

How Jumbo became the first Dutch supermarket to support women's rights

On June 22, 2021, Oxfam Novib launched its new publication 'Not in This Together', as part of the international Oxfam Behind the Barcodes campaign. For Oxfam Novib this marked the launch of a series of public campaign actions aimed at improving the position of women in developing countries that produce our food.

It also marked a breakthrough with the second-largest supermarket in the Netherlands. One day before the new actions and after intense discussions with Oxfam Novib, Jumbo published a statement on women's rights. In it, Jumbo recognizes the importance of equal treatment of women, acknowledges that their wages are often lower than men's and commits to embed women's rights in the way it runs its business, in line with [Oxfam's Recommendations for Food Retailers to Address Gender Equality in Global Supply Chains](#).

In this blog, we explain why these policy recommendations are so important, and what steps are still needed to eliminate the exploitation of women from our food supply chains.

Why is a women's rights policy important?

Oxfam's new publication 'Not In This Together' shows that women in supermarket supply chains are structurally discriminated against and exploited. This is a problem that is reflected in the production of all the food products Oxfam researched: coffee from Brazil, Assam tea from India, basmati rice from Pakistan, fish and shrimp from Thailand and wine from South Africa.

The structural problems faced by women who produce our food, described in Oxfam's report, require a structural approach to solve them. A policy on women's rights with concrete time-bound actions, in line with Oxfam's recommendations, are important steps towards achieving this.

What preceded Jumbo's commitment on women's rights?

Oxfam launched the Behind the Barcodes supermarkets campaign in June 2018, and in early 2019, Jumbo responded by publishing its first human rights policy. It also signed the United Nations Women's Empowerment Principles (UNWEPs), which sends a clear signal that the company is committed to improving the position of women throughout its business.

What action has Jumbo promised to take?

Now Jumbo has taken a vital further step: it recognizes the specific challenges faced by women and has committed to embed women's rights in its human rights policy and due diligence process by 2022, engaging with trade unions and suppliers on women's representation and involving women's rights organizations in formulating this policy. This shows the company is going beyond reliance on social audits and certifications and commits to involving stakeholders in a meaningful way.

By specifically addressing women's hidden and unpaid productive roles in its commitments, Jumbo recognizes that women are critical to any thriving supply chain and that the company has a role to play to ensure that women in its supply chain have voice, agency, and access. Jumbo also promises more transparency about the company's ambitions and actions with regard to diversity and inclusion in its own organization by the end of 2021, in line with the UNWEPs, demonstrating a recognition that diversity and inclusion are intrinsically linked to women's and human rights and deserve the attention of powerful players such as supermarkets.

The company will publish a gender action plan by the end of 2022 and report on its implementation. It will report action taken to improve low wages and progress in narrowing the gender pay gap for three high-risk food products. Because the women who produce our food are all too often victims of violence and harassment (with disastrous effects on their physical and mental health), two other

vital commitments are to tackle gender-based violence and to ensure complaint mechanisms are adapted to women's needs. The latter step is very relevant, because the effectiveness of such mechanisms depends on how easily they are accessible and trusted by those who must be able to report abuses.

Finally, Jumbo commits to use its influence to promote women's rights, for example by speaking out about the need for greater regulation, as a way to counter the lobbying by powerful companies who prefer voluntary measures Netherlands and Europe.

Where could Jumbo go further

We still see three ways Jumbo could go further:

1) In its women's rights statement, Jumbo states that it focuses primarily on its responsibility as a purchaser of own-brand products. In a human rights due diligence approach, a company is expected to set priorities and justify them based on the severity and probability (salience) of the human rights risks. Major human rights risks can also come into play in the production of branded food products that Jumbo offers on its shelves and the supermarket also has a responsibility to find ways to use its influence as a buyer of those products as needed.

2) Jumbo makes a number of commitments specifically for three high-risk food products. It is important that the lessons learned are included in the approach the company takes to address comparable risks for other products.

3) Jumbo has not made any concrete commitments on a number of aspects of Oxfam's recommendations. We will continue to draw attention to this, including through the Oxfam supermarket scorecard and through our engagement with the supermarket. For example, there are the recommendation to buy more products from women-led companies and to provide guidance and support to suppliers to ensure better health and safety conditions for women and better social policies.

Jumbo has taken an important step by publishing its statement on women's rights. At the same time, this is only the beginning: the implementation of the steps it commits to is crucial. Oxfam Novib will closely monitor and advise Jumbo where possible, in consultation with women's rights organizations and our partner organizations in producing countries.

Oxfam Novib also calls on Albert Heijn, Aldi, Lidl and PLUS to follow Jumbo's example

Jumbo has shown that it is possible to quickly take the first step to better protect women's rights. Albert Heijn's parent company, Ahold Delhaize, Lidl and Aldi have also signed the UNWEPs, just like Jumbo. Given the widespread violation of women's rights in their supply chains, now is the time for these supermarkets and PLUS to make a commitment to deliver on women's rights and publish concrete steps.

Jumbo's move and the fact that other supermarkets and food companies have not yet made similar commitments, shows that a combination of public pressure and government regulation is needed to guarantee human rights in the supply chains of our food. That is why Oxfam Novib, in collaboration with other Dutch NGOs and companies in the Sustainable & Responsible Business Initiative, calls on the Dutch government to introduce human rights due diligence legislation, which ensures a level playing field for all companies operating in the Netherlands, and at the same time to commit to ambitious European ICSR rules.