bottom as firms threaten to relocate to countries with ever lower wages and working conditions. After Dole announced it was closing farms in Colombia, one supervisor told a worker, “In Africa they work for a bowl of soup a day,” and, “In Colombia workers make too many demands.”<sup>8</sup>

The cut flower industry has provided some job creation – 100,000 people are employed in the flower industry in Colombia and 40,000 in Kenya. These jobs are important to the workers and valued by them as crucial sources of income. However, the jobs are poorly

compensated, provide little security, and are hazardous to the health of workers.

While jobs in the flower industry are often unsafe for workers, the industry itself can be detrimental to its surrounding environment. The cultivation of flowers requires a great deal of water, which in arid countries like Kenya comes at the expense of small-scale farmers growing other crops. “The flower companies are exporting our water,” said Severino Maitima, head of the Kenyan water authority. “A flower is 90% water. We are one of the driest countries in the world and we are exporting water to one of the wettest.”

Mr Maitima also reported that the farms take water whenever they need it, rather than just during the flood periods when they are legally permitted to.<sup>9</sup>

The Savannah of Bogotá that houses Colombia’s flower industry – the second largest in the world – is also facing water shortages. The aquifer has fallen by 180 metres and water has to be imported from other regions.<sup>10</sup>

*Workers on a Kenyan flower farm  
Photo: Paul Moon/War on Want*



# Risking their health for work

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Flower workers are constantly exposed to high levels of extremely toxic chemicals, and many report serious health effects, including skin lesions and allergies, respiratory problems, incidences of people fainting, headaches, eye problems and chronic asthma. The chemicals used are known to cause miscarriages and congenital malformations. Accidents often result in chemical burns.

The World Health Organisation recommends at least 24 hours between the time flowers are sprayed and the time workers re-enter the area, but such guidelines are often disregarded. Many workers report being forced to enter greenhouses right after fumigation. When asked if the company respects minimum safety standards, Maria, a Colombia flower worker, told us: "To them it's more important to complete orders."

Because they are not consumable, flowers have escaped much of the anti-pesticide pressure that has begun to reform the way fruit and vegetables are grown. And because cut flowers have no value if they are not attractive, chemicals are also used to preserve their beauty. A 2002 study of 8,000 flower workers near Bogota found they had been exposed to 127 different pesticides, 20% of which are banned in the US because they are highly toxic or carcinogenic.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, because pesticides are used primarily in enclosed greenhouses with often high temperatures, they are more easily inhaled or absorbed through the skin. Studies in Latin America have found that 50-60% of flower workers exhibit at least one symptom of pesticide poisoning.<sup>12</sup>

Most workers receive no training in the

handling of pesticides and are often unaware of which chemicals are being used, which makes it impossible for them to gauge whether their employers are following safety guidelines. However, our research found that most workers are aware of the health risks involved. One woman said, "I know we're left with the consequences; insecticides and fungicides are being passed through our skin." Her colleague noted, "Not everyone's built the same and some people are harmed while others aren't. But we're always going to have the risk of contamination with fungicides."

In both Colombia and Kenya, workers report that if accidents occur or workers get sick, they are often fired without compensation. Aide, a flower worker, tells of an incident on a Colombian farm where workers downwind of pesticide spraying got sick and fainted. They were fired immediately. Another worker explained that incidents are often not recorded because supervisors "scare the workers into not saying anything".

In addition to exposure to highly toxic chemicals, flower workers are at extremely high risk of disabling repetitive strain injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome, which can cause chronic pain and severely restrict their ability to work. Colombia's Ministry of Social Protection reports that flower workers account for 32% of the country's cases of carpal tunnel syndrome, despite the fact that the flower industry employs less than a quarter of one percent of the population.

Every worker we surveyed in Colombia reported incidences of carpal tunnel syndrome, spinal injuries, rotator cuff injuries, and so on. They also report that the




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companies do nothing to prevent or lower the incidence of repetitive strain injuries. Workers are made to do the same repetitive task for months on end, making the potential for injury high.

One woman told us she was refused medical treatment and then sacked when she could no longer move her arm due to repetitive strain. Luz, who has had carpal tunnel syndrome for two years, has a medical order that requires the company to change the task she does every two hours. Instead, she said, “The company has never done this. I stay in the same job for days, weeks, entire months.”

A final safety hazard that is widely reported on flower farms is the quality of water available for workers to drink. Flower workers toil in hot greenhouses with a high level of physical activity, and need access to safe and clean water. Instead, most of them report that the water provided is visibly dirty and makes people sick.

The farms say that they have treated the water and that it is safe for human consumption, but the workers are highly sceptical. One worker noted, “You doubt the water is safe because the administration don’t drink the same water as the workers.”



*Workers in protective clothing spray flowers in a greenhouse in Bogotá. A minimum waiting time of 24 hours is recommended before workers re-enter the area, but workers are often sent in immediately after spraying with no protective gear.  
Photo: Fernando Vergara/EMPICS/AP*

# Low pay, no security

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Throughout the flower industry worldwide the majority of workers, especially those in post-harvest jobs, are women. In Colombia 65% of flower workers are women, and in Kenya the figure reaches 75%.<sup>13</sup> They work long hours, often with mandatory overtime, for very little pay and no job security. The women we surveyed in Colombia report being paid less than 50 pence per hour – half the living wage in that country.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Kenyan flower workers often receive as little as £23 a month, which is not enough to cover basic needs such as food, housing, transport, education and medical bills. Local flower workers estimate they need at least double that to live, around £50 a month, so they look for additional work to make up the difference.<sup>15</sup> Workers in Kenya and Colombia both reported working overtime for no extra pay.

Throughout the flower industry, overtime is compulsory and largely dependent on the

demand from the USA and Europe, with workers required to put in significantly longer hours at peak times such as Mother's Day and Valentine's Day. Working hours can be extended with little or no notice, and there is no dispensation for those with children. Some women are forced to leave their children unattended when overtime arises unexpectedly. Women's safety is also at risk when they are forced to travel after dark, as companies do not provide their employees with transport.

Job security is extremely poor for most flower workers. In a recent survey of Colombian flower workers, lack of job security and poor treatment were rated as even bigger concerns than their low wages.<sup>16</sup> On African flower farms there is evidence that companies keep workers on temporary contracts that they extend year after year. This denies workers benefits such as social security, maternity leave and union membership that they are legally entitled to

## Easy come, easy go

Jobs in the cut flower industry are extremely insecure. Workers on short term or seasonal contracts can be dismissed at any time, and there is little protection for permanent workers who get injured or sick. In some countries it is not just the jobs but the entire industry that is at stake. Countries like Ethiopia are competing with more established flower exporters like Kenya by offering significant tax breaks to companies; five large farms have already relocated.<sup>17</sup> China is positioning itself to become the world's second largest flower exporter. Neither Chinese nor Ethiopian flower farms have independent trade unions to challenge poor working conditions. Flower industry jobs provide many families' only source of income. It is therefore vital that consumers not boycott flowers from developing countries.

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and suspends them in a state of insecurity. In Kenya 65% of the floriculture workforce is temporary or casual and in Zambia fully 77% of flower workers are on seasonal contracts if they are on contracts at all.<sup>18</sup>

Women face greater job insecurity than men, and are likely to be fired when they become pregnant. As a result, many hide pregnancies or resort to abortion to keep their jobs. Over 90% of women workers in the Colombian cut flower industry report being forced to take a pregnancy test when they join the company.<sup>19</sup>

Sexual harassment on flower farms is widespread, in part because of conditions that make women vulnerable. Women often work in very isolated conditions, in huge greenhouses where workers are spaced far apart and no one can hear or see what is happening. A study in Ecuador found 55% of workers surveyed had experienced sexual harassment at work.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, women are often reluctant to report or discuss harassment, in large part due to their lack of job security.



*Flower worker in Colombia  
Photo: Elcio Carrión/War on Want*

# Struggling for a voice

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Despite the fact that many flower-producing countries have labour laws that guarantee workers freedom of association, many barriers exist that prevent workers from organising. In addition, flower companies tend to employ workers on short-term contracts or on a casual basis, which often prevents them from joining a trade union. It is the widespread absence of unions on flower farms worldwide which leaves workers exposed to poor working conditions. Independent unions are integral to safe and healthy working conditions.

In Colombia, less than 5% of the overall workforce is unionised. It is the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist: since the mid-1980s around 4,000 trade unionists have been murdered in Colombia, and more trade unionists are killed there annually than in the rest of the world combined.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the threat of violence, there are severe bureaucratic obstacles to getting a union officially recognised.

On Colombian flower farms, workers who try to unionise are continually threatened and harassed by the administration. One worker noted, “They treat us unionised workers as if we are contagious. They threaten to fire other workers if they speak with us.” Another said, “They put thousands of obstacles in our way to prevent us from meeting. When they know we have a union meeting scheduled they’ll make us work overtime.”

Some flower companies have formed their own unions, known in Colombia as ‘yellow unions’. Flower companies can then avoid having to negotiate with or acknowledging the existence of independent unions. Farm owners have also been known to bribe workers not to join unions. One company pays bribes of 40,000 Colombian pesos (roughly £10) to workers if they leave the union, whilst another persuades workers to join the yellow union with offers of money and free lunches.

In October 2006, Dole announced it was closing down two of its 13 Colombian farms. The two farms slated for closure employed some 2,600 workers, almost a third of Dole’s Colombian workforce. Dole claimed it was because of competition from other flower producers in China and Africa. However, local workers suggest the true reason behind the closures was that the workers were unionised.<sup>22</sup> Since the threatened closures, Dole has slashed its workforce on the unionised Splendor farm from 1,500 to only 300. Of those 1,200 workers no longer working on the plantation, 300 left as they were not contracted and the other 900 resigned – although the workers claim this was under pressure from Dole.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, there is little union representation on Kenyan flower plantations, with studies showing membership as low as 16-17%.<sup>24</sup> Research conducted on Kenyan flower farms reveals that many workers are unaware of their rights, including the right to form a union.<sup>25</sup> In Ethiopia the problem is even more pronounced – there are no trade unions on Ethiopian flower farms.<sup>26</sup>

# Green flowers or greenwash?

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Florverde ('green flowers') is the certification programme set up by the Association of Colombian Flower Exporters (Asocoflores) with the stated purpose of minimising the environmental impacts of the cut flowers industry and protecting workers' rights. UK supermarkets Marks & Spencer, Asda and Tesco became more interested in Florverde flowers after a 2006 visit to Colombia, and Marks & Spencer has significantly increased its orders as a result.<sup>27</sup>

But while Florverde's standards are meant to ensure environmentally friendly practices and safe working conditions, we found the mark gives no such guarantee. On Florverde farms, 36% of the toxic chemicals used were considered to be 'extremely' or 'highly' toxic by the World Health Organisation, according to a 2005 study.<sup>28</sup>

When we interviewed workers on Florverde farms they complained of job-related medical problems such as repetitive strain injury, and that they were banned from organising a union to negotiate health safeguards and better pay. The real focus of the Florverde

standard is not on improving working conditions but on trying to improve the international competitiveness of the Colombian flower industry, as shown in Asocoflores' summary of the standard: "To make Asocoflores-related floriculture sustainable and competitive."

While the standard does nominally provide for trade union recognition, it offers no specific protection for independent unions. The assumption in the industry, and in the Florverde standard, is that there are no trade unions. The focus is instead on ways for the companies to supplant the role of unions with national associations and company-run complaints systems. Lidia, on a Florverde farm, confirmed that joining a trade union was difficult if not impossible. "The farm tried to bribe the workers to leave the union, and gave bonuses, vacations and food subsidies to workers who weren't part of the union. We are discriminated against because we are organised."

Without trade unions, workers are virtually unable to challenge farm managers about poor working conditions and breaches of flower standards.



*Claudia Lucia Quevedo spoke on camera about the poor conditions on her Florverde certified farm. To see her video testimony and that of other Colombian flower workers, go to [www.waronwant.org/cutflowers](http://www.waronwant.org/cutflowers)*

# Take action

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War on Want believes that companies must be held accountable for their actions around the world. In particular we believe that workers overseas should be able to seek redress in the UK when they suffer as a result of the action of UK companies or their suppliers. Yet the UK government prefers to support the voluntary approach of 'corporate social responsibility', despite the fact that this has been shown to be an ineffective alternative to regulation. As long as the political will to rein in corporate power is lacking in our elected leaders, it is up to us to apply pressure. We are asking all readers and supporters to take the following actions:

**1. Call on the UK government** to adopt legislation that will give workers overseas the right of redress in the UK when they suffer as the result of UK companies or their suppliers. Please write to Rt Hon Alistair Darling MP, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, calling on the government to abandon its promotion of voluntary alternatives and support binding regulation instead. His address is Department of Trade and Industry, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET.

**2. Contact the supermarkets.** Major UK supermarkets are increasingly sourcing their cut flowers from developing countries. Members of the public can contact the major supermarkets direct and voice their concern about their impacts on local communities and workers as detailed in this report.

To contact Asda, write to Andy Bond, Chief Executive, Asda House, Southbank, Great Wilson Street, Leeds LS11 5AD, or phone 0113 243 5435.

To contact Marks & Spencer, write to Stuart Rose, Chief Executive, Marks & Spencer, Waterside House, 35 North Wharf Road, London W2 1NW, or phone 020 7935 4422.

To contact Sainsbury's, write to Justin King, Chief Executive, J Sainsbury plc, 33 Holborn, London EC1N 2HT, or phone 020 7695 6000.

To contact Tesco, write to Sir Terry Leahy, Chief Executive, New Tesco House, Delamare Road, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire EN8 9SL, or phone 01992 632222.

To contact Waitrose, write to Steven Esom, Managing Partner, Waitrose Limited, Doncastle Road, Bracknell, Berkshire RG12 8YA, or phone 0800 188 884.

**3. Shop smart.** There aren't many genuine alternatives in terms of cut flowers. Fairtrade flowers guarantee that the workers are paid a higher wage, the farms meet basic environmental and labour standards and workers can exercise their right to collective bargaining. While this is an important step, Fairtrade applies to only a tiny fraction of the flowers on sale in Britain. It is therefore imperative that the government enact meaningful legislation on the industry as a whole, and that consumers continue to pressure the supermarkets to act responsibly.

**4. Join Us!** We need your support to continue our campaigning on corporate accountability. Become a member and follow our work at [www.waronwant.org](http://www.waronwant.org)

## Appendix: How the research was conducted

This report was researched in consultation with Cactus, Untraflores and the Kenyan Women Workers Organisation (KEWWO), our partners, and with other workers' organisations covering the cut flower industry. More than 30 flower workers were interviewed in January and February 2007, and their testimonies were cross-referenced with similar studies. We did not seek out worst-case farms. Our researchers spoke to workers from typical farms, several of which are certified to their country's national standard.

All workers interviewed work on flower farms or plantations that supply the UK.

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**War on Want**

War on Want fights poverty in developing countries in partnership and solidarity with people affected by globalisation. We campaign for workers' rights and against the root causes of global poverty, inequality and injustice.

Cover picture: Colombian flower worker covers her face while sorting flowers. Photo: Elcio Carriço/War on Want.

