

## FAIR TRADE FOR WOMEN PRODUCERS

# WIEGO

*Demonstrating that women in informal employment, organized in groups, are able to engage with domestic and global markets, sustain themselves in hard times, and transform their lives.*

In 2009 WIEGO embarked on a global project to promote women's economic empowerment as a response to the Dutch Government's Global Call to Action on Millennium Development Goal 3: Gender Equity.

### PROJECT OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

Fair Trade for Women Producers is one element of a global project that works with different sectors of informal workers. The *Fair Trade for Women Producers* project has the following objectives:

- To demonstrate how, when organized in collective forms of enterprise, women can engage with global markets in a way that brings transformational change, both economically and politically
- To demonstrate that, in spite of the structural barriers imposed by regional trade agreements and international trade rules, there is a strong alternative trade movement which is mobilizing to affect structural solutions and to redress to the inequalities of the global trade system
- To increase and strengthen the Fair Trade movement through a process of mutual exchange and learning within and across regions through a gender and organizing lens

The project set out to highlight the key success factors in organizing women informal producers for export production, and how other informal workers can learn from those successes. Women producers have been involved in all stages of the project.

*Fair Trade for Women Producers* allowed women producers to tell their own stories through a facilitated process of action research. Case studies were collected using conventional and innovative methods, including interviews of women leaders and group members, focus group discussions, and exploratory visits to organizations, communities and households to understand the realities on the ground. The documented cases explore what women producers have gained by being involved in groups.

### PROJECT PARTNERS

WIEGO entered into a partnership agreement in seven countries with organizations working with Fair Trade producers:

1. India – Fair Trade Forum India (FTFI)
2. Nepal – Fair Trade Group Nepal (FTGN)
3. Kenya – Kenya Fair Trade Network (KEFAT)
4. Tanzania – Tanzania Network for Fair Trade
5. Uganda – National Association of Women's Organizations of Uganda (NAWOU)
6. Nicaragua – PRODECOOP, a second level cooperative of coffee farmers
7. Mexico – Ya'Muntsi Behña a cooperative of indigenous women artisans and Ñephi Behña, their support organization

In the first five countries the partner is an affiliate of the WFTO (World Fair Trade Organization). WFTO is a global network of Fair Trade organizations drawn from buyers in the Global North and suppliers in the Global South.

All of WIEGO's partner organizations in this project work to a set of Fair Trade principles which include economic and social goals.

## PROJECT OUTCOMES

The case studies show that informal workers have organized themselves for production and trade, learned new skills, understood quality requirements, developed new products, and exported to international markets. Through involvement in their associations and cooperatives, women have been successful in accessing markets while at the same time having opportunities to discuss and solve problems, learn from each other and provide mutual support and protection in difficult times. They grow in confidence, earn incomes to help meet their families' needs, win the respect of husbands and other men in their communities, and begin to participate in community decision-making.

These stories have been communicated through photo journals, murals, film, songs, embroidery and words. Documentation and dissemination will allow good practice examples of fair trade to be broadly shared throughout and across regions. The lessons learned will also be documented for future sharing with other women collectives, as well as with donors and partners.

The project also served to examine different forms of collective organizations – large umbrella organizations, smaller self help groups, women entrepreneurs, community-owned organizations, etc. – and their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, needs assessments identified skills that can build capacities of women for enhanced sustainability of their livelihood opportunities. access and collective organizing. They will then roll out training to potentially hundreds of others in the medium to long-term.

Fair Trade buyers proactively target disadvantaged producer organizations. In addition to providing a vital link with Fair Trade markets, their marketing organizations in developing countries have historically supported the formation of producer groups and offered technical support in product design, quality standards and organizational development.

An unforeseen benefit emerged from the project's initiation workshop, held in Kathmandu in May 2009. The participating groups determined that sharing their case studies more widely and demonstrating the positive

impact for women of working collectively may prove to be an added incentive to Fair Trade buyers.

## SHARED CHALLENGES

Across all countries, many of the challenges are similar – many of the women producers are subsistence farmers, but the income from their crafts sales is an essential or even the primary source of income. Yet handicraft production is often not recognized as work and goes undocumented in statistics.

Because of the global economic recession, many producers have suffered a reduction in demand for their goods. The drop in demand for handicrafts in many Northern countries poses a serious challenge to the sustainability of the sector; dependency on key relationships is often a weakness in the Fair Trade system. Where government support programmes exist, they are often directed at formal enterprises, excluding a large percentage of the working population. However, it appears being organized in groups gives producers a better chance of weathering crisis as they often have credit and savings schemes to fall back on.

## MOVING FORWARD

Producer organizations need continuous support to innovate in product development, diversify markets, upgrade their skills, learn business skills and access fair finance. The specific work plans of each group include training to informal producers and their leaders so they can share their learning with the wider group and beyond. The ambition to reach hundreds of informal workers will need to be tempered to the prevailing market conditions.

The training provided to informal women producers, as well as the skills and knowledge acquired by field assistants in implementing this project have become part of the community assets, ensuring dividends will accrue beyond the end of the project.

Fair Trade networks grew in strength during years of boom. The moment is ripe to use this collective strength to devise a strategy which addresses the key issues that have emerged from these case studies.



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy by increasing their representative Voice through more and stronger organizations and their official Visibility through better statistics and research. The individuals and institutions in the WIEGO network are drawn from three broad constituencies: membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers; research, statistical, and academic institutions; and development agencies of various types (non-governmental, governmental, and inter-governmental). For more information see <http://www.wiego.org>



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