

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The impact of international codes of conduct on employment conditions and gender issues in Chinese flower companies

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Accepted 15 October, 2010

**The study examined how international codes of conduct address employment conditions and gender issues in the Chinese flower industry. A sample of 20 companies was purposively selected and 200 workers from these companies were interviewed. The adoption of international codes did not improve workers conditions and gender issues and codes were poorly enforced. There was evidence of discrimination based on workers' status of employment and gender. A permanent worker mean daily wage was RMB14.1 higher than a casual worker. Although welfare benefits were provided to permanent workers, males and females beneficiaries differed significantly by 32.4 and 24.1%, respectively. This paper provided the basis for the need to gender audit, mainstream flower companies and adopts participatory auditing for flower companies' compliance to the use of codes of conduct.**

**Key words:** Codes of conduct, Chinese flower industry, mainstream, gender, permanent worker, casual worker, employment conditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Cut flower production has become a major part of China's economy with a whole sale value of US\$1,172million production in 2009 (Ando, 2009). China success in selling flowers to the international market has attracted a lot of attention to the industry social issues. Concerns emanating from consumers, supermarkets and civil society organizations have made flower companies in China to comply with a number of codes of conduct developed by

international organizations. These codes supplement the China Labor laws, the Chinese Constitution and the conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO). The codes are meant to address the employment conditions of workers and gender issues in the industry.

The flower industry worldwide is noted as a sector where poor labor conditions, environmental damaging production processes and gender inequalities are widely practiced. The use of codes of conduct has been assumed as one effective way of tackling employment, production and gender issues in the industry (Dolan et al., 2002). Our interest for the study stems from the conclusions of Hale and Sham (2001), Barrientos et al. (2003), Smith and Feldman (2004), Prieto-Carron et al. (2006), Prieton-Carreom (2008) and Opondo (undated) that little academic debate has focused on the effectiveness of codes for workers and codes neglect gender issues in sectors that are dominated by females and thus, critical research has to focus on codes. In addition, in China, 90% of toy corporations circumvent the use of codes by deceitful measures. Also, in recent years, the

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**Abbreviations:** ILO, International Labor Organization; CIFT, China International flower trade; GM, gender mainstreaming; ICC, International Code of Conduct; ETI, Ethical Trading Initiative; GA, gender analysis; SQs, structured questionnaires; ISs, interview schedules; FLP, Flower Label Program; MPS, Milieu Programma Sierteelt; Max Havelaar; M&S, Marks and Spencer; EUREGAP, European Retailers for Good Agricultural practice; BRC, British Retail Consortium.