**Global supermarkets, the supply chain and exploitation of women**

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You may be a woman farmer transplanting rice in Pakistan. You may be one of the many key workers keeping the food industry going under challenging circumstances. You may be a shopper at a western supermarket such as Walmart, Tesco or Aldi – perhaps one of the many who, like me, was grateful for the chance to see our community while shopping for groceries during lockdown.

Major listed supermarkets from the Netherlands, UK and US have upped dividend payouts to shareholders by an average of 123 percent – from about $10 billion to $22.3 billion – as they stayed open as essential business during the first eight months of the coronavirus pandemic, according to Oxfam.

COVID-19 has shown us just how interwoven we are as a human family – be it relying on each other to stay safe or realising that our economies depend on one another. The global system of food has, too, brought us all together like no other. But it is not a system humanity participates in equally.

Shockingly, hardly any of these supermarkets paid any substantial COVID related support to those overseas workers and farmers who continued keep supply chains going throughout the crisis. A new report by Oxfam — ‘Not In This Together’ — also reveals the continuation of “systemic” exploitation of women by supermarket supply chains. Our findings tell the story of a food system built upon inequality: in which a few winners are advantaged at the expense of so many losing out.

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Consider the owners of supermarkets – supermarkets that hold outsized influence over global food supply chains, upon which hundreds of millions of people’s livelihoods depend. These include: Ahold Delhaize from the Netherlands; Morrisons, Sainsbury’s and Tesco from the UK; and Albertsons Companies, Costco, Kroger and Walmart from the US. All paid out nearly all (an average of 98 percent) of their net profits to owners and shareholders.

We also know that privately-owned food retailers profited hugely from extra sales over this period: including Aldi North, Aldi South, Lidl, Edeka and Rewe from Germany; or Jumbo and PLUS from the Netherlands.

Now contrast that with the workers and the farmers within the supermarkets’ global supply chains, who continued to provide produce and keep supply chains moving. Think particularly of the women who dominate the most insecure and lowest paid jobs and who saw pervasive and systemic exploitation while their rights continue to be violated.

Samina Bin Yamin is 45-years-old and a mother of four, from Shetehveran village, Tehsil Kamoki, District Gujran-wala, Punjab. She says, “Life is difficult now due to COVID. Previously, we were meeting each other very frequently, now we have limited our self in the compound. There is no business, our children’s education is being affected and the rates of agriculture inputs such as seed, fertiliser are higher than the previous rice season. The rate of paddy this year is PKR 2,000 which is lower than the rate of the previous year. The Thalla charges deductions in the local markets and after the settlement of debt to the Arthi (Middlemen) we are left with nothing in our hand.”

Supermarkets have emerged as the standout winners from the pandemic, while women, workers and farmers at the other end of the global food supply chain continue to face escalating outbreaks of and lack of protections from COVID-19. It is another case of inequality worsening, and again the exploitation of women is endemic. Any significant COVID-related support to the workers and farmers who continued throughout the crisis to provide produce and keep supply chains going was limited. What is equally as horrifying is the pervasive and systemic exploitation of women in supermarket supply chains.

Most workers and farmers interviewed by Oxfam for our report do not earn a living wage or income. Some do not even earn a monthly minimum wage. It would take Samina more than 5,700 years to earn what the chief executive at a top US supermarket earns on average in a year.

Rafia Imanat is the wife of Imanat Ali and a resident of village Chak 27 at Tehsil Muridke, Sheikhupura. The emerging needs of health and education of growing children is now unbearable. Rafia’s primary source of income is transplanting and it is a major livelihood source for her family in the rice season. She says, “We work in the scorching heat while we are out farming. We get up early in the morning and complete the domestic work. Then all the men and women accompany the group leader. The men uproot the rice and the females transplant the rice. We return in the evening and prepare the evening meal for the family. In summers, the higher temperature of the water along with the atmospheric heat causes rashes and allergies. Skin diseases due to wastewater during rice cultivation are prevalent. But, as we do not have medical facilities here, we travel long distances for our treatment.”

But change is possible. Through our engagement with supermarkets, we have seen important first steps taken by some of them, such as Tesco’s gender policy that outlines specific actions it will take, like increasing formal ways to support women to stand up for their rights in the workplace. Or Walmart’s commitment to sourcing from women-owned businesses. But there remains far more to be done across the sector to improve the lives of women workers.

Our message to supermarkets is to take their record sales as an opportunity to create a more sustainable and resilient global food supply chain – to genuinely put hard policies and action behind respecting women across their supply chains. Practically, that means identifying and tackling human rights violations, including those resulting from COVID-19, and ensure living wages are paid across their supply chains.

It means gaining a full understanding of the roles that women play in their supply chains, and the issues they face – and developing comprehensive gender policies to tackle them. Is it radical to suggest that in age of a billionaire bonanza, workers and farmers should earn enough to not go hungry and live safely?

Human rights and due-diligence legislation is under discussion in Europe, which could provide a legal framework for companies to respect women’s human rights. We need better public policy: in which governments put a stop to companies paying excessive shareholder pay-outs at the expense of human rights. We, too, as consumers must play our part to expose, to lobby and to campaign for real change, that we know supermarkets respond to. The pandemic has shown us that we must rethink the unjust systems of old – systems that we are all a part of. Let it now lead to ending the human suffering behind the food that we find on the supermarket shelf.

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