

# **Non-traditional agricultural export industries: Conditions for women workers in Colombia and Peru**

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*Women comprise the majority of the workforce in many non-traditional agricultural export (NTAE) industries, which international lending and aid agencies espouse as a development solution for rural poor people. In the Peruvian asparagus industry and the Colombian cut-flower plantations, however, women workers endure unsafe and substandard conditions. Local organisations creatively employ various strategies, ranging from legislative advocacy to direct services for workers, to promote women's rights in this sector, but their efficacy is limited by governments' failure to pass and enforce comprehensive labour laws, and judicial procedures that favour employers.*

## **Introduction**

The growing non-traditional agricultural export (NTAE)(1) industries in Peru and Colombia – namely asparagus and cut flowers, respectively – are providing increased employment opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, where other salaried jobs are scarce. However, the Andean governments' numerous policies to promote the growth of the NTAE sector have not been matched with efforts to guarantee safety and quality of employment. It appears that recent labour reforms in Peru and Colombia have actually served to worsen working conditions and wages, while ensuring lower costs and increased flexibility for employers.

Workers' terms of employment, and the seasonal nature of work in the NTAE sector, lead to job instability, and the salaries are insufficient for women – particularly female heads of households – to cover basic family expenses. Even though the majority of workers in the asparagus fields and rose greenhouses are women, it is the men who are able to earn promotions to supervisory levels, and thus increase their wages. Gender discrimination and low education levels among women workers keep them from advancing in the hierarchy, even after gaining decades of experience. Maternity-based discrimination is also common; women workers regularly find that they are unable to find or keep a job when they become pregnant, despite existing national laws protecting maternity leave. Finally, these industries are notorious for the heavy use of toxic pesticides, which cause illnesses in workers of both sexes, but particularly reproductive health problems in women.

Asociación Aurora Vivar, in Peru, and Corporación Cactus, in Colombia, are two non-government organisations (NGOs) working to promote decent working conditions for women in the asparagus and cut-flower industries. Their strategies include providing workshops and legal support services for workers, and analysing national labour legislation and proposing reforms.

The final part of this article will explore some of these strategies, as well as the company and government practices that limit their effectiveness.

The information in this article was gathered through five years of work with the International Labour Rights Forum (ILRF)'s Rights for Working Women Campaign and the Fairness in Flowers Campaign, and through numerous meetings in Latin America with agricultural workers' unions and NGOs like Corporación Cactus. From 2005 to 2007, I was based in Quito, Ecuador, where I collaborated directly with local and regional NGOs and unions, to promote better working conditions for flower workers. In the autumn of 2006, I recorded primary interviews with cut-flower workers in Colombia and Ecuador, and some of these testimonies are included in this article.

### **Case studies: introduction**

#### *The Peruvian asparagus industry*

Peru is the largest exporter of fresh asparagus in the world, and the second largest exporter of canned asparagus, after China. Asparagus was first introduced in the Peruvian coastal regions in the late 1950s; canned asparagus initially dominated exports. Many of the producers were farmers cultivating asparagus on a small scale, as the Agrarian Reform of the 1960s prevented private companies from owning large tracts of agricultural land (Shimizu 2006).

In the 1990s, laws regarding land ownership changed, reversing protections for small farmers. These legal changes, combined with the introduction of costly drip-irrigation systems, shifted much of the production to large-scale operations. At the same time, while canned asparagus exports continued, fresh asparagus exports became increasingly important. Large producers maintain product freshness by having their own refrigeration and processing facilities, and save transportation costs by exporting large volumes (Shimizu 2006). The shift to large-scale production also encouraged use of hired labour.

Peru's primary agricultural export has traditionally been coffee, followed by cotton and sugar. As international prices for these commodities have fallen, so has their relative importance, compared with the new non-traditional agricultural exports. Among Peru's non-traditional agricultural exports, asparagus still leads the way, with sales increasing by 20 per cent between 2005 and 2006 (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007b). There are approximately 176 companies producing asparagus in Peru, and last year the country exported almost \$300m worth of asparagus (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007b; Emery 2007).

Most fresh asparagus is exported to the USA, whereas most canned asparagus goes to Spain. In 1993, the USA implemented the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA), which exempts Peru and the other Andean countries from tariffs on fresh asparagus imported into the USA, giving Peru an advantage over other producing countries.

The Peruvian asparagus industry employs approximately 60,000 workers (USITC 2005). Over 70 per cent of the workers in the asparagus fields are women, and most are between the ages of 18 and 25 (Amat 2006; Jara 2007). In processing plants, more than 95 per cent of workers are

women (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007b). According to Calisaya and Flores (2006), asparagus producers prefer to hire women workers, because they are more likely to be willing to enter and leave the labour market according to the season, and because the required tasks favour skills considered 'feminine', like fine motor skills and meticulousness.

### *The Colombian flower industry*

Cut flowers were first produced in Colombia for export in 1965. That year, a US Agency for International Development (USAID) adviser in exports promotion read a graduate thesis on the ideal conditions for the large-scale production of carnations, and travelled to Colombia to analyse the viability of flower production near Bogotá (Farné 1998). The region possessed ideal climatic conditions, and also offered low labour costs and proximity to an international airport for rapid export. Almost immediately, Colombia began to export carnations and chrysanthemums, and this was soon followed by roses and tropical flowers.

Today, Colombia is the largest exporter of cut flowers to the USA (US/LEAP and ILRF 2007). Flower imports to the USA from Colombia, like asparagus imports from Peru, receive duty-free treatment under the ATPA.

The Colombian flower industry employs more than 110,000 workers (Asocolflores 2007). Approximately 65 per cent of these workers are women, in part due to the employers' belief that women are better at the delicate handling that the flowers require, particularly during packing (Pérez-Plá 2006). Many of these women are single mothers (Goodman 2007).

### **Case studies: working conditions**

#### *Contracts and working hours*

The seasonality of agricultural production, and the fact that tasks vary in different production stages, prevents consistency in working hours.

The asparagus season is short and intense, with workers harvesting or packing asparagus for 12–18 hours per day. If their three-month contracts are not renewed, they are left unemployed; some workers look for employment in grape, artichoke, or tomato production during the asparagus off-season. Under short-term contracts, workers do not receive health insurance, vacation, or social-security coverage.

Female workers are more likely than male workers to be given short-term contracts, with few or no opportunities for advancement from their entry-level positions. 'The supervisors are always men. Those who receive training are men. The men generally stay to work year-round, but we women only work seasonally' (quotation from the 4<sup>th</sup> working meeting with Ica women workers, 26 June 2004, quoted in Calisaya and Flores 2006, 42). Similarly, none of the women visiting the Corporación Cactus legal support centre, who had worked between five and ten years for the same flower company, had received any incentives, bonuses, or possibilities of being promoted (Páez Sepúlveda 2006).

Although cut flowers are grown year-round in Colombian greenhouses, demand increases sharply in international markets prior to holidays such as Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. During these peak periods, workers are often required to work up to 80 hours per week (US/LEAP and ILRF 2007). In addition, even though production is constant and workers may be employed at the same plantation for several years, they are often given a series of short contracts that allow employers legally to avoid the expenses associated with social-security coverage and other benefits. Another recent tactic has been to hire workers through one of many 'co-operatives', organisations that have lost the form and functions of a co-operative and are actually acting as subcontracting agencies; companies argue that workers hired in this manner are not entitled to the same rights under Colombian labour law, because they are 'associates', and not 'employees'. Subcontracted workers are also unable to unionise (Cendales Pardo 2005).

### *Salaries*

Most Peruvian women working in the asparagus industry earn 16–18 *soles* per day (about \$5). One woman worker explained to researchers: 'They say they pay us 18 soles, including overtime. Seventeen or 18 soles aren't enough, when breakfast costs more than five soles, lunch about eight soles, and a worker can't live on just bread and milk...and for clothing? And if you get sick, how will you buy medicine?' (Oxfam GB 2005, 5). Another woman, quoted in Calisaya and Flores (2006, 45), says: 'On a daily basis, you don't know how much you will earn'.

Flower workers in Colombia earn approximately \$200 per month, but their take-home pay is actually less than that, after social-security contributions and other deductions. Renting a small apartment near the flower plantations costs more than half a worker's monthly salary. Often, workers can only afford to rent one room for themselves and their children, in an apartment shared with other families (interviews with author, November 2006).

For 39 per cent of women flower workers, their salary is the only source of income for the household (Chaparro 2004). One Colombian flower worker, a single mother, explained: 'I have to take care of everything myself, I have to pay all of the rent, pay for the food at the market, and pay for child care for my son' (2) (interview with author, 12 November 2006). The lack of job stability causes particularly serious crises for single mothers, who have sole responsibility for covering all of their families' basic needs, and whose salaries are insufficient to be able to save money for periods of unemployment.

### *Health and safety*

Health problems – including rashes, vision and respiratory problems, back problems, reproductive health problems, and carpal tunnel syndrome – are common, due to pesticide exposure, long working hours, and repetitive tasks; and they are exacerbated by employers' failure to provide adequate protective equipment. Doctors in flower-producing regions in Colombia report up to five cases of acute poisoning daily (VIDEA 2002). In the first three months of 2005, 26 women from a plantation in the Ica region of Peru, a major asparagus-production area, received medical attention due to intoxication by organophosphates (Calisaya and Flores 2006). Women suffer particular health problems as a result of pesticide exposure; a

study by the Colombian National Institute of Health found an elevated rate of miscarriages, premature births, and congenital malformations among flower workers (Cox 2002).

Frequently, Colombian flower companies deduct social-security quotas from employees' pay-cheques, but fail to send these contributions to the social-security system, which provides health-care coverage and retirement pensions. The omission often isn't discovered until a worker retires or suffers an accident or illness, and finds that she cannot access services (Páez Sepúlveda 2004).

Flower companies also regularly refuse to appropriately diagnose and treat workers with occupational illnesses. The lack of other employment opportunities for women in the region forces those who suffer from occupational illnesses to fight to keep their jobs, even when their health is deteriorating day by day. Esperanza, a Colombian woman who has been working in the flower industry for 19 years and developed a serious case of carpal tunnel syndrome a few years ago, shared her experience:

*Some plantations have occupational-health doctors that just do annual exams. This has two purposes: one is to see how the worker is, and the other is that when it is necessary to reduce personnel, they can fire the ones that are sick. I had been working at this plantation for four years when my hands started to fall asleep. I would work from 6am until 5 or 6pm, using clippers all day long. The pain went all the way up to my shoulder. I have had surgery on my right hand three times. I feel like I am going to lose this finger. It is really hard to bend it or move it. I get to work at 6am, and by 8:30am my hands hurt so much I can't stand it. (Interview with author, 12 November 2006)*

### *Maternity*

Agro-export companies go to great lengths to preclude the employment of pregnant women, who in both Peru and Colombia are entitled by law to temporary placement in a less risky position, and to paid maternity leave. Asparagus and flower workers who are found to be pregnant are generally fired immediately (Calisaya and Flores 2006; interviews with author 2003–2006). In both sectors, it is also becoming common practice for employers to demand that prospective employees take pregnancy tests or show proof of sterilisation. A recent study showed that over 90 per cent of interviewed women workers in the Peruvian agro-export industry said that maternity leave was not given, in violation of national law (Calisaya and Flores 2006). According to a 25-year-old Peruvian woman working in the asparagus industry, employers 'note the people who are pregnant and they don't give them work, sometimes the pregnancy isn't obvious yet and you get in, but as the months pass and you keep working, after a few months they realize it and they fire you' (Oxfam GB 2005, 9). In a poll of approximately 1,400 flower workers in Colombia, Corporación Cactus found that 85 per cent of female workers had been required to undergo a pregnancy test, as a prerequisite for employment (Corporación Cactus 2006).

## *Unions*

The right to organise is clearly established in International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 11 and 87, which have both been ratified by Peru and Colombia; nevertheless, asparagus and flower workers who try to organise unions to defend their labour rights and negotiate working conditions with their employers face swift retaliation.

Workers who have formed or joined unions in these sectors have been fired, blacklisted, and threatened with physical violence or death. In Peru, unionists' family members who are employed at other farms have been threatened with dismissal for being related to a 'subversive' (Calisaya and Flores 2006).

At Peru's largest producer of canned vegetables (including white and green asparagus), Sociedad Agrícola Virú SA, Gladys Campos Chirado led an effort to organise workers in 2004. She was fired in retaliation, along with several other workers. Her case has not yet been resolved by the Peruvian courts (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007b).

In Colombia, a flower worker recounted: 'Last month, the manager fired two women I worked with, saying that they were union members and therefore they couldn't work at the company any longer, and warning them that they wouldn't be able to get work at any other company either' (interview with author, 12 November 2006).

## **National laws for the NTAE sector**

### *Peruvian labour law*

Between 1999 and 2003, Peru passed several laws regarding the rights of women workers. One, for example, prohibited employers from firing workers based on pregnancy, and another reaffirmed women workers' right to special breaks for breast-feeding. These laws, however, are inadequately enforced.

Meanwhile, in 2000, the Peruvian Parliament passed the Law that Approves the Norms for the Promotion of the Agrarian Sector (Law 27360), which decreased protections for labour rights in the agro-industry, where the overwhelming majority of workers are women. Whereas the general labour legislation for private companies establishes an eight-hour working day, or a 48-hour working week, the law allows for 'accumulated' workdays in the agricultural sector, with overtime only paid when the *average* working day over the entire period of the work contract exceeds eight hours. In other words, a worker could be obligated to work 20 hours one day, without overtime pay, and then given very little work on subsequent days, so that the average working day is eight hours. This law also established a lower tax burden for agricultural companies, and smaller contributions to the social-security system. It also lowered the amount that agricultural employers must pay for unjust dismissals to one-third of the fine applied in other private companies (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007b).

Law 27360 was due to expire in 2006, but that year the Parliament voted to extend it – along with the tax breaks and limits on workers' rights – until the year 2021.

## *Colombian labour law*

The most recent change in Colombian labour law, effected by Law 789 in December 2002, was proclaimed to be an attempt to ‘enact measures to support employment and broaden social protection’.

In fact, this reform placed an increased burden on workers, and contributed to the further deterioration of protections for women in the cut-flower sector and other industries. Fines for employers who fire workers without just cause were reduced. In addition, changes to working hours and overtime pay were made that particularly affect flower workers, who work excessive amounts of overtime during peak seasons such as the weeks before Valentine’s Day.

Whereas work done after 6pm was previously considered night work, and paid at a higher rate, particularly if it was not part of the worker’s normal schedule (and therefore ‘overtime’), Law 789 modified the Labour Code, so that night hours do not begin until 10pm. In addition, this law reduced wages for work on Sundays and holidays from an extra 100 per cent to only 75 per cent above the normal wage.

Proponents of the labour-law reform claimed that by reducing costs for employers, it would enable them to hire additional workers and therefore increase employment. While unemployment has dropped slightly, it is unclear whether this is attributable to the labour reform, because the studies done in Colombia have not analysed the effect of the changes in working hours on job creation. The Labour Market and Social Security Observatory (OMTSS) at the Universidad Externado de Colombia concluded that only 1.7 per cent of the jobs that had been created in recent years were attributable to the labour-law reform (Chaparro 2004).

In practice, the changes have increased flexibility and decreased costs for employers, while increasing obligatory overtime for workers. The consequences for women workers are particularly serious, as they are left not only with lower salaries to cover their families’ basic expenses, but also fewer hours to spend tending to household responsibilities and caring for their children.

Even some in the Colombian government have begun to acknowledge the widespread criticism of the labour reform’s effect on the working class. The new Vice Minister for Labour Issues, Andrés Fernando Palacio Chaverra, has said that new changes to the labour law are now under consideration, due to doubts regarding the usefulness and appropriateness of some parts of the 2002 reform – including the lengthening of the working day (El País 2007). Ricardo Zamudio of Corporación Cactus, however, argues that simply repealing the 2002 reform would only restore a situation that is the ‘lesser of two evils’, rather than producing the kind of structural changes needed to promote decent conditions for flower workers (Zamudio 2007).

## **NGO strategies**

Many of the women working in the asparagus and flower sectors have no prior experience with salaried employment. Some have migrated from other parts of the country in search of work and lack a local support network. Even in cases where national labour laws include ample

protections, these women are often unaware of the rights established therein, and additionally lack the resources and experience necessary to demand compliance. The majority enter jobs in agro-industry 'without any prior experience with salaried work, without any work experience where their rights were recognised or where they participated in the securing of new rights, which makes it hard for them to enforce rights already achieved and legislated, such as those related to maternity' (Calisaya and Flores 2006, 35). Organisations like Asociación Aurora Vivar and Corporación Cactus are finding ways to work within this context, via outreach, education, advocacy, and legal services, to promote safer and fairer working conditions for women in agro-industry.

### *Legislative advocacy and support for worker organising*

Asociación Aurora Vivar has been working for 22 years to promote the rights of women workers in Peru, through public education, research, and advocacy. They also provide training on leadership skills, gender equality, and labour rights, for women employed in the NTAE sector.

In a new project, Aurora Vivar is supporting legal cases recently filed by two young women, Blanca and Rosmery, who allegedly were fired by asparagus producer Corporación APEISA when their pregnancies became apparent. The case rests on the assertion that the two women were fired under the pretext of 'decreased production needs' but the company then hired replacements. Blanca and Rosmery allege that when they demanded their jobs back, they were advised to desist and not to complain to the Ministry of Labour, because they would 'lose the opportunity to get another job in the future...because no company wanted to have "problematic" workers' (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007b, 8). Aurora Vivar is also using these as emblematic cases in its efforts to raise public awareness about the widespread violations of maternity rights in the NTAE sector.

Recognising that organised workers are much better positioned to pressure and negotiate for adequate working conditions, workers at Sociedad Agrícola Virú, where Gladys Campos Chirado was fired for organising a union in 2004, again attempted to unionise in early 2007. They carried out a three-day work stoppage in May; the Peruvian Labour Authority mediated an agreement that included a company commitment to refrain from retaliating against workers who were involved in the protest. However, soon after, the company began threatening to fire workers. Aurora Vivar has asked international organisations to urge Peruvian authorities to intervene on behalf of the workers (Calisaya 2007).

Asociación Aurora Vivar has also been working on a gender analysis of the proposed General Labour Law. The text of this bill was written and revised between 2001 and 2006 by a Commission of Experts, the Ministry of Labour, the National Labour Council, and the Congressional Labour Commission. The Aurora Vivar critique shows that the bill does not explicitly address issues facing women workers or establish the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination (Asociación Aurora Vivar 2007a). In addition, while Aurora Vivar applauds the bill's condemnation of sexual harassment in the workplace, it also criticises the bill's lack of sanctions for aggressors. Nevertheless, the bill would make some favourable changes to Peruvian labour law, and while it was not sent to the full Parliament for debate on the expected date, Aurora Vivar and its union allies hope that this opportunity to improve conditions and

protections for women workers will not be lost. To that end, they are seeking meetings with members of Parliament to push for passage of the bill along with their recommended modifications (Flores 2007).

### *Providing access to legal recourse*

Several years ago, Corporación Cactus established a legal support centre for flower workers in Tocancipá, a small town surrounded by flower plantations near Colombia's capital. It publicises these free services weekly on its local radio programme. The centre has attended to over 500 flower workers from dozens of different companies, since the year 2000. Approximately 70 per cent of the workers visiting the centre have been women, and one-quarter of these women have been single mothers (Páez Sepúlveda 2004; 2006).

The most common complaints received at the legal centre relate to non-payment or late payment of salaries, unjustified dismissals, or employers' failure to pay overtime wages or workers' quotas to the social-security system. Workers also come seeking basic information on their labour rights according to Colombian law (Páez Sepúlveda 2004; 2006).

Almost one-fifth of workers visiting the legal centre had been fired with no legal justification based on their conduct or qualifications. Some workers had been fired for refusing to work overtime, which by law must be voluntary. Others were fired because their occupational illnesses lowered their productivity. A number of women were fired because they became pregnant (Páez Sepúlveda 2004; 2006).

Research suggests that employer intransigence, judicial delays, and insufficient resources for governmental agencies charged with monitoring compliance with labour laws and court sentences have made this work an uphill battle for the Cactus lawyers. In 60 per cent of the cases that were filed with the labour courts, the employers failed to show up to the hearings and Cactus was forced to pay for a guardian *ad-litem*, or appointed advocate, to represent them. Even when the final decision favoured the worker, in many cases the employer simply refused to carry out the court order. In other cases, the labour inspectors have intervened to mediate; in these situations, only 30 per cent of the cases have been resolved in favour of the workers (this is also partly attributable to employers' failure to appear at the hearings). In general, the legal processes are very slow; it can take two to seven years for a case to go through the labour courts (Páez Sepúlveda 2007).

Despite these obstacles, the Cactus lawyers have achieved several notable victories that serve to reaffirm workers' rights, and even instigate some changes in company practices.

One female flower worker, for example, had been diagnosed with a nerve disease that included symptoms like severe body aches, numbness, and loss of feeling and strength in her limbs. The National University's Toxicology Department determined that the cause of her illness was exposure to neurotoxins at the flower plantation where she worked. Cactus successfully argued her case, and, in February 2005, the local municipal court ruled that the health administrator, or EPS(3), had to give her an exam to determine appropriate rehabilitative treatment.

Between 2004 and 2005, four women who believed that they had been dismissed from flower companies for being pregnant visited the Cactus legal centre for advice. The two women who consequently chose to file legal complaints were successful – one was reinstated in her job, and the other received pay for maternity leave.

Finally, in 2006, Cactus achieved a legal decision that it hopes will set an important precedent regarding the rights of flower workers hired through so-called ‘co-operatives’, as well as the rights of workers who are dismissed because of physical limitations caused by job-related illnesses and accidents. That year, Cactus represented Hilda Fresneda, a flower worker who was fired from a ‘co-operative’ after a work-related accident during the 2005 Valentine’s Day production season, and subsequently disaffiliated from the EPS health provider. Cactus successfully proved that Hilda was fired because of her occupational illness, and the court ordered the EPS to provide her with immediate medical attention. The Constitutional Court also ruled that the ‘co-operative’ was actually acting as a subcontractor, and ordered that she be reinstated. Omaira Páez Sepúlveda, one of the Cactus lawyers, explained, ‘a decision from the Constitutional Court that guarantees human rights previously not recognised under this form of contracting becomes an extremely important tool to address labour rights violations’.

In general, Ms. Páez Sepúlveda says: ‘besides obtaining compensation for individuals whose rights have been violated, I think we have had an impact on particular companies that have systematically violated labour rights. In the May survey of the centre’s clients, the workers told us that two companies had changed their practices as a result of the complaints filed with our support’ (2007).

Cactus’s legal support centre is a model that can have a positive impact on individual workers who otherwise lacked the resources and experience to file complaints, and in certain cases more widespread consequences. The new legal precedents and changes in company practices are particularly important, as the 500 people who have used the services offered by Cactus represent less than one per cent of Colombian flower workers. More advances could be made if labour courts had the human and financial resources to proceed more quickly on such cases, and if employers were required to appear at all hearings.

## **Conclusion**

Regrettably, it seems that the efforts of organisations like Cactus and Aurora Vivar are hampered by a lack of political will to value the quality and safety of jobs in the NTAE industries in Peru and Colombia, where ‘progress’ is valued in terms of success in macroeconomic indicators.

According to Omaira Páez Sepúlveda of Corporación Cactus, ‘one of the causes of the preponderance of female labour is that women are seen as an apt group for the implementation of flexible and precarious kinds of work, given their higher levels of socioeconomic vulnerability’ (Páez Sepúlveda 2004, 8). Single mothers, in particular, are under extreme pressure to accept any job available, as they are solely responsible for providing for their children. As women workers are not given access to additional job training or supervisory positions, they are unable to negotiate higher pay or increased job stability. Subsequently, without a decent wage, women are unable to offer their children the adequate nutrition and higher education that would enable the family to rise out of poverty. Development agencies and lenders that champion the benefits of

the NTAE sector should recognise that the prevalent hiring and management practices, along with un-enforced national labour laws, are actually breeding exploitation and discrimination.

If NTAE industries are going to offer a real alternative for rural poor people, particularly women, governments must be pressured to enact policies that go beyond increasing exports, lowering costs for domestic producers, and stimulating foreign investment. They must allocate the resources necessary to enforce labour laws, and establish – and apply – sanctions for employers who violate workers' rights.

National governments must also clearly respect and protect the legal activities of organisations seeking to protect women's rights and workers' rights. In Colombia, President Uribe has accused human-rights organisations of being fronts for terrorists, putting NGOs in 'a very precarious situation', according to Jorge Rojas, head of the Office for Human Rights and Forced Displacement (BBC News 2003). Corporación Cactus is one of many NGOs in Colombia that has received threats in the past (Zamudio 2007), making its activities much more difficult and dangerous.

The inefficient and protracted judicial proceedings also pose a problem for fired workers who cannot afford to wait several years for compensation, and for the under-funded NGOs that represent them. The labour courts must be structured in a way that guarantees workers real legal recourse, instead of giving an unfair advantage to delinquent employers. Development organisations and foundations must prioritise support for organisations that address the needs of women workers.

Finally, workers must be allowed to organise, as the law provides, so that they are empowered to act collectively to defend their rights instead of being the passive subjects of employer whims and a flawed development strategy.

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## **Notes**

1. Non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAEs) are 'high-value' products introduced more recently in less-developed countries, generally as a central part of a new development strategy, and frequently pushed by international lending and aid agencies like USAID. Traditional agricultural exports (TAEs), like coffee, bananas, sugar, and corn, have a longer history of production in these countries and are receiving progressively lower prices on the world market.
2. Flower workers interviewed by the author are unnamed or are identified only by first name, at their request, due to their fear that they will be fired or blacklisted for speaking about their experiences and concerns.
3. An EPS is a health administrator, public or private, who forms part of the social-security system, and provides services to affiliated individuals. The employer is responsible for affiliating all of its contracted employees to an EPS.

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