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Colombia's Cut Flower Industry: Unprecedented Growth and Controversy, 1960–2022

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Seeing a beautiful and colorful display of flowers for sale at a florist shop or grocery store is a delight, maybe never more so than in the dead of winter. US shoppers would undoubtedly be surprised to learn that most of the cut flowers in those arrays come not from domestic hothouses, or even from a country long associated with flowers like the Netherlands, but from Colombia. Using news and official reports along with scholarly literature on the subject, this essay analyzes both the explosive growth of the cut flower industry in Colombia since 1960 and some of the most important controversies surrounding it.

Keywords: Colombian exports, cut flower industry, Dole Food Company, US flower imports, women workers, environmental damage/protection

Ver una hermosa y colorida exhibición de flores a la venta en una floristería o tienda de comestibles es un gozo, tal vez mayor aún en pleno invierno. Los compradores estadounidenses probablemente se sorprenderían al saber que la mayoría de las flores en esos arreglos provienen no de invernaderos domésticos y tampoco de un país asociado durante mucho tiempo con las flores, como los Países Bajos, sino de Colombia. Utilizando noticias e informes oficiales junto con estudios académicos sobre el tema, este ensayo analiza tanto el crecimiento explosivo de la industria de las flores en Colombia desde 1960 como algunas de las controversias más importantes asociadas con ella.

Palabras clave: exportaciones de Colombia, industria de flores, Dole Food Company, importaciones de flores en EE UU, mujeres trabajadoras, daño/protección ambiental

Introduction

Over the last sixty years, Colombia's cut flower exports have emerged as a billion-dollar industry to join petroleum, coffee, coal, and nickel as major contributors to the country's official export economy. This singular development has had an impact not

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only on Colombian entrepreneurs and workers but also on the flower industry in the United States, which has been forced to adjust to a situation where seventy-five percent of cut flowers now come from Colombia rather than domestic outlets. It has also inspired considerable controversy about its role in economic globalization and its effects in Colombia on the environment and on the working conditions of the mostly female flower employees.

After a brief review of published works on the topic, this essay presents the origins and growth of the industry and evaluates its cost to the environment, the treatment of its workers and its impact on gender relations in Colombia, and its effects on flower growing in the US. The central argument is that the success of Colombia's cut flower industry shows that it is possible for a Global South country to develop a novel primary export that can open a new source of national wealth as it becomes a major supplier in global markets.

Existing Scholarship

In addition to official reports, trade journal analyses, and news articles, scholarly studies have been published on Colombia's cut flower industry, of which four are particularly informative. The earliest is Michael Fairbanks and Stacy Lindsay's *Plowing the Sea: Nurturing the Hidden Sources of Growth in the Developing World* (1997), which suggested that, while Colombia's cut flower industry was an important Andean contribution to the global economy, its inherent flaws nevertheless prevented it from raising the standard of living within the country. Anthropologist Greta Friedemann-Sánchez reported on her intensive fieldwork in *Assembling Flowers and Cultivating Homes: Labor and Gender in Colombia* (2006) and concluded that the cut flower industry, through its reliance on female workers, was bringing substantial, positive changes in gender relations in the regions surrounding Bogotá and Medellín. Catherine Ziegler's *Favored Flowers: Culture and Economy in a Global System* (2007) discussed the commodity chain of cut flowers including wholesalers, buyers, packing, storing, transporting, and distribution within the context of globalization. A more recent study by María Angélica Arbeláez, Marcela Meléndez, and Nicolás León, "The Emergence of Fresh Cut-Flower Exports in Colombia" (2012) offered a comprehensive overview and concluded that "flower growing is one of the most successful cases of Colombian export activity" (69).

Two additional books focus primarily on Ecuador but also provide substantial information on the cut flower industry in Colombia: Amy Stewart's *Flower Confidential* (2007) and Christopher Krupa's *A Feast of Flowers: Race, Labor, and Postcolonial Capitalism in Ecuador* (2012). Stewart concedes that Colombia is the leading exporter of flowers but argues that the prevalence of drugs and violence make it "a difficult place to do business" (143). Krupa explains that developments in global finance

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capital in the 1970s and 1980s enabled Ecuador's banking infrastructure to support its new cut-flower industry and challenge Colombia's ascendancy.

The Colombian Advantage for Flower Growing

Colombia is best known for its production of coffee, cocaine, and oil, yet over the last sixty years, it has become a major player in the globalized flower trade. Perhaps this development is not surprising, for a review of the country's geography reveals that it affords an ideal location for growing certain flowers. Its location near the equator ensures the same amount of light every day and consistent temperatures year-round. In the western third of the country, the Andean cordillera features three tall north-south ranges separated by the deep Cauca and Magdalena river valleys, abutted on the north and west by Caribbean and Pacific coastal lowlands. The Amazon rain forest south of the Guaviare River and the Llanos Orientals, or tropical plains to the north of it, make up the eastern two-thirds. The resulting range of climates and ecosystems accounts for 130,000 different plant species that thrive on the country's soil and 1,900 species of birds—more than in Europe and North America together.

Colombia's capital, Bogotá, is located on a high plain or savanna spreading out from the Andean foothills. It is about 8,700 feet above sea level and close to both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. One hundred thousand years ago the savanna was a lake, but after the water receded, it left rich soil and an ecosystem of wetlands ideal for growing flowers. Moreover, served by El Dorado International Airport, Bogotá is just a three-hour flight from Miami and closer to East Coast customers than California, which by the 1960s had become the center of the domestic US cut flower industry (Bergmann 2018).

Cut Flower Production in Europe and the US

Cut flower production has a long, distinguished history in Europe and the US. European gardeners have cultivated roses, carnations, and chrysanthemums for centuries. They cut and brought these and other flowers into homes by the sixteenth century. In the US, flower production followed European settlers, with the first greenhouses reported in the mid-1700s. Small producers located near cities and towns supplied cut flowers (Bergmann 2018).

As Europeans spread across the North American continent, flower growing moved with them, and in the twentieth century, the development of transportation by air and refrigerated trucks allowed the industry to relocate to areas with the best climates for optimum production at low cost. Commercial growing of carnations and roses transferred first to the Colorado mountains and then to coastal California. Later,

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the centers of chrysanthemum and gladiola production moved to Florida and California, so that by the mid-twentieth century, California dominated the fresh-cut flower industry in the US (Ziegler 2007, 63).

Origins and Growth of the Colombian Cut Flower Industry, 1960s–2020

After its start in the 1960s, Colombia became the world's second-largest flower exporter and reshaped US buying habits in the process. President John F. Kennedy's creation of the Alliance for Progress in 1961 opened a new era in Colombia-US relations. The Alliance was a ten-year, twenty-million-dollar effort to promote political stability and representative government in Latin America through cooperative programs in agriculture and trade. Under this initiative, the US pledged to provide funds to improve infrastructure for industrialization and to collaborate with private investment projects to be administered by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Since Colombia was one of the first Latin American countries to adopt a policy of comprehensive government-directed economic planning, it became the leading beneficiary of the new arrangement (Davis 1993, 227–228).

The possibility of exporting cut flowers from Colombia was one of several new initiatives. Edgar Wells Castillo, a Colombian floriculturist of English descent residing in the US, was awed by flower prices at wholesale flower markets. Airlines had recently established regular jet flights between Bogotá and Miami, and Wells consulted an agronomist in Florida on the latest techniques for producing commercial flowers. With this information, he became intent on transforming Colombia into a producer and exporter of cut flowers (Conlon 2015, 3). Although the region surrounding Bogotá was suitable for many different flower crops, Wells focused on carnations because their sturdiness and long postharvest endurance allowed them to withstand the journey to northeastern US markets. He set up an export company, Flores Colombianas, and on October 18, 1965, sent the first shipment of cut flowers worth $20,000 to Miami (Conlon 2015, 3).

Impressed by Wells' success, David Cheever, a graduate student in horticulture at Colorado State University, wrote his master's thesis in 1967 on "Bogotá, Colombia, as a Cut-Flower Exporter for World Markets." In this study, he emphasized that the plateau region surrounding Bogotá was ideal for growing flowers and that its location near an international airport would facilitate flower exportation to the US. After graduation, Cheever tested his theories in Colombia. He and three partners each invested $25,000 in a new business enterprise called Floramérica. They built greenhouses close to the Bogotá airport and used assembly-line production and modern shipping techniques. Like Flores Colombianas, Floramérica started with

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carnations. The first planting was in October of 1969, with the goal of producing flowers for Mother's Day in May 1970 (McQuaid 2011, 2). The plan proved successful, for Floramérca exported to the US almost $400,000 worth of carnations in 1970.

Cheever and his associates quickly added roses to their plantings, having convinced Avianca Airlines and other Colombian transportation companies to provide special handling so that flowers could be shipped to the US in dedicated cargo planes. Over the next two decades, Floramérica grew to the point where it was generating fifty million dollars in sales per year. Soon, other Colombian companies began to copy Floramérica's production and marketing methods, and between 1966 and 1978, their flower exports rose from less than one percent to nearly ninety percent of total US cut flower imports (Fairbanks and Lindsay 1997, 3). On its thirtieth anniversary in 2003, Asocolflores (Association of Colombian Flower Exporters) honored Cheever as the founding father of the cut flower industry in recognition of Floramérica as a pioneer company that practically invented the floriculture industry in Colombia (Stewart 2007, 142).

Asocolflores was an early initiative to support the Colombian flower industry. Created in 1973 and including seventy-five percent of Colombian flower growers, its goals were: "to promote flower exports, to defend and maintain access to international markets, and to develop the Colombian flower industry" (Conlon 2015, 4). There was much to be done. For example, in the 1960s, only a few airlines using outdated passenger planes served Colombia. They transported the flowers in narrow luggage holds that required manual handling and added to transportation costs. To remedy this situation, Asocolflores chartered newer airplanes and required that growers send a fixed number of flowers per shipment. It also improved conditions at the Miami airport by establishing a company, Transcold, to unload flowers and keep them in refrigerated storage facilities (Fairbanks and Lindsay 1997, 5).

In addition, Colombian growers contracted with some thirty established US trucking companies to haul flowers daily to hundreds of cities. As a result, between 1977 and 1986, imports of Colombian flowers rose an average of twenty-one percent per year from $22.6 million to $175.6 million, and US flower consumption expanded more than 300 percent from $227.5 million to $713.6 million. The chart below, created by Catherine Ziegler using information supplied by Asocolflores, the California Cut Flower Commission, Exoflores, Floraculture International, and the Flower Council of Holland, reveals that by 2003, Colombia was second in flower exports to the US, but still far behind the Netherlands. At that point, Ecuador was just entering the market, while California remained the most important domestic producer. By 2019, Colombia had surpassed the Netherlands in flower exports to the US, although as Figure 2 shows, it remained well behind the Netherlands in global sales.

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Figure 1. Comparison of Principal United States Cut Flower Suppliers, 2003

Country	Approx. No. Growers	Approx. exports $mil	Avg. production in $/hectare
Colombia	500	787	140,000
California	300	366	174,000
Netherlands	6,700	3,500	583,000
Ecuador	250	287	89,000

Source: Ziegler 2007, 63

Figure 2. Top Four Flower-Producing Countries in terms of Global Export Revenues, 2019

Country	**Export Revenues**
Netherlands	$4.6 billion
Colombia	$1.4 billion
Ecuador	$879.8 million
Kenya	$709.4 million

Source: Larson 2021

Despite California's continued domestic lead, many US growers were disadvantaged by the inflow of foreign blooms. As early as 1977, they began appealing to the federal government to reduce flower imports. They also accused companies of dumping. Both arguments failed to elicit government action. Actually, US growers eventually reaped a benefit because the Colombian distributors opened up flower markets in retail supermarkets such as Walmart, Kroger, Safeway, Whole Foods, Albertson's, and Costco, where the US growers' share was fifty percent (Ziegler 2007, 65).

The boom in exports from Colombia took place even as the country was undergoing decades of political turmoil. Since the 1940s, the nation had been ravaged by political violence, evolving into an era when the civil war was so extreme that it was known as "La Violencia." After 1980, prolonged guerrilla challenges supported the emergence of illegal trade in cocaine, yet, despite ongoing, fierce fighting, by many measures Colombia's economy performed surprisingly well, and, with significant help from the US, the flower export boom continued. In addition to the Alliance for Progress incentives, in 1991 the US Congress sought to limit coca farming and expand job opportunities by enacting the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA), an agreement offering duty-free access to a broad range of imports from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

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In 2000, Colombia successfully lobbied President Bill Clinton for an enormous aid package worth $1.3 billion known as "Plan Colombia," an agreement that transformed Colombia into the third-leading recipient of US foreign aid after Israel and Egypt (La Rosa and Mejía 2012, 92). Additionally, in 2012, Congress adopted the US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA) that reaffirmed and strengthened the ATPA trade preferences. This act eliminated tariffs and other barriers to Colombian goods and services and promoted economic growth by significantly expanding trade between the two countries, thus further reducing any uncertainty in the Colombian flower industry (Conlon 2015, 5).

In 1998, the Dole Food Company, the world's largest producer and marketer of fresh fruit and vegetables, bought Floramérica and also acquired Sunburst Farms, Inc., the largest US importer of cut flowers. The combined annual revenue for the two companies was about $100 million. This transaction raised Dole's stock by forty-four percent on the New York Stock Exchange, and Dole reported that eighty-four percent of US supermarkets had installed floral departments (*Los Angeles Times* 1998).

In May 1999, Dole opened its new headquarters in Westlake Village, California, and continued to expand its operations. But on October 13, 2006, the *American Shipper* reported that Dole was restructuring its Fresh Flowers Division, closing flower operations in Ecuador and two farms in Colombia and eliminating 3,500 jobs, mostly in South America. The company explained that this decision was based on greater competition from Asia and Africa, where flowers could be produced at lower costs (*American Shipper* 2006). However, according to Amy Stewart, a year later Dole still owned 1,400 acres of flower farms in Colombia and Ecuador, grew 800 varieties of flowers, and reported sales of about $169 million (Stewart 2007, 142). Colombia remained the dominant player in the Latin American cut flower trade, but the need for heightened security and the prevalence of drug smuggling within boxes of flowers continued to make it a difficult place to do business.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The cut flower industry was deeply affected by the global pandemic in 2020. In 2013, 8,000 hectares (nearly 20,000 acres) of flowers were cultivated in Colombia: 7,000 hectares (more than 17,000 acres) in greenhouses and the rest produced outdoors under rain-fed conditions (Conlon 2015, 7). Seventy-three percent of the farms were located on the Bogotá savanna, twenty-four percent in the Rionegro Valley near Medellín, and the remaining three percent across the central and western parts of the country. Some 300 farms produced flowers for export. Fifty percent of them were between 20 and 50 hectares (50 to 125 acres), while the rest were larger than 50 hectares.

By 2013, Colombia was exporting $1.34 billion worth of flowers, with more than 75 percent going to the US, or about $1.09 billion (Conlon 2015). Roses topped the export flower list at $365 million, followed by carnations at $156 million and chrysanthemums at $147 million. The remaining $422 million came from other varieties. Six years later in 2019, the worldwide cut flower market as a whole was thriving. The top flower-producing countries in terms of export revenues were the Netherlands ($4.6 billion), Colombia ($1.4 billion), Ecuador ($879.8 million), and Kenya ($709.4 million). While the Netherlands produced eighty percent of the world's tulips, Colombia and Ecuador were the largest producers of carnations and roses respectively, with roses, symbolizing love and romance, the world's most popular flowers (Larson 2019).

Once the Covid-19 pandemic started to spread in March 2020, however, economic activity froze around the world. On March 25, 2020, the Colombian government ordered all people within the Republic to quarantine and shelter in place. It extended this order several times, but permitted employees in some industries, including the food and agriculture sectors, to continue working. The flower industry operated at twenty-five percent capacity, although half of the workers, some 70,000 people, were ordered to stay at home on paid or administrative leave. The other half continued working, taking necessary measures to avoid Covid-19 spread (Rau and Gomez 2020, 2).

The pandemic reduced the demand for flowers and severely affected worldwide flower markets. When many countries urged their populations to stay at home, celebrations requiring flowers were canceled. Florists shuttered their shops for lack of demand, "while shoppers prioritised rice over roses and beans over begonias" (Fredenburgh 2020). As a result, by May 2020 sales of Colombian flowers had fallen by forty percent. This decline was less than the eighty percent decrease that Asocolflores had predicted, but the financial loss of an estimated $108 million for the months of April and May was still huge for what had become one of Colombia's biggest exports. There was no demand for flowers in Europe, and many customers in the US canceled orders for the Mother's Day holiday, which, after Valentine's Day, is the second most important day of the year for the industry. It spelled impending disaster, as "many flower farms' crops were discarded. Since no one knew what was going to happen, new crops were not planted as usual" (Cain 2022).

In an effort to prop up the flower industry during this crisis, Asocolflores, with the support of Procolombia (a Colombian government institution that promotes exports and investment in the country), conducted virtual business meetings and sponsored e-commerce to try to create more sales for Colombian flowers (Rau and Gomez 2020). Stephanie Cain reported that in 2021, colder than usual temperatures along

with a rainier growing season crushed crop yields of roses and carnations, both popular for weddings. In the US, many farms switched from growing flowers for florists for events such as weddings to supplying grocery stores because it was more profitable. Labor shortages also affected the domestic industry. In Colombia, faltering demand forced farms and wholesalers to "let go of employees, including harvesters and salespeople. Other workers left their jobs as a ripple effect of lifestyle changes brought by the pandemic" (Cain 2022).

Despite these problems, Colombia sold $1.54 billion worth of flowers during the first eleven months of 2021, an increase of seventeen percent over the previous year, according to figures from Asocolflores. It was clear that even individuals suffering a lockdown in their homes found that cut flowers provided companionship and a way to get through confinement (Mataix Gomez 2022). In February 2022, the Asocolflores president announced that sales were back to prepandemic levels, and he anticipated that 650 million flowers (mostly roses) would be sold during the two main seasons of Valentine's and Mother's Days (cited in *Floral Daily* 2022, 10).

Controversies Provoked by the Cut Flower Industry

While the development of this industry is undoubtedly a boon for the Colombian economy, environmental and workplace controversies have plagued it from the start. In addition, Colombian production has had an important impact on US flower growers. This section describes the most important aspects of three troublesome issues surrounding the cut flower industry in Colombia.

1. Environmental Concerns

Flower growing in Colombia has been criticized for its extensive use of fresh water, a vital natural resource. Although the Bogotá area receives thirty-three inches of rainfall annually, flower farms and other users have drilled more than 5,000 wells on the savanna, causing the groundwater level to plummet. According to one engineering study noted in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, because of the activities, springs, streams, and wetlands have been disappearing (McQuaid 2011).

To deal with these complaints, in 1996 Colombian flower growers created Florverde, a voluntary certification program with targets for sustainable water use and guidelines for chemical applications. Unfortunately, according to Ernesto Vélez, then-chairman of the Ascolflores Board of Directors, fewer than half the farms belonging to the association participate in Florverde, and government oversight remains weak.

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Poor water quality was another concern for a number of years. On one occasion, the United Kingdom stopped admitting flowers from Colombia after worms were found in shipping boxes, apparently from contaminated water in which the flowers were packed. Colombian exporters learned about dry packing, and that process seemed to resolve the problem (Arbeláez, Meléndez, and León 2012, 81).

In addition, a large carbon footprint results from shipping flowers along the "cold chain" of refrigerated trucks, cargo planes, and warehouses. At peak season, Bogotá sends thirty to thirty-five flower-filled cargo planes daily to Miami. As Lydia Gulick explains, an article in *Scientific American* states that "'Valentine's Day [alone] produces some 9,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions from field to U.S. florist.' Upon arrival to the United States, the flowers are searched, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture checks them for insects . . . [but not] for chemical residue. This allows growers to use incredibly harmful chemicals to preserve the flowers, many of which have been labeled as highly or extremely toxic by the World Health Organization" (Gulick 2019).

To deal with this problem, consumers, retailers, and flower growers in the US founded VeriFlora in 2007, a certification program to ensure the environmental and social sustainability of flowers. To receive this designation, flower farms must maintain ecosystem protection, sustainable crop production, fair labor practices, and other standards (DVFlora 2010). Since its creation, thirty-two farms in Colombia have been VeriFora certified, but this is only a small segment of the massive flower enterprise in Colombia (Gulick 2019).

2. Treatment of the Mostly Female Working Force and Gender Relations

The impact of the export flower industry on employment is significant: "The Colombian flower industry employs 90,000 Colombians directly and another 40,000 indirectly through various companies that supply inputs and services to the industry. The Colombian flower industry is also a major employer of low-skill, largely female labor drawn from the low-income areas surrounding Bogota and Medellin" (Conlon 2015, 8). An important controversy arising from the industry is its low wages and the continued existence of hazardous working conditions. Researcher Greta Friedemann-Sánchez found: "There are facilities that have enough washrooms, bathrooms, lockers, cafeterias, a subsidized lunch workers can purchase, recycle all organic material, trying to do biological control of pests and fungus, and follow labor laws. And then there are firms that don't do any of those things" (2006, 53).

McQuaid (2011) reported on conditions at one flower farm that seem to mirror maquiladora factories in Central America and the Caribbean:

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> I stood on a platform above a sprawling assembly line where about 320 workers (triple the usual number—this was the run-up to Mother's Day), most of them women, were arrayed along two long conveyor belts with 14 parallel rows of workstations on either side. The work was divided into many small, discrete tasks—measuring, cutting, bunching—before neat bundles appeared on the belt, which were then dunked in a foamy antifungal solution and boxed. Latin pop music reverberated off the corrugated metal walls. The workers were handling 300,000 rose blooms a day.

McQuaid goes on to say that workers endure repetitive stress injuries and can be exposed to "as many as 127 different chemicals, mostly fungicides and pesticides. . . . One 1990 study . . . suggested that pregnant Colombian flower workers exposed to pesticides might have higher rates of miscarriages, premature births, and babies with congenital defects" (McQuaid 2011).

In the 1990s, the Colombian flower industry's success in American and European markets was marred by negative reports about the existence of hazardous working conditions for women and for children as young as nine employed on the farms (Gulick 2019, 4). To counter these allegations, in 1996, Asocolflores launched a series of initiatives to improve the conditions. First, it urged its member farms to replace the most hazardous classes of agricultural chemicals, for researchers had found that workers may continue to be affected for years after exposure (McQuaid 2011).

Besides attempting to eliminate more than twenty-seven hazardous chemicals (mostly fungicides and pesticides), Asocolflores launched a series of five programs to improve the situation of flower workers. Since employed women are frequently abused by their spouses for being too independent, the first program, begun in 1999, was called "Cultivating Peace in the Family." Its goal was to teach workers and their families how to reconcile conflicts through non-violent methods by offering workshops in farms. These workshops provide booklets and posters that describe examples of family and workplace cases of conflict and suggest ways these scenarios can be managed with rational resolution alternatives (Vélez 2007, 10).

According to the former Asocolflores director, Ernesto Vélez (2007), in 2003, the organization began a second program, "A School of Floricultures," designed to help people displaced by violence find work. The school provides training in cultivating, harvesting, grading, and packing of flowers in a nine-month theoretical course and a three-month practicum at the farms. Upon completion, participants can be employed permanently, and by the end of 2006 nearly 2,500 people had successfully been trained. "Flowers are Home," a third program, assists farm workers in obtaining housing loans or home improvement subsidies from government sources. Under a

fourth initiative, Asocolflores Child Care Centers began sheltering some 20,000 children while their parents worked, and its "School Reinforcement Program" in 2007 was aiding 35,000 children via an oral health campaign and providing 13,500 children ages four to twelve with school kits to complement their education. The final program, "Continued Education," supports adults in completing their elementary and secondary education as well as promoting and coordinating recreation, culture and educational activities with workers, families, and communities (Vélez 2007, 9–11). The drawback to these programs is that approximately twenty-five percent of the flower farms have not participated in them.

Despite Asocolflores programs bolstered by Florverde and VeriFlora certification, outside observers have continued to cite the abuses in the industry. For example, Lydia Gulick, writing in 2019, states succinctly that Colombia's success in raising cut flowers is due "in large part, to labor abuses such as the use of dangerous chemicals and extremely low wages. . . . The predominantly female workers on the farms, who earn around $300 a month experience devastating side effects from toxic chemicals including rashes, headaches, impaired vision, and skin discoloration" (Gulick 2019).

Other abuses cited by Gulick include sixteen-to-twenty-hour workdays and struggles with carpal tunnel and repetitive strain injuries. Moreover, "when asking management for medical assistance or time to see a doctor, the common response is to be fired without compensation. This not only leaves people injured and without work, but also at a disadvantage in finding alternative employment" (Gulick 2019). Verena Meier confirms Gulick's assessment, noting that "the women workers, although gaining income and status and finding industrial type working relations, pay with a double workload by living in difficult social and environmental conditions entailing constant health and unemployment risks" (Meier 1999, 273).

Despite these deplorable conditions, many women choose to carry on, since their work offers a step up from their previous employment on subsistence farms or as maids, jobs with lower wages than the flower industry. McQuaid (2011) reports one representative example of the pros and cons of working in the industry: Argenis Bernal began working on flower farms when she was fifteen, and "because she was a good worker, she said, she was assigned to the harvest, wielding her clippers along pathways between long lines of flower beds. . . . 'Working all day long, you spend your time hunched over, from the sowing of the seedlings until the time the stems are cut.' " After about a decade of this arduous labor, Bernal had to stop harvesting. At age fifty-three, she had problems with her spinal column and with repetitive motion. But this did not mean quitting her job on the flower farm. She still worked eight hours a day and was determined to continue until she qualified for a pension because she and her husband were financing one of their four children in his business

management studies at a regional community college (McQuaid 2011). Having her own income had given her independence and a more equal role in her marriage.

Friedemann-Sánchez provides more information as to why women flower workers covet their jobs despite less-than-desirable working conditions. She concedes that because the work is labor intensive, wages are low, and the legal protections are not always enforced, some researchers maintain that Colombia's edge for this "third world" form of production is based on gender exploitation. She suggests, however, that at least on the two flower farms in Cajicá and Chía on the Bogotá savanna (where she carried out intensive fieldwork), women have found satisfaction in their jobs and use their new monetary power to refashion gender relations (Friedemann-Sánchez 2006, xvi).

Friedemann-Sánchez further avers that the closely watched skilled labor does not amount to exploitation, but rather has brought new discipline to women employees: "Bureaucratic discipline, reinforced through patriarchal languages, provides women with skills and knowledge to contest patriarchy at home, where they can use their new financial and social assets as leverage" (Friedemann-Sánchez 2006, xvi). She states that the floriculture industry has improved women's lives by promoting gender equity and filling a quasi-governmental role in the region. Friedemann-Sánchez observes that "the fresh-cut flower industry is in fact a catalyst for social changes and female empowerment. Flower workers navigate constantly between two worlds: between the global economy and the household economy" (xvi).

In short, Friedemann-Sánchez argues that working in the flower industry at one point provided some real benefits to women. She asserted that in a country suffering from an intense economic recession in 2006, the flower companies offered women hope: "Not only do they provide jobs and community for many families, they employ one of the most disadvantaged groups in central Colombia: rural women. . . . They provide a sense of order and opportunity in the midst of chaos and poverty" (Friedemann-Sánchez 2006, xvi). In addition to challenging accepted gender relations, women flower workers were empowered by new self-esteem, wage income, property ownership, and social networking. She concludes, as the title of her book suggests, that "women who assemble flowers at work, when they go to their families . . . are enabled to cultivate their homes" (7).

3. Impact on US Flower Growers

In addition to the issues concerning the environment and the treatment of the workers, a third important controversy involved the impact of Colombian cut flower imports on the US domestic industry, although it has now apparently been resolved. By the beginning of the 1970s, the surge in Colombian flower imports caused concern

for US growers who resorted to the legal system to block them: "Through the Society of American Flower Growers, local growers filed a claim with the U.S. Department of Commerce against Colombian flower imports. They claimed that flowers coming from Colombia should pay a countervailing duty equivalent to the number of benefits and subsidies received for flower production and exports in the home country" (Arbeláez, Meléndez, and León 2012, 99). Colombia responded in 1973 by sending missions to defend their exports, and Asocolflores was born.

First, it convinced the US Department of Commerce to support a bilateral alliance to promote US flower consumption. Next, it promoted the creation of the Florida Importers' Association, an independent US entity, in order to protect commercial flower growers' interests outside the country. It also hired groups of US lawyers and technical advisors and began to lobby US decision-makers. Since then, Asocolflores has maintained its presence in Washington and served as a powerful means of helping exporters coordinate efforts to overcome difficulties (Arbeláez, Meléndez, and León 2012, 87).

US growers also benefited from the ability to place their cut flowers in supermarkets, an innovation prompted by Dole's purchase of Sunburst Farms and the opening of flower supplies in supermarkets. As a result, US consumers, instead of purchasing from flower shops or ordering online, could choose from a vast variety of flowers readily at hand. By the twenty-first century, globalization had transformed the domestic flower industry just as it had transformed the availability of other commodities such as fruits and vegetables.

Summary and Conclusions

Over the last sixty years, Colombians have used their natural climate advantages to carve out an important place in the global cut flower industry. The nation's shipments to the United States have helped to create new markets for cut flowers, forcing domestic suppliers to adjust in order to maintain viability in a drastically changed consumer market. Critics of the industry continue to cite very real environmental drawbacks in Colombia caused by flower operations and the abuses faced by their mostly female workers. Despite efforts of the Colombian government and the flower growers themselves to correct these abuses, they remain an obvious liability to the long-term success of the industry.

Nevertheless, the endurance of women workers in less-than-ideal working conditions in order to become more independent and take greater control over their lives is documented. The flower industry in Colombia created job opportunities for women that favor their economic independence, increased self-esteem, and the skills to resist male domination in the household and curb domestic violence. Colombia's

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success in exporting cut flowers demonstrates that with the combination of industry collaboration, public support, and often luck, the development of a primary export can effectively challenge traditional global trading practices and open a new source of national wealth (Sabel 2012, 42).

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