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Among the flowers, the thorns grow

Europe's love for flowers conceals the ugly reality behind its industry

'The working day at her flower farm is meant to be eight hours, but she explains that she often feels obliged to work an extra three hours, for which she does not receive overtime pay.' These lines only hint at the overall working conditions in a Kenyan greenhouse. Last month's *BBC* report, complete with workers' interviews, also listed sexual harassment and illnesses as the fallouts of working in Kenya's flower industry.

The sector that brings around €900 million to Kenya every year – though not even €100 to the worker per month – eventually serves Europe. Produce sourced from Kenya accounts for 40 per cent of the European flower market.

Apart from the exploitation of workers, the trade causes considerable climate damage. 'The production of flowers requires a great deal of water, and to feed the European appetite for cheap cut flowers, the blooms are transported refrigerated in long-haul, gas-guzzling jets, wrapped in single-use plastic and are usually arranged in toxic floral foam to keep them fresh', said the report.

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In Egypt, meanwhile, children have been found to be picking jasmine flowers at 3 am for the French company L'Oréal and other fragrance manufacturers. The pickers come from families struggling to survive, yet a single perfume bottle sells for hundreds of euros.

European companies have added to their profits by avoiding tax liabilities in the producer country. A 2020 investigation found that 'flower companies are evading local taxes through export companies in the Netherlands and trusts located in tax havens such as the Cayman and British Virgin Islands, Liechtenstein and Jersey. Others sell their revenue to sister companies in Dubai for an artificially low price, which means that profits do not fall at the Kenyan farm, but at a foreign entity where

the profit tax is also much lower than in Kenya.'

A tokenistic process

Majority-world migrants already have a history of working in Europe under inhospitable conditions. But far away from the European continent, too, the minority world's needs and whims control and diminish the lives of the majority population. The beneficiary continent manages to shirk the question of responsible sourcing due to weak laws and multi-tiered supply chains. There are conscientious consumers who wish to avoid products that are the result of extractive practices. But the Fairtrade certificate they are looking for has not proved sufficiently credible.

The supply chain from flower-growing countries – which also include Ethiopia and Ecuador – is a long one. This makes it difficult to prevent, or convenient to ignore, malpractices at the local level by farm supervisors and contractors. In Kenya, for example, 'workers are given very high targets, which they are unable to meet despite working more than 12- or 14-hour shifts. Having failed to meet these targets, female workers are forced to finish the target the next day without pay or offer a bribe or sexual favours to a supervisor to retain their jobs.'

Half of these flowers get sold through auctions in the Netherlands. This means they fall out with the protection of the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, in force since July, which caters to 'established business relationships'.

Social audits of workplaces, if done without trust-building and engagement with workers, have meanwhile failed to expose erring companies. They end up being a tokenistic process — not designed to detect forced labour or understand everyday working conditions but only to register what was visible on the day and at the time of the visit.

Enforcing labour rights

Strict regulation and monitoring of working hours can ensure that cases of farmers suffering from tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome and other injuries are not repeated. The EU must also recognise the enhanced vulnerability of women on these farms — especially in the light of the International Labour Organization Convention 190, which demands safe and dignified working conditions for women in the world of work. Maternity leave, sick leave, creches, conveyance support (to cover long journeys to the workplace) and insurance are all critical to the health and

well-being of workers and their households — and indeed entire families are often engaged on the farms.

There is laxity around flower cultivation because it is not seen as akin to food, but people still end up consuming the chemicals used to grow and preserve the crops. Business should not be done with farms that use pesticides, because 'floriculture workers are constantly exposed to toxins in fertilizers and pesticides and preservatives used to extend the life of blooms. Also, these harmful substances contaminate water streams and soil, entering the food chain and causing significant harm to the local communities living close to floriculture greenhouses.'

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Anti-Slavery International and the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights made a set of recommendations around the import controls Europe could impose. These could be associated with 'a particular site of production', 'a particular importer or company' or 'an entire industry' in the case of forced labour, whether imposed by state or non-state actors. This would authorise customs to stop tainted products at the border.

In April, the European Parliament approved a regulation 'to prohibit the sale, import, and export of goods made using forced labour'. To first identify this forced labour, however, long-term collaborations will have to be developed with suppliers, where the relationship is not just about sale and purchase but includes non-negotiable terms on workers' rights, backed by regular training, monitoring and site inspections.

Fair flower cultivation is possible

More civil society campaigns on responsible sourcing are needed, linked to raising awareness among consumers in Europe. This can reduce, for example, demand for flowers requiring heavy irrigation, which otherwise leads to water scarcity in the region of origin.

One excuse for the poor wages paid to workers on flower farms is that higher pay would deter customers. Yet a survey of grocery retail by McKinsey revealed: 'Around 60 per cent of … consumers would be willing to pay more for products when employee safety and no child labour are guaranteed.' And flowers are non-essential goods, which their pricing can reflect.

Through financial incentives and subsidies, governments can meanwhile

reward companies that are serious about ethical sourcing. Indeed, McKinsey has also found that companies more compliant with 'environmental, social and governance' regulation fare better in stock valuation and access to finance. Moreover, by paying a living wage, a company can reduce worker turnover by 30 per cent.

The general public and civil society can create pressure on governments in their respective European countries to make the global flower trade less lopsided — and fairer to cultivators in the majority world.

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