

Socially responsible fruit growing

The experience of Afrifresh, in partnership with IFC: the business case for better work for women on fresh fruit farms in South Africa

The Afrifresh company

Afrifresh is a leading South African producer and exporter of fresh fruit. The company specialises in table grapes and citrus (grapefruits, oranges, soft citrus and lemons). Afrifresh started as a trader and exporter of vegetables and fruits, and expanded their business since 2009 with the production of fresh fruit. Afrifresh is now one of the leading producers and exporters of fresh fruit in South Africa, with buyers in the EU and other countries.

In the EU, the demands for social performance are becoming increasingly stringent. In order to maintain access to a premium market and to stay ahead of the competition in

terms of sustainability, Afrifresh is working hard on a strong social performance record.

The employees

With the successful expansion to production activities, the profile of Afrifresh' workforce changed from mainly office workers to a majority of unskilled farm workers, many of whom live on the farm. Afrifresh employs over 1,200 permanent workers and over 4,000 seasonal workers on 12 farms in South Africa. 35% of the permanent and 48,5% of the seasonal workforce are women.



Gender-based constraints

Traditional jobs for men and women

At the farms women work in operational roles that require much detail and care, such as vine development, grading and packing. Jobs requiring more physical strength and a higher skill profile go to men and are better paid. Women have expressed their interest for non-traditional jobs, but they often lack the key skills for such jobs.

Woman in management positions

Management positions at Afrifresh are predominantly filled by men. Afrifresh has not received a single application from a woman for a position of general farm manager. In South Africa, 60% of the highly educated graduates are women. However, these women are not interested in management jobs on a farm.

Vulnerability to discrimination and harassment

Under apartheid, farm workers had few legally recognized rights. Women were particularly vulnerable in terms of labour rights. Since then employment in the sector has undergone important changes, including the introduction of a number of protective laws.

However, the industry is still grappling with the legacy of racial segregation on farms and historically entrenched mistrust between farmers and workers. Due to the low level of education and the scarcity of job opportunities, women are still vulnerable to discrimination and harassment. Awareness on sexual harassment is low and female workers usually don't report incidents for fear of losing their jobs

Result:

Access to the high value EU market



Credits

International Finance Corporation. 2016. Afrifresh – Fresh produce (export), South Africa. Washington, DC.

Published in: International Finance Corporation. 2016. The Business Case for Women's Employment in Agribusiness. Washington, DC.



Strategies

Zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment on the farm

Afrifresh has explicit policies expressing non-tolerance for discrimination and (sexual) harassment on the farms. A grievance mechanism for incidents has been established. Trainings are provided to all permanent farmworkers on wages, working hours, occupational health and safety (OHS) and other aspects related to working conditions. All workers, permanent and seasonal, get introduction trainings at the beginning of the harvesting season.

Worker - management communication

Workers' committees have been established, to facilitate better communication between the workers and management. The committee members received trainings and meet regularly with the management team to discuss key occupational health and safety issues and working conditions. Female workers actively participate and contribute to the committees. On some farms, a separate women's committee has been established to discuss workplace issues that particularly challenge women.

Women in leadership positions

Afrifresh provides equal career opportunities to both male and female workers. Currently 18% of the managers and 27% of the supervisors are women. In 2016, Afrifresh appointed its first female board member.

Equal opportunities for professional training and personal development

Afrifresh gives equal training opportunities and job opportunities to men and women on the farms. When the company noticed that women on the farms were interested in driving trucks, tractors and lifters, it sponsored a training programme and encouraged women to participate.

On-the-job technical training was provided to the female workers on the farm, e.g. on new grafting skills. After training, women were enthusiastic in sharing their knowledge with their co-workers on other farms. To address the low education level of female workers, an adult training centre for literacy and agricultural knowledge has been established.

Results



Benefits for Afrifresh

Access to EU market

Access to the high value EU market has been secured with the company's strong social performance record.

Better and consistent quality of production and less management time by:

1. Retaining the right people

Afrifresh is building a harmonious and cohesive people culture, leading to less conflicts and harassment, and more productivity and efficiency.

2. Maintaining a high quality workforce

As handling and weighing grapes are typically seen as jobs for women, it is critical for the company to keep women and provide good and safe working conditions for them.

3. Providing better working conditions to retain the same seasonal workers

This strategy not only improves productivity, but also reduces management time and training costs. Hiring and training new seasonal workers is costly: new seasonal labourers are less productive compared to experienced workers and it takes time to acquire skills. Skilled seasonal workers can also become supervisors for new workers on the farm.



Benefits for women

Better working environment

Workers, especially women, have a harmonious and safe ('zero harassment') working environment.

More women in management positions

Leadership trainings help to advance women's skills in management and boost their confidence in work and in life.

Equal treatment

Men and women enjoy equal employment and career opportunities.

More job and training opportunities

Non-traditional jobs and technical training opportunities are available for female workers.