

## A Fair Trade for Gender?

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**Does a Fair Trade approach lead to more gender equality? While Fairtrade International, one of the major players in the Fair Trade movement, according to its global policy commits to enhancing gender equality, research finds that in the cocoa industry of Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), their practice hardly differs from regular trade production that sustains gender inequalities and a triple burden for women<sup>1</sup>.**

### **Côte d'Ivoire, cocoa production that does not protect women's rights**

Côte d'Ivoire is the world's main supplier of cocoa, presently providing 39% of cocoa exports worldwide. Agriculture is the country's most important economic sector with cocoa beans as the main export product, accounting for 25% of the country's exports. The majority of cocoa is produced by small-scale family farms and over 25% of the Ivorian population is engaged in cocoa cultivation. Cocoa is a cash crop and is thus a crucial source of income for a considerable part of the rural population, but many cocoa farmers experience substantial poverty and difficulties in providing for their families.

Since men usually are responsible for the cultivation of cash crops and women are responsible for the cultivation of food crops (for subsistence use), men chiefly manage and control the cocoa production. Women contribute considerably to the early stages of cocoa production by planting cocoa seedlings, caring for the plants and trees and maintaining plantations. They are also heavily involved in harvest and post-harvest activities such as transporting harvested cocoa pods and extracting, fermenting and drying cocoa beans. Men are often responsible for the final stages including marketing and management of cocoa production revenue, leaving women uninformed of plantation incomes and dependent on men for compensation for their labour. This obscures the opportunity for many women to benefit economically from cocoa cultivation. Women's labour often goes unrecognised, undervalued and unpaid. Rural Ivorian women are also responsible for the care work in the family and household work, and are thus subject to double and triple work burdens, implying substantial amounts of informal and unrecognised domestic labour.

One major source of discrimination is women's unequal access to land. Women own only a quarter of the land in West Africa. In Côte d'Ivoire, discriminatory inheritance laws hinder women's possibilities to own and manage land and women face over five times higher tax liability than men do. If women do own land, the plots are generally considerably smaller than men's, and they have limited access to capital and financial inputs. The limited access to land further prevents women's active involvement in cooperatives, since membership frequently relies on land ownership; women thus have limited access to the services, training, and inputs provided by cooperatives. As a consequence, female cocoa farmers' yields and productivity levels are generally considerably lower than those of male cocoa farmers. In addition, household and caregiver obligations, lack of education, high levels of illiteracy and confined bargaining power both within and without the household considerably impede women farmers. Overall, women's possibilities to develop income-generating activities are considerably obstructed.

Although Côte d'Ivoire has ratified CEDAW and adopted the Beijing Platform for Action and Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, its Gender Inequality Index and Human Development Index scores are lower than the regional average, implying the need for considerable development, especially in improving women's rights and gender equality.

### **Fair Trade: more Gender Equality?**

The concept of 'Fair Trade' was developed as a response to exploitative and asymmetrical trade relations pushed forward by neoliberal economic policy. Rather than pursuing politics that promote business rights over human rights, Fair Trade emphasises human rights, fair wages, gender equality and decent working conditions. Fairtrade International, arguably the largest and most known promoter of Fair Trade, has since its establishment in 1997 sought to promote more equal trade relations worldwide through improving the living and working conditions for producers. Among its range of products, it offers a wide array of certified cocoa and chocolate products.

One of Fairtrade International's aims is to achieve gender equality and to contribute to women's empowerment. There have been a few reports and studies on the impacts of Fairtrade International, but the gendered effects of Fairtrade International and Fairtrade certified production have not been comprehensively assessed. It remains unclear if it achieves its aim of promoting gender equality.

In Côte d'Ivoire, Fairtrade International sources its cocoa from certified cocoa cooperatives, consisting of varying numbers of small scale cocoa farms. In order to attain a Fairtrade certification, cooperatives must adhere to the Fairtrade Standards that stipulate for example democratic practice, use of pesticides, waste management and non-tolerance for discrimination. In its efforts to counteract unequal power relations and gender inequality, Fairtrade International includes gender-specific criteria in the Fairtrade Standards and it has established a Gender Strategy for 2016-2020, providing strategies for how Fairtrade International is to attain its aim of closing the gender gap in smallholder agriculture. In this way, Fairtrade International aims to mainstream gender in all aspects of its work. Yet, my review of many reports on the situation in Côte d'Ivoire suggests that Fairtrade International's efforts hitherto have been insufficient.

Accounts presented in the analysed documents of the actual practise attest that women experience the same or similar problems and injustices, whether they are engaged in non-certified or certified cocoa production. Women within Fairtrade certified cocoa production recount the prevailing and extensive impediments and discriminatory practices facing them, even following Fairtrade certification, and although Fairtrade certification has succeeded in improving the conditions for farmers and their communities in general, it has done little to improve women's situation or further gender equality. Women continue to be mainly responsible for the household and family while their help in form of considerable amounts of undervalued and unpaid labour on their husbands' cocoa farms is expected. Women are involved, directly or indirectly, in all stages of cocoa production but receive exceptionally marginal benefits from cocoa cultivation. The gender bias observable in Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa industry confines women to cultivate male relatives' land instead of being recognised farmers in their own right.

Although the small number of female cocoa farmers and female membership in cocoa cooperatives is slowly increasing, women continue to be strikingly underrepresented in cooperatives and management roles within cooperatives and communities. By focusing on export and cash crops traditionally managed by men, one may even argue that Fairtrade efforts are gender biased, thus not merely failing to improve women's situation, but indeed contributing to maintaining gender disparities. Although Fairtrade International has developed a Gender Strategy to increase attentiveness to gender issues and to mainstream gender, it seemingly has yet to achieve its aims of furthering gender equality in reality.

### Conclusion

Despite the considerable gender gap within the Ivorian cocoa industry, both within and without Fairtrade certified production, gender remains a largely excluded aspect. Frequently, efforts by Fairtrade International or similar actors sourcing their cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire are

assumed to be gender neutral. Such actors have hitherto failed to establish strategies and policies that succeed in combating the impediments to women's equal participation and benefits. Consequently, there is a need for more gender-sensitive efforts to make trade fairer. Although addressing gender should be perceived vital, following its impacts for women alone, it is evident that gender is not merely a women's issue but is significantly influential for all social, political and economic aspects of society. Failing to address gender thus has far-reaching consequences and it is imperative to conceptualise and include gender in social analysis and development efforts.

The analysis of the documents suggests that Fairtrade International seeks foremost to empower women and improve their situation within the existing system in place in Côte d'Ivoire. No real efforts to drastically alter the conditions of cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire are discernible in Fairtrade International documents, suggesting that although the Fairtrade International claims that gender equality is one of its main goals, there might be an unwillingness to develop and promote efforts that would serve to notably change and improve the situation for women within the Ivorian cocoa industry. Moreover, in many of Fairtrade International's efforts to improve the situation for cocoa farmers, gender is an ignored aspect and it seems to be assumed that Fairtrade International's efforts are gender neutral and will affect men and women in cocoa production equally. Consequently, the verdict is that as an example of Fair Trade, Fairtrade International hitherto fails to generate notable improvements for women's empowerment and gender equality in Ivorian cocoa production and in Ivorian rural communities. However, if Fairtrade International would develop and implement efforts to comprehensively include and address gender and women's issues throughout their supply chains, as well as acknowledge and address the potential counter-productive consequences of its efforts, it could constitute a role model for other organisations, within and without the Fair Trade movement.

<sup>i</sup> This article is a summary of the main findings from the Master thesis in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg, which was a case study of Fairtrade International through conducting a critical qualitative text analysis of over 70 available documents, reports and studies on (Fairtrade certified) cocoa cultivation in Côte d'Ivoire. If you are interested in reading the full thesis, please do not hesitate to contact the author: [naiade99@gmail.com](mailto:naiade99@gmail.com)