

How do we go from challenging gender equality to making sure women are truly included?

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On International Women's Day, it's important to recognize that our economies and communities around the world depend on women, and on women being able to fully realize their rights and potential.

Women in the global south play a huge role in farming, but are disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. As the extended economic impacts of COVID-19 continue to be felt globally, there is a risk of this gap growing even more. For instance, women working on flower farms in Kenya have seen massive layoffs or salary cuts, while at the same time costs for housing and everyday staples have increased, along with costs and obligations related to home schooling.

Immediate responses are necessary to ensure families make it through this difficult period. Looking longer term, governments, businesses and others need to take action, not just to challenge gender bias and enact policies on equal opportunity for women, but also to make sure women can actually claim their seat at the table and in positions of leadership.

Here are five insights from the experiences of Fairtrade women farmers and workers, which are relevant to making progress on women's inclusion in global trade.

1. Reduce barriers to women's participation, in addition to ensuring non-discrimination.

Fairtrade sets out requirements for ensuring key rights of farmers and workers. Related to women, these include no discrimination, zero tolerance of harassment and gender-based violence, and requiring farmer cooperatives to have a gender policy affirming commitment to gender equality and specific efforts to build women's participation, leadership role and more.

Even if cooperatives have policies on gender equality and non-discrimination, women still face barriers to becoming members.

According to a study we published recently assessing progress on efforts towards gender equality, some common barriers include: lack of land ownership, lack of access to capital, and gender norms about household work and childcare which take up significant time.

These barriers need to be tackled. For instance, some Fairtrade cooperatives are trying out membership models that include a whole household rather than just the head of household, or they waive land ownership requirements for women. Labour-saving devices like biogas stoves purchased through Fairtrade's Growing Women in Coffee programme in Kenya, reduce the time women needed to spend collecting firewood and cooking.

It's not just membership organizations that can do better. In tea plantations in India and Sri Lanka, another recent study we commissioned found that women face both cultural and logistical challenges to participating or holding leadership roles in their labour unions. Workplaces can provide child care facilities and provide skills training for women, while unions can look for ways to make it easier for women to meaningfully participate.

2. Being represented matters.

Fairtrade producer organizations have successfully established women's committees or other entities that enable women to raise specific issues and get them taken up by the larger organization. However, it is also important to have women represented in positions of power that have been traditionally held by men.

Each of the six cooperatives featured in our gender study include women in elected leadership roles, including as board members. This is important so that women's voices are not seen as siloed into only certain avenues of participation, and more can be done to further increase women's representation.

3. Train women to be leaders – and also invest in them.

Fairtrade's women's leadership schools in countries such as El Salvador, Côte d'Ivoire, Kazakhstan and India, have increased women's self-confidence, as well as knowledge about gender equality and technical farming skills. According to our study, the most successful of these programmes involve not just training, but also investment in overcoming barriers that women face to expanding their businesses or accessing markets for their crops.

For instance, some Fairtrade cocoa cooperatives in Côte d'Ivoire have used their Fairtrade Premium to invest in alternative income-generating activities such as growing other crops for sale in their local markets, raising chickens, or other non-farm businesses.

4. Progress in the short term can be made, while recognizing the need for long-term systemic changes.

Although most women do not own their own land in coffee-growing regions of Kenya, Fairtrade's Growing Women in Coffee programme worked around this. In order to participate in the programme, men transferred at least 50 coffee bushes to their wives to manage. In addition, the women received trainings in good agricultural practices and also were supported to develop their own roasting capacity and create their own specialty coffee brand – the first women-grown coffee brand to be sold in Kenya, called Zawadi or 'gift' in Swahili. The results were so impressive that some men have transferred as much as 300 bushes to their wives. Such strategies can be effective, while work is done to effect longer-term changes to legal and cultural norms.

5. Engage men as champions for gender equity.

Fairtrade's three regional Producer Networks have scaled up gender trainings to educate both men and women on principles of gender equality, as well as how to adopt policies that put it into practice within their organizations. These trainings also try to shift behaviours at home, so that husbands and wives discuss their farming, expenses and decision-making together.

Such changes take time and require buy-in from communities more broadly, but Amah Kouao, a cocoa farmer in Côte d'Ivoire and graduate of the Women's School of Leadership there, is optimistic. "After I finished the training, I asked my sons for a family meeting. I told my sons how they now had to behave. (...) I was a shy woman who couldn't speak up, but today I am very powerful. Now when I can't make a meeting, they cancel it. I am training other women every week through community groups to share the knowledge I was empowered with."

Given the crucial role that women play in their families, household economies, and communities, it is essential that progress toward women's equality does not reverse course. We need to listen to women, and commit to efforts that expand empowerment and economic opportunities for women and girls and support their full inclusion, if we are to achieve a more sustainable future.