



# The bitter taste of Chilean fruit sold in Europe

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Aided both by its location and the policies of successive governments over 30 years, Chile has become one of the main exporters of fruit to Europe. It's a very lucrative business, above all because so many seasonal female workers are employed in insecure working conditions that give them serious health problems including musculoskeletal pain and agrochemical poisoning. The testimony of four women brings to the fore the hidden harm that the Chilean fruit industry does to women workers' health.



↗ **Fruit workers in Sagrado Corazón affiliated with the union.**  
 Photo: © Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la agroexportación y del Mar

## *Sub-contractors now account for almost all contracts in the sector.*

Over the past 30 years, government policy has aimed to make Chile a food power by steering agribusiness towards exports. Indeed, Chile has become the world's leading exporter of grapes, cranberries, cherries and plums,<sup>1</sup> and fruit production is a major sector of the Chilean economy. The area of agricultural land given over to fruit extends from north to south for almost 2 000 kilometres, between the Atacama and Los Lagos regions. Each year, the sector produces close to 5 million tonnes of fruit, of which 2.6 million tonnes are exported as fresh fruit, bringing close to 3.3 billion euros into the country.<sup>2</sup>

Europe is the third largest destination for Chilean fruit, behind the United States and China, and the chief importers are the Netherlands (30 per cent), the UK (20 per cent), Germany (12 per cent) and Russia (11 per cent).<sup>3</sup>

But what's on the other side of the coin? Who are the workers who harvest and prepare the fruit that lands on our tables in Europe? How do they work? And what effects does this work have on their health?

### **Piece rates and health at work**

María Rivera, now President of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la Agroexportación y del Mar (the national union of temporary women workers in the agri-food export and seaweed harvesting sectors), picked table grapes and packed fruit for 35 years in Chile's northern Atacama region. María used to begin the work season in September by preparing the vines; she would pick the grapes between December and March, then tend other fruit for export such as oranges and lemons.

Some 800 kilometres further south, in the O'Higgins region, Ingrid Rivera begins work in November when the cherries, dubbed "red gold", are harvested. She began working in the orchards at age 15 and now works in packing. She packs plums and

peaches, followed by apples and pears in February, and finally citrus fruits, avocados, kiwis and nuts.

María and Ingrid are seasonal workers: their jobs are tied to the pace at which the various crops grow and ripen, and this is why they are employed on fixed-term contracts lasting one season that then either expire or are renewed the following season. They are a highly feminised workforce in the sector. The companies claim that fruit preparation requires the fine motor skills and "gentleness" attributed to women, while the women regard the seasonal nature of the work as an opportunity for gaining economic autonomy. Women currently account for close to one third of staff involved in fruit production, rising to one half of the workforce in spring and summer (Valdés and Godoy, 2016).

Statistics show that the autonomy they gain is fragile and typically involves working conditions that accentuate their subordinate status. For example, in 2009, 24.2 per cent of women and 19.7 per cent of men earned less than the legal wage, while 23 per cent of seasonal workers, whether male or female, worked more than the legal maximum of 45 hours a week. In 2011, 50 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women employed by subcontractors had no employment contract (Valdés, 2015).

The insecurity that permeates the entire work cycle for workers in the fruit export business was tangible in the interviews they gave, and evident in the informal nature of their connection to the companies, the deregulation of employment contracts, the lack of social protection, the low wages and the long working hours.

Subcontractors act as the gateway to the work cycle, providing labour to the client companies. Over the past 30 years, they have become increasingly important, to the

1. <https://www.prochile.gob.cl/landing/sectores-productivos>  
 2. <https://www.odepa.gob.cl/rubros/frutas-frescas>  
 3. <https://www.asoex.cl/component/content/article/25-noticias/768-avance-temporada-de-exportaciones-de-frutas-de-chile-mas-de-2-millones-de-toneladas-de-frutas-frescas-se-han-exportado-al-mundo.html>

extent that they now account for almost all contracts in the sector and are identifiable by the arbitrary and abusive treatment they mete out: "In rural areas, the preference is for subcontractors who take workers' incomes. The workers don't have contracts, so they don't pay social security contributions, and that means they aren't covered by social protection," explains Ingrid Rivera.

Once in the workplace, workers come face to face with a complex process of long task chains, from plant preparation to harvesting to fruit packing.

"We begin the season preparing the vines in September with leaf-thinning and suckering, then we reduce the load on the plant through green harvesting, choose the best shoots and thin the plants out (...). Then we have to make a light well, remove leaves so that the light can reach the soil and warm it to make the fruit grow more quickly," María tells us, meticulously describing the various tasks that must be performed before table grapes can be harvested. Meanwhile, Ingrid takes us to the hangars where the fruit is packed. The interview

takes place at the height of the cherry season, and Ingrid is busy with packing. Once the cherry cartons are ready, there's a whole list of things to do to prepare the fruits for export: "There's grading, packing, weighing and sealing, and after that the cherry cartons are packed on pallets. Next they're loaded onto lorries and leave for the port."

The complex system runs on working arrangements based on piece work so that the company can achieve the best productivity/profit ratio. "The harvesters pick as much as they can because they're paid by the carton. The owners don't set a limit, they just keep giving orders: *Hurry up! Work faster! Pick harder!* And the fruit has to keep on coming and coming and coming because that's how they earn their money," she says.

The system has worked perfectly for years owing to a mixture of authoritarianism on the part of the business and the pressure that the women workers would place themselves under. The need to make money for the months when they aren't earning often forces the workers to make sacrifices. Through painful necessity, task

after endless task, with no breaks and no respite, the women overburden their bodies, leading to what Chilean researcher Ximena Valdés has termed "naturalised bodily attrition" (Valdés, 2016).

"Natural" attrition exhausts the body's resources, and it eventually ceases to function. "I'm 51, and I feel like I'm already fit for the scrapheap: I have pains in my wrists, fingers, the joints in my fingers and hands, and in my shoulders," Ingrid tells us. Musculo-skeletal issues are not the only problems she is experiencing: the pressure of work has a significant impact on her mental health. "As I speak, women are dying of heart attacks. Some are developing mental illness, suffering psychologically from the pressure not to lose a scrap of work," adds Alicia Muñoz, the national officer for female employees at the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas (National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women, ANAMURI).

In addition to the high pace of work and the ensuing exhaustion, there are the long working days. As wages are dependent on productivity, the hours that workers put in are far greater than is allowed by law<sup>4</sup> so that they can earn better wages. In this connection, packing is where the most serious problems arise because the days often stretch late into the night and the overtime is not accounted for because all the fruit harvested that day must be packed.

This makes the double working day even more of a problem for women because Chilean society also expects them to take care of their families, their homes and their children after school.

4. The Chilean Labour Code provides for a working week of 45 hours for private sector workers, whether male or female.
5. The "pre-harvest interval" (PHI) is the amount of time that must elapse between the application of the pesticide and harvesting. The "re-entry period" is the amount of time that must elapse before people go into the treated area without protective equipment.



## Pesticides cause women to give birth to malformed children.

↗ Woman working in the "tripaje" process. Photo: © Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la agroexportación y del Mar

## Use of pesticides and consequences for health

"We can see the effects of pesticides on our children, but nobody talks about it, it stays hidden. But women are giving birth to children who are malformed or have bone problems," Ingrid explains. The health problems experienced by the women and men working in the fruit sector following the use of chemicals on crops are chilling to learn about.

The growth in agricultural exports over recent decades has led to increased imports and usage of pesticides that are highly toxic to human health. The information available shows that the quantities of agricultural chemicals imported rose from 5 577 tonnes in 1984 to 32 545 tonnes in 2008 (Valdés, 2016). According to Patricia Grau, a nurse and lecturer at the University of Chile, the use of agrochemical products in the country is closely linked to the economic interests of export businesses and major international chemicals conglomerates, and this prevents more aggressive preventive measures from being taken. "Epidemiological and health monitoring programmes have almost no effect and little coverage. In other words, although protocols are in place to monitor the person applying the pesticide, what purpose do they serve? The person applying the pesticide is the one they focus the most attention on — and that's the person who has the most protection," she explains. As a result, information for agricultural workers on pre-harvest intervals, re-entry times<sup>5</sup> or on the products used is full of holes or even entirely absent.

"They would spray the products on the ground while we were working there. The trees were wet all over, but we had to work all the same. All these things have consequences," Ingrid adds. These sorts of products can cause acute poisoning; short-term exposure and rapid absorption can cause nausea, a slow heart rate or dermatitis. The

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Red Nacional de Vigilancia Epidemiológica en Plaguicidas (National Network for the Epidemiological Surveillance of Pesticides, REVEP) recorded 140 instances of acute pesticide poisoning in total between January and March 2018, higher than the expected average figure for that time of the year.

Despite evidence of the consequences of acute poisoning, "the major pesticide-related topics of the moment are the chronic, carcinogenic effects," says Patricia Grau, adding: "And another worry is the effect on children's health." Chronic poisoning is the result of repeated exposure over an extended period of time that allows the product to accumulate in the body. For agricultural workers and the people living close to the crops, this can have serious consequences such as cancer or genetic mutations. However, there is scant epidemiological research into this matter because the employers do not want to know about it, and so the problems stay under the radar.

### Beacon of hope: collective action

"The bosses are always telling the women workers that there's no need for them to sign up, that there's no need for trade unions here, that problems are resolved on a one-to-one basis," Alicia Muñoz says. Alicia has been a union leader of women agricultural workers for a long time. In 1998, she was involved in establishing ANAMURI, an organisation that has significantly helped to shed light on the working conditions and the health of women working in the export agribusiness. ANAMURI's most important initiative was the establishment, between 2009 and 2018, of ethical tribunals, annual gatherings of experts and civil society representatives to conduct research and publicly expose cases of pesticide poisoning and other workplace violence (Valdés *et al.*, 2017).

In September 2019, ANAMURI developed further by setting up the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras Eventuales de la Agroexportación y del Mar, which provides seasonal female workers with better legal support to assert their rights, conduct collective bargaining and refer matters to the labour inspectorate.

In an environment of workers' fear, regulatory weakness and limited power of labour inspectorates, this autonomous organisation plays a key role in changing practices. Initiatives such as these set the stage for the fight for decent working and living conditions. ●



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This article is available in the original Spanish at [www.etui.org](http://www.etui.org)



### FURTHER READING

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