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PEOPLE  
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Special 2013

A young woman with dark hair, wearing a blue shirt and brown gloves, is shown harvesting white roses in a field. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred field of rose bushes.

# *Fair*

The journey of the rose

# *Flowers*

# The journey of the rose

Development aid organisation Hivos has mounted a major publicity campaign to publicize the shocking labour conditions women workers endure in Africa's burgeoning floriculture sector. Dutch flower growers, increasingly active in Africa, are not amused. 'You can't compare us to coffee or cocoa producers, we're the ones who are boosting sustainability in the sector', they protest. Even so, there's still room for improvement. A large number of players have now joined together in the Floriculture Sustainability Initiative. And the working conditions in Africa are high on the agenda.

✦ WORDS HANS VAN DE VEEN ✦ IMAGES BAS JONGERIUS

Roses have already travelled a considerable distance before they take pride of place on a Dutch flower stall or continue their onward journey across the world. That journey mostly begins in Kenya, where many Dutch rose growers are located.

Say it with flowers. The Dutch floriculture sector knows only too well that its livelihood depends on emotion. Flowers aren't one of life's necessities after all, they're all about making people feel good. So if the consumer starts to wonder whether flowers are actually okay, sales might well collapse. Maybe that's what makes the sector particularly sensitive to criticism. Most of the criticism directed at the flower and plant industry has tended to focus on environmental concerns, but more recently attention has been directed at the social aspect of horticultural production – particularly in the tropics. That's where an increasing number of Dutch growers have relocated their flower production because of the available space, low local wage costs and the many hours of sunshine. Development aid organisation Hivos's Power of the Fair Trade Flower publicity campaign last autumn turned the spotlights on horticultural production in Africa. More particularly it shed light on the plight of women workers, who account for the majority of the sector's workforce. The organisation pulled no punches in its campaign. "In East Africa flowers are often produced under shocking conditions. The wages are too low for a reasonable quality of life, women's labour rights are violated and sexual abuse is rife", Hivos reported. The Dutch daily papers took up the story in numerous articles and consumer rights tv show Tros Radar broadcast a programme on the theme to coincide with Valentine's Day. The sector was outraged. "I know growers



The roses reach their final destination: sold to the consumer

to sufficiently acknowledge this, Kok feels. “They say working conditions at Dutch companies are not ideal either. But if you look at the steps that have already been taken! Obviously there are still some rotten apples, and we need to target those. But they shouldn’t be taking it out on the good companies.”

**Hivos campaign coordinator** Caroline Wildeman says the sometimes angry responses from within the sector are understandable. But as an NGO Hivos has a different role to play, she says. “We’re here to defend the rights of the African women.” She has no doubts: “Our campaigns are based on reliable research, carried out by the Kenya Human Rights Commission, but also data from local trades unions. Our partner organisations also continue to report numerous abuses. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg because many companies are dominated by a culture of fear. Wages are so low that workers – often single mothers – can’t support their families on the money they get. And short-term contracts are the norm, often for years on end. As a result women are dependent on their bosses’ goodwill, which makes them even more vulnerable. What you see are problems around pregnancy, exposure to pesticides and sexual intimidation.” Hivos’ publicity campaign in the Netherlands is targeted at boosting the supply of ‘fair trade’ blooms while at the same time aiding organisations in East Africa seeking to improve women’s labour conditions. Wildeman agrees that Dutch companies are relatively good employers in East Africa. “But they could be more active in promoting what they stand for. As world market leader the Netherlands has a responsibility towards others. And that means not staying

who completely flipped”, says Gijs Kok, manager of External Relations at Flora Holland. “They don’t recognise themselves in this picture being painted of the sector. It’s mainly Dutch companies who are leading the way in Africa with ethical standards. A publicity campaign like this feels like a slap in the face.” We’re talking to Kok at the Aalsmeer branch of the cooperative auction. Trucks ferry to and fro. Situated just a stone’s throw away from Schiphol international airport, Aalsmeer ranks as the world’s largest marketplace for flowers and plants. The cooperative is genetically programmed for sustainability, says Kok. For its 5000 affiliated growers a healthy market position in the long term is far more important than a quick win. Flora Holland is proof of the success of this approach, with an annual turnover that exceeds four billion euros.

**Increasingly it’s what** happens abroad that makes the sector vulnerable to criti-

cism, Kok concedes. In the Netherlands everything is well regulated. According to the sector itself, more than 80% of production complies with the most stringent sustainability norms. This claim is borne out by environmental organisation Natuur & Milieu, which recently confirmed that horticulturalists were leading the field within the farm sector in innovations aimed at conserving energy and pesticides. Satisfactory labour conditions are safeguarded through collective labour agreements and the sector’s own standard (MPS Social Qualified). But a horticulturalist venturing into Africa will be faced with a culture based on different norms and values. Companies have to learn to deal with this. And that’s difficult, says Kok, because Dutch entrepreneurs are used to an equal opportunities approach in the workplace and regard equal pay for men and women as the norm. Dutch growers have brought employment and know-how to Africa and often support education and health projects. Hivos fails

## How important is floriculture to the Netherlands?

The Netherlands is a major player in the world decorative flower trade: 60% of all production originates with Dutch companies. In 2012 they exported flowers and plants worth € 5.4 billion. As such floriculture represents the most important part of the Dutch horticultural sector, itself a key Dutch export pillar. Nowadays more than a quarter of the flowers sold in the Netherlands – and exported from there – come from East African countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda. And the share of blooms grown in East Africa is still on the increase. In the winter months around half of the flower production comes from African countries. Roses are by far the most popular flower, with the FloraHolland auction trading some three billion annually. The sector has been hit by the financial crisis, with the volume of flower and plant exports via the Aalsmeer auction stagnating in 2012. However price increases meant turnover was still up by 3% compared to the previous year. Sales in southern Europe have fallen, but this is being offset by increased sales in emerging economies. The rise of electronic trading has led to redundancies at the physical auction house, with Flora Holland announcing it is to cut 1400 of the 3200 jobs. Many of the country’s nine thousand growers are also struggling to keep their heads above water and industry pundits predict a wave of mergers. Growers vary hugely in size: alongside the dozens of small companies market leader Dutch Flower Group is a giant, booking turnover of € 1 billion in 2012. Employment in the sector as a whole is also in steady decline due to the outsourcing of flower production abroad. Over the last decade job numbers in the glasshouse growing sector have fallen by a quarter.



Imports are so great that several cargo planes loaded with roses from Kenya arrive at Schiphol daily

silent on abuses but taking the lead in changing the sector.” Hivos and the flower sector are back on speaking terms, Wildeman says. “They support our aim of investing in women,” she says. “And what appeal to us is the emphasis on best practices as a challenge to the sector.” Both Hivos and the flower growers are taking part in the recently-launched initiative to boost sustainability in the flower supply chain, the Floriculture Sustainability Initiative (FSI). Jeroen Oudheusden, a veteran of the flower sector, is FSI programme coordinator. The response to the Hivos campaign underlines the need for a joint international approach, he believes. That human rights have become an issue can come as no surprise, he says. “Rather than going on the defensive we’re better off showing where things are going well and where concrete measures are being taken to bring about improvements. And in those instances where the situation is not as it ought to be we should respond jointly as a sector. It’s the shared

responsibility of producers, traders and retailers.”

**Driving force behind** the Floriculture Sustainability Initiative is the Sustainable Trade Initiative, which develops programmes aimed at boosting sustainability in supply chains for a wide range of products. Central to its work is that the financial support given is always coupled to hefty investments from within the sector itself. At the FSI launch in January the 25 participants pledged to strive for 90 percent sustainability in their international supply chains by 2020. A major challenge. “The flower sector is very fragmented,” Oudheusden explains. “There are a huge number of players and platforms. We’re going to try and amalgamate the many different public and private sector sustainability initiatives. Together with the pioneers in the sector we are setting up projects focused around current issues such as water management, human rights and environmentally friendly transport.”

FloraHolland is Europe’s biggest flower auction





The recently-harvested roses are readied for transport by plane, here at the Bilashaka Flowers company owned by Dutchman Joost Zuurbier

➤ A thorny issue to be tackled is the wide range of quality certification marks which currently hamper transparency. Even Oudheusden cannot put an accurate percentage on the share of flowers currently being produced sustainably. “All the numbers are approximations. That’s why measurability is one of our key priorities.” FSI is looking to make the various quality certification standards internationally comparable, so revealing for the first time how sustainable the sector actually is. And that’s something that not only consumers, but also retailers and florists are waiting to hear. “It has to be more transparent, and based on facts.” Flowers carrying the Max Havelaar certification make up just a small share of the market. Even for this fair trade organisation flowers have so far represented no more than a niche product. In the Netherlands only the range of roses sold by the Plus supermarket chain is fully ‘fair trade’ certified. Consumer demand in Britain, Switzerland and Germany is greater, says product relations manager Jos Harmsen at Max Havelaar. But, he adds, sales in the Netherlands are set to grow. “We see a strong upswing in demand, particularly from florists and importers. Mostly smaller companies, but we’re also in talks with major player Dutch Flower Group. Fair trade flowers are becoming an item, we see that all around us.”

**At Hivos** Caroline Wildeman welcomes these developments. “For us certification represents a means to an end. Producing all flowers fairly and sustainably is what it’s all

about,” she says. “Until we’ve achieved that, quality certification marks offer the best guarantee.” The problem for consumers is that sustainably produced blooms aren’t identifiable as such in the shop, except for a few bunches carrying the Max Havelaar logo. But according to Gijs Kok of Flora Holland, shoppers needn’t feel they have to ask their florist specifically for fair trade flowers. People should realise that the floriculture sector has set itself high standards and that the flowers on display are therefore always okay, he says. Even so, that same sector has recently opted to put more effort into raising the marketing profile of its hitherto little-known quality certification Fair Flowers, Fair Plants (FFP). Various Flora-Holland members are already FFP-certified, which means that they conform to stringent environmental and social norms. Kok expects a rapid increase in their numbers as most companies are already certified for other quality marks. FFP flowers are separately labelled at auction, so that buyers know they are bidding for a certified, fully-traceable product. “In a few years’ time we aim to work only with fully certified growers, particularly in Africa,” says Kok. That should be achievable without financial aid from his growers’ organisation as has been given until now. “This is 2013. One is entitled to expect that players in the sector have woken up to the importance of consumer quality marks.” ■

[www.floraholland.com](http://www.floraholland.com)  
[www.hivos.nl](http://www.hivos.nl)  
[www.fsi2020.com](http://www.fsi2020.com)

## Can flower production become less energy-intensive?

Rose growing in particular is increasingly being outsourced to East Africa. That’s because it’s cheaper for producers to grow in warmer climes, even when the costs of transport by cargo plane are factored in. It’s more environmentally friendly too: air traffic produces fewer harmful emissions than growing under glass in the Netherlands. But it’s all relative: in both scenarios carbon emissions remain high.

Government, growers and the environmental lobby are seeking a solution to the problem in the form of low-energy greenhouses in the Netherlands. As part of government policy to boost its key economic sectors, the horticulture sector has implemented the ‘Greenhouse as Energy Source’ programme, aimed at halving fossil fuel use in existing greenhouses by 2020. New greenhouses must be entirely energy-neutral by then. Geothermal energy, co-generation and the use of underground thermal energy storage will all play an important role. However there are some doubts whether the target will be attained. Due to their poor financial circumstances, not all growers are keen to make the necessary investments. The sector is also experimenting with imports from the tropics by refrigerated sea container. [www.kasalsenergiebron.nl](http://www.kasalsenergiebron.nl)

WORLD **GROWING ROSES IN KENYA**

# ‘More pressure needed on poorly performing companies’

✦ WORDS HANS VAN DE VEEN ✦ IMAGES BAS JONGERIUS



Two thirds of our roses come from Africa, with most of them coming from Kenya as Dutch growers increasingly relocate. Do they respect people and planet in this low-wage country? We visited several pioneers, companies that are investing in equitable social policy. Fair trade pays off, they say. ➤



Auditor Joyce Gema: “Dutch flower growers see themselves as frontrunners, but I don’t see it that way. Barring a few exceptions.”



Union representative Mary is satisfied about the situation at Max Havelaar-certified Simbi Roses. “Women who are breast-feeding are allowed to leave an hour early.”



Joyce, supervisor at Dutch grower Bilashaka: “We have some workers that have been here ten years.”

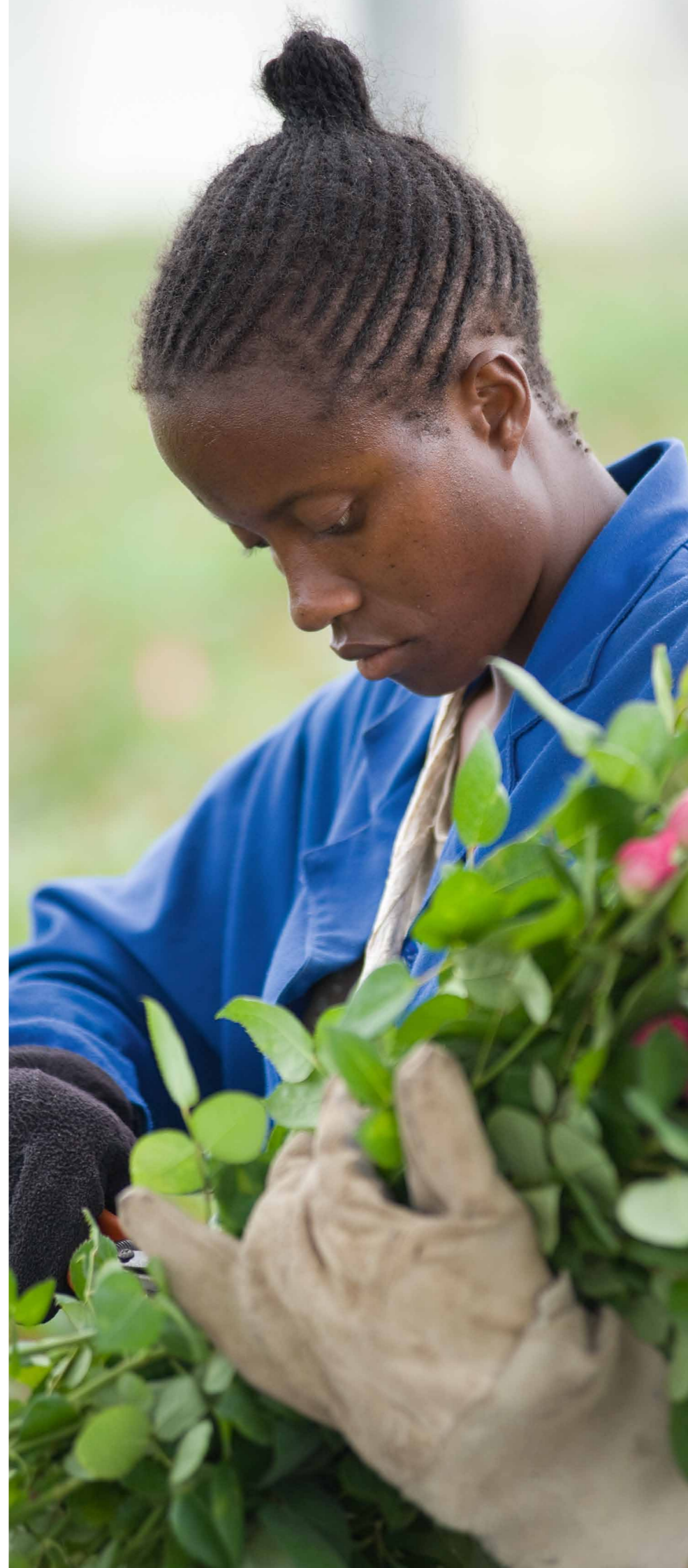
► **“M**y wife would say: I’d rather you brought me some food,” says one of the workers in the rose packaging unit at Kenyan company Simbi Roses. His colleagues laugh, nodding in agreement. After we’d asked them some questions they had one for us: what do the Dutch actually want with all these roses from Africa? Our explanation that we buy a bouquet of roses to try and win someone over or to make amends led them to respond as they did. Kenya has no culture of saying it with flowers. The thousands of Kenyans employed daily in readying flowers for export to the Netherlands have little idea of what we do with them. Are they a form of medicine, or can one perhaps eat them? A product intended solely for decoration is hard to imagine for these workers, each of whom earn no more than a couple of euro’s a day.

**At Dutch-owned** Bilashaka Flowers director Joost Zuurbier has placed a table in the production hall bearing fourteen vases. Each vase holds a bouquet of roses, each one a day older than the previous bunch. Decay sets in from vase ten, by vase fourteen the roses droop sadly. Zuurbier’s display is aimed at giving his workers an insight into the lifecycle of the rose, which they only know as a freshly picked product. Daily a truck carrying around 150 000 roses

plies the 100-kilometre route between Bilashaka on the shores of the Naivasha lake and Nairobi airport. After a journey by air lasting eight hours the cargo arrives at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport for further processing. All in all the entire process from harvest in Africa to auction takes a day longer than for flowers grown in the Netherlands, an acceptable time-lag for the flower growers. The Zuurbier family firm employs over six hundred Kenyans, of which some 70 per cent are women. They harvest the roses in the greenhouses, sort them according to length and bundle them in the production hall. The men are charged with delivering and fetching the blooms. A working day is eight hours, a working week 46. The average monthly wage amounts to eighty euro’s (excluding performance bonuses). Wages and working conditions are agreed in consultation with the unions and are based on a collective labour agreement. “The floriculture sector pays in excess of the minimum wage,” says Zuurbier, “and we in turn pay a bit more than that.” In addition his company has invested in attractive secondary labour conditions such as medical aid and free lunches daily. Towards the end of the month that’s quite often the only meal of the day for some of the workers when their salary is spent. “People are keen to work here,” says super-

visor Joyce, 43. “Because the company is good to them. We have some workers that have been here ten years.” Bilashaka is also active in the community. Together with other flower farms it invested in a local clinic (Zuurbier’s wife is chairperson of the board), helped set up the new high school and provides fresh drinking water in the settlement where most of the workers live. Informal settlements like these spring up spontaneously as a result of the mass influx of people in search of work on the flower farms and often lack basic amenities because authorities are slow to respond.

**Bilashaka Flowers** is also a pioneer in environmental terms. A huge field of solar panels warms the water that is pumped through the greenhouses to heat them at night. Bilashaka is one of the very few companies to do this in Africa but Zuurbier says the heating helps to keep fungal infections at bay, reducing the need for pesticides. It is still necessary to spray the crops, however. The times when this is done are displayed at the entrance to the greenhouses and workers are only allowed to enter six hours after the roses have been treated. Rainwater is collected in huge basins while water that has been used is recycled. That’s important in the vulnerable area around Lake Naivasha, the country’s largest fresh-



Women harvest the roses in the greenhouse, sort them by length and divide them into bunches in the processing hall.

## How important are roses to Kenya’s economy?

In the last fifteen years the value of Kenyan flower production has increased tenfold, from € 30 mln to € 367 mln. As such it is one of the country’s most important export sectors. According to the Kenya Flower Council, some ninety thousand people are employed at the flower companies, while a further 500.000 are dependent on the sector.

water lake and home to hippos and flamingos. In the past the vegetable and flower growers in the region were often blamed for problems such as pollution and declining water levels because they are heavy users of water and were thought to discharge their effluents in the lake. But it has since become apparent that sewage from the fast-growing city of Naivasha and erosion caused by subsistence farming on the steep slopes around the lake play at least as great a role. Financed in part by Dutch development aid a project to better educate the farmers has been running for some years now, while Vitens/Evides International contributes to better drinking water supplies in Naivasha itself. Joost Zuurbier is the treasurer for the local water users association, which pays farmers up-river to boost water quality by switching to terraced farming. “More and more flower growers are shouldering their responsibilities,” say staff at the local office of the World Wildlife Foundation. But, they add, it’s still only half the local growers who are taking part in the programme.

**Joyce Gema also** points to the differences between the various flower growers. The Kenyan started her career as HR advisor on a flower farm but now works as an independent consultant in the sector. Her company React Africa provides training



► courses for management and staff and carries out audits at certified companies. Gema is also the principal author of a recent report by the Kenya Human Rights Commission which identifies abuses in the floriculture sector. “Many of the companies active in this sector are doing their best,” she emphasises, “but others take no notice of anyone. They won’t change unless they are put under pressure to change.” That pressure should be exerted by a combination of government, unions, ngos and best practices companies within the sector. “This is a well-organized sector. The flower growers have their own associations and then there’s the Kenya Flower Council and the support of government. Together they command quite a bit of momentum for change.” Gema ranks the majority of Dutch flower growers in Kenya in the mid group. “They think of themselves as frontrunners, but I don’t see it that way. Barring a couple of

exceptions.” Real best practices are to be found at companies supplying the British market direct, she says. “Supermarkets, chains like Marks & Spencer, are really on top of their game. They send their own inspectors to check whether producers are adhering to environmental norms and are pursuing good social policies. Flora Holland could do that too.” Gema sees the low wages in the sector as a major issue. “The legal minimum wage for the sector of 40 euros a month is really shameful,” she says. “No-one can make ends meet on that. In the industrial sector minimum wages are twice as high. The floriculture sector pays € 55- € 65 on average, less than half of the companies pay more. Decent companies ask me: what is a reasonable wage in Kenya. I point them to a legislative bill that sets a living wage of € 109. That’s enough to support a family and pay your children’s school fees.” The bill was submitted to parliament some

time ago but still awaits ratification. This could be because various politicians have flower farms or other agricultural interests and may not be keen to see wages rise, Gema suggests.

**Women workers** in the horticultural sector often earn even less than their male counterparts. Women are usually offered less training and have fewer chances of being promoted, Gema noted in her report. Furthermore they are often subjected to sexual harassment and intimidation. To tackle this problem director and owner Jack Kneppers of rose producer Maridadi Flowers has come up with a radical solution. His 42 hectare business on an industrial site in Naivasha employs 720 but appoints only women managers in those departments where men and women work together. “At one point I discovered that a young woman, a good worker, was suffering from depression because she was con-

◀ Women workers in the greenhouses often suffer from harassment at the hands of their male bosses unless companies institute specific prevention measures.

► Women workers in the rose growing sector earn around 55 to 65 euros a month.



stantly being harassed by her boss for sex. So I fired him. People who mess about aren’t welcome. That’s the message.” “I love it,” says 24-year-old Emaculate of her work in the greenhouse. Asked why all the supervisors at Maridadi are women she says “Ask Jack why that is. But I think it’s because women work harder.” Kneppers agrees. “The women’s average quality of work is far better than that of the men. Our company reaps the benefits.” Striking is that the labour unions don’t get a foot in the door at Maridadi. “Unions, that always leads to upset,” says Kneppers. “There are so many factors in play that have nothing to do with labour conditions. I look only at performance.” The workers’ income is based entirely on piece rates. An average monthly income at Maridadi amounts to around € 80, but so-called ‘excellent workers’ take home a good deal more. “My people earn good money, relatively speaking. Everyone wants to work here. When we have vacancies literally hundreds of people turn up at the gate in the morning.”

**Mary Kambo and Edward** Kahuthia share Kneppers’ analysis of the unions to a great extent. They work for Cobades, an organisation focused on the labour rights of women in the flower growing sector. Kambo: “Unions aren’t interested. They do little or nothing in terms of training. Union members are frequently dissatisfied, complaining that union officials are only interested in their own jobs. We encourage

workers to ask their unions what the union is actually doing for them.” Cobades fills the vacuum the unions leave behind. The organisation runs training courses for staff and union representatives. “On the farms if we’re allowed in, otherwise outside.” In workers parliaments workers formulate complaints about companies and debate with one another. “Increasingly more women are being voted onto the workers’ committees,” says Kambo. “Thanks to the training courses they become more self-confident and more active.” It’s all part of the new dynamic Kahuthia sees in the country. “We have a progressive constitution, and a new government with young people. Kenya is changing fast.” Both Kenyans emphasise that while there are numerous abuses at many companies, important steps forward are also being taken. And they need to be, if companies wish to qualify for Kenya Flower Council certification or the Dutch MPS. Jack Kneppers expects to be fully compliant with all the social norms for quality mark certification by the end of the year. “We already meet most of the requirements like transport, work clothing, a free lunch and health care,” he says. “All that’s missing are a couple of complementary facilities, like changing rooms.” Bilashaka is already certified for both quality marks and is in the throes of qualifying for fair trade. “As far as things on the farm go there’s little difference,” says Zuurbier. “At this level the norms are comparable to

other quality certification marks.” The difference lies particularly in the joint body, a fund to finance community projects that is mandatory to gain fair trade status.

**Simbi Roses** has already made the grade. The Kenyan company is situated amid rolling coffee plantations in Thika, an hour’s drive from the Kenyan capital of Nairobi. The company has been fully certified as fair trade for several years and supplies roses with the Max Havelaar quality mark to Dutch supermarket chain Plus. In a round table interview four managers speak with a great deal of passion about the company, whose 400 workers are nearly all union members. “We encourage that. It gives the people a platform to raise issues and improve things. We don’t want our people to fear those in charge as sometimes happens on other flower farms.” “This is a good company,” says union representative Mary (1981), all the while rapidly sorting roses into bunches. “We work 7.4 hours a day, rather than eight. Women who are breastfeeding are allowed to leave an hour earlier. Maternity leave is three months, rather than two. And from the fair trade fund we have financed renovations to the school, school fees and clean drinking water. We decide ourselves where the money goes, and that feels good.” ■

With thanks to Kneppers Rozen, Simbi Roses, Zuurbier&Co Rozenkwekerijen and Hivos.

## Women@Work

Women's labour rights are respected in more and more countries, but in many developing countries and emerging markets that is not the case. There, the work performed by women is often barely noticed. Women have little access to knowledge and education, their work is underskilled and therefore undervalued.

On the other hand studies have shown that female workers often produce better quality products than their male counterparts. Entrepreneurs ascribe the superior quality to women's greater commitment, their attention to quality control and their willingness to invest in the long-term interests of their families and the communities they live in.

This is where corporations can make a difference. Female employees who feel valued and are treated well work harder and more efficiently. Companies giving equal opportunities to women actually bolster their position in the market and become appealing business partners. The socially aware consumer also increasingly rates companies according to their employee treatment record. Investing in women enhances the corporate image and creates better opportunities in both national and international markets.

Investing in women is a profitable endeavour: It's good for business. It's good for women. It's good for the economy.

This brochure shows how frontrunners in the African cut flower industry make a difference. For their workers and the communities in which they live.

There is a great deal at stake, and there is much to be gained.  
Investing in women: It pays!



[www.hivos.org](http://www.hivos.org)

Contact Caroline Wildeman  
*Global Campaign Coördinator*

+31(0)70 376 55 00  
[cwildeman@hivos.nl](mailto:cwildeman@hivos.nl)