

# Gendered Conventions of ‘Ethicality’? Comparing smallholder values with ethical sourcing standards in Kenya

*Kiah Smith*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia.

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## Abstract

Within global food networks, multiple and diverse meanings of social justice, environmental sustainability, livelihoods, fairness and well-being (or ‘ethicality’) exist in parallel to those embedded in ethical sourcing schemes. This paper considers the dilemma facing ethical sourcing when consumer- or retailer-driven ethical values around social justice, environmental sustainability, livelihoods, fairness and well-being (or ‘ethicality’) - differ from the issues that women smallholder farmers may prioritise. Drawing on conventions theory and qualitative research with women French bean farmers in Kenya, the paper describes the ways in which meanings of ‘ethicality’ are highly gendered and context-specific. Findings suggest that women smallholders draw from a wide variety of domestic, civic and green conventions in order to make meaning of the livelihood outcomes that matter most to them within ethical trade networks. Only some of these are compatible with the market and industrial conventions currently underpinning fair and ethical trade.

Keywords: Gender; ethical trade; fair trade; conventions theory; smallholders.

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## Introduction

Ethical sourcing standards - such as the UK’s Ethical Trading Initiative and the international brand of Fair Trade - bridge the domains of food production and consumption, providing a regulatory means to embed transnational justice or ‘ethicality’ into global production-consumption relationships. One of the main critiques of ethical sourcing, however, is that standards are ‘partial and selective as to whose ethical interests they serve’ (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009: p.152). Global food production is highly gendered, considering that women smallholder farmers contribute a high proportion of labour and knowledge in export-led horticulture in the global South, but still often lack control over income, land, distribution or other decisions crucial for achieving local sustainable livelihoods. Women also tend to be excluded from setting ethical regulations and implementing them on the ground.

Ethical sourcing has therefore been criticised for failing to incorporate gendered perspectives on social well-being, environmental sustainability and livelihoods, and for institutionalising the ethical values and priorities of Northern consumers, NGOs, governments and food retailers. These critiques are associated with limits to voluntary ethical initiatives

more generally (Challies, 2012; Utting, 2010) and in UK-Africa ethical and fair trade networks specifically (Barrientos *et al.*, 2003; Dolan *et al.*, 2003; Dolan and Humphrey, 2000; Friedberg, 2003a, 2004; Opondo, 2005; Tallontire *et al.*, 2005). It is very unlikely that they reflect the ethics of Southern producers whom they are intended to benefit (Blowfield & Dolan, 2008: p.18; see also Bacon *et al.*, 2008; Barrientos & Dolan, 2006; Dolan, 2008; Raynolds & Bennett, 2015). While there are many studies of the gendered content and impacts of ethical sourcing - such as the gendered division of labour in horticulture and rural households, employment conditions, and bias in code implementation and auditing, (see for example Barrientos *et al.*, 2001; Dolan, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Smith, 2014), few studies have explored the ethical values that women smallholders do hold in relation to the global food production-consumption networks they participate in.

Ethical standards are widely understood to reflect particular constructs of ethics depending on who is defining the standards, goals or desired outcomes (Blowfield, 2003). The paradox for ethical sourcing and its ability to embed transnational justice into food networks therefore lies in the capacity of multi-stakeholder ethical trade standards to balance the 'ethicality' of both producers and consumers enrolled into them. This is no easy task, considering the distance (both geographical, economic and cultural) between women smallholder farmers in the global South and consumers of imported, high-value horticultural products in the global North. In this paper, I argue that there is an opportunity to elaborate on the gendered meanings embedded in ethical trade standards through examining how the values defining ethicality in Kenyan-UK horticultural food networks are constructed, both by women smallholders and in standards themselves. This represents a shift from focusing on the content or impacts of ethical trade towards an exploration of how the meanings of food ethics are being shaped both from 'above' and from 'below' (see Friedmann & McNair, 2008).

Conventions theory considers how economic exchange depends on shared agreements about the meaning of 'quality', and helps to explain how it is that these meanings come into being (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009: p.42). In this paper, I apply conventions theory to consider how local, gendered values of 'ethicality' compare with those formalised in ethical trade schemes. Although little research has explored this question specifically with a gender focus, a key assumption is that women smallholders' constructions of ethicality will likely differ from those embedded in Northern-led ethical sourcing standards. Following a brief overview of conventions theory and its application to analysing ethicality, the paper describes findings on how women smallholder farmers understand or define their own well-being, income, food security and environmental sustainability within the 'ethical' food networks in which they participate. What conventions do they draw on, and how do these compare to the values embedded in existing ethical trade standards?

To answer these questions, I first present an analysis of four key ethical sourcing standards that regulate ethical sourcing (in this case, of French Beans) between Kenya and the UK, focusing on what is included in the codes and what conventions are used to justify them. I then explore women smallholders' values around 'ethicality' and the conventions that they use to justify these priorities. Findings are condensed from qualitative analysis of research with over 180 women smallholder farmers in Machakos, Kenya: women's own words (interview data); data generated via participatory methods such as wheel diagrams, field visits, and action research workshops; and as well as interview data from industry representatives and NGOs in Kenya and the UK. Ethical trade is shown to be largely based on civic and market conventions, though the valuation process is different for actors engaged in food production compared to those at other 'nodes' in the food network.

## Ethicality and conventions: theoretical background

Conventions theory makes it possible to compare the values of women smallholder farmers with those currently embedded in regulatory ethical trade, as it is concerned with ‘how actors materially and ideologically engage particular norms, rules, and quality constructions across production, distribution and consumption arenas’ (Raynolds, 2002: p.409). Sociological understandings of conventions theory focus on ‘worlds of justification’, and their associated ‘orders of worth’. Table 1 presents an overview of the seven categories of conventions:

**Table 1: Overview of conventions theory**

Conventions	Definition (world of justification + orders of worth)
<b>Market</b>	Price and economic value, investment, market supply and demand
<b>Civic</b>	Collective interest, common welfare, citizenship, fairness, equality
<b>Domestic</b>	Trust, social ties, interpersonal dependencies, dignity, place/locality, tradition
<b>Opinion</b>	Regard, reputation, recognition, esteem
<b>Inspired</b>	Grace, non-conformity, creativity, passion, emotion
<b>Industrial</b>	Productivity, efficiency, competency, testing, standards, certification, auditing
<b>Green</b>	Welfare of the environment tied to common welfare

Source: Originated by Boltanski & Thévenot (1991) and developed more recently by Ponte & Gibbon (2005), Rosin & Campbell (2009), and Evans (2011).

Of interest to conventions theory are, firstly, the constructs of meanings themselves, and second, the processes by which particular meanings come to be valued over others. ‘Worlds of justification’ are based on different political philosophies on how to achieve the common good. The ‘order of worth’ indicates how value is to be assigned to the participants (both humans and objects) in a given social interaction, which in turn suggests the types of actions that can justifiably be taken to reform social structures (Rosin & Campbell, 2009: p.37). In this case, the social structures of interest are the relationships between and within farmers, environments and economies that ethical sourcing standards seek to alter. This framework ‘provides both a vocabulary and a grammar for the public disputation of fairness and justice in social interaction’ (Rosin & Campbell, 2009: p.37). Ethical trade falls within the civic and industrial worlds, which is based on assessments, labels and certification systems regarding social and environmental impacts and a collective commitment to welfare (Ponte, 2009: p.239-240). The acceptance of ethical standards will depend on how the meanings of ethical are being constructed and by whom, as well as how those meanings resonate with existing understandings of food ethics.

Much of the existing work linking conventions theory with ethical sourcing applies the categories of conventions to understand how food quality is defined between the level of production and the level of consumption via certification and other audit technologies (see Campbell & Le Heron, 2007; Ponte, 2009; Rosin & Campbell, 2009). For example, Raynolds (2002) has shown how the success of fair and organic certification has appealed to consumers’ civic and green concerns, as well as domestic qualifications of trust; Renard (2003) has focused on the market conventions of fair trade; and Freidberg (2003b) and Dolan (2005b) applied conventions theory to the study of African horticulture to conclude that ethical trade reflects histories of colonialism.

Beyond quality, standards also incorporate ethical values. According to the extensive literature on ethical food production, trade and consumption (see for example, Crang & Hughes, 2015; Goodman *et al.*, 2014; Lang, 2010; and Rosin *et al.*, 2012), the relatively recent creation and proliferation of multi-stakeholder standards, regulations and certification schemes such as Fair Trade, the UK's Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) base code, GLOBALG.A.P. (worldwide Good Agricultural Practice certification) and industry codes of conduct is connected to the rising importance of a diverse range of ethical 'values' shaping food systems today. These include:

- quality (fresh, local, seasonal, sustainable source, authenticity);
- social justice (animal welfare, fair trade, labour rights and work conditions, income/affordability, access, socio-economic status, diversity, gender equality, well-being, land, hunger/food security);
- environment (climate change, land use, biodiversity, organics, soil, transport/food miles, harmony with nature and community, interdependence);
- health (safety, nutrition, culture);
- politics (democracy, justice, empowerment, rights, partnerships, authenticity, solidarity, autonomy, equality of outcome/opportunity/voice); and
- markets (fair trade, fair prices, convenience, aesthetics, ease and adaptability to new lifestyles).

In embedding these values (albeit, some more than others) into economic transactions, ethical sourcing standards have become 'strategic intervention[s] for addressing the social, economic, and environmental injustices of global agriculture' (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009). Many ethical sourcing standards govern the environmental and social conditions in Kenyan French bean supply to the UK, including the ETI, Fair Trade, GLOBALG.A.P. and Kenyan horticultural sector code, KenyaG.A.P (local version of GLOBALG.A.P). My analysis of their ethical 'values' (rather than the content of their checklists, which have been covered elsewhere, see Smith, 2014) indicates that while these standards certainly draw on shared understandings of what counts as fair or ethical, they vary in their inclusion or exclusion of specific values.

The only values common to each code are labour conditions, health and the inclusion of smallholders. Environmental issues and food safety and/or quality are the most comprehensively covered, including restrictions on pesticide use, soil management, pollution prevention, waste management and recycling, biodiversity, wildlife and water management; although how to achieve 'sustainability' in these areas is defined very differently across systems. For example, Fair Trade specifies restrictions on the use of genetically modified organisms, while GLOBALGAP and KenyaGAP allow this. None of the standards deal with land tenure issues, such as ownership, leasing, disputes or succession. The least clearly stated goals related to producer empowerment, gender, income, food security, and well-being are more variable.

Recognition of the gendered dimensions of these issues vary. Fair trade standards are the most comprehensive on social justice and gender issues, in that (a) the empowerment of marginalized groups and non-discrimination of women are included in Fair Trade principles; and (b) non-discrimination and positive discrimination on the basis of sex are specified in Fair Trade standards. Fair Trade also targets women in terms of minimum requirements for occupational health and safety, whereby pregnant or nursing women are not allowed to apply pesticides. Well-being and quality of life are most elaborated in the ETI's labour rights such as collective bargaining, freedom of association, choice, humane treatment and children's rights. Values around well-being and quality of life intersect with income: the ETI requires living wages to be paid, and the FLO



links income and development through community funds (see Smith, 2014).

Which conventions are being used to justify these priorities? Ethical sourcing standards reflect civic and green conventions that assess quality, safety, environmental and social justice through industrial norms and processes of standards, accreditation, audits, targets and policies. Civic, green and industrial conventions combine with market conventions around price, efficiency and competition. For example, Fair Trade uses market conventions to justify paying a price premium for certified products in order to contribute to local development for smallholders and their communities. This enables ethical standards to specify exactly how ethicality should be measured and implemented in supply chains. In my own field research in Kenya, however, many participants' expressed concern that the conglomeration of standards applying to women smallholders 'may not even be applicable, let alone be relevant' (Exporter, Nairobi).

This is because food ethics are not neutral, concrete or given, but:

*"[e]merge in the process of actions aimed at solving problems or co-ordination [...which...] may be tested and thus needs to be justified by drawing on a variety of criteria of justice that are broadly accepted at a particular time."* (Ponte, 2009: p.239)

This aspect of conventions theory makes it useful for exploring gender and ethical sourcing. Rather than focus on the categories of conventions themselves, the remainder of this paper focuses on conventions theory's insistence that multiple 'spheres of action' exist, and thus, that meanings embedded in civic/industrial conventions such as ethical trade standards coexist with broader understandings of ethicality. As Ponte (2009: p.241) puts it:

*"The plurality of possible worlds of justification of action drawn upon within certain spheres coexists with more localised and familiar understandings of what is just."*

Based on this approach, I now turn to applying the categories of conventions to assess how women smallholders define ethicality (in terms of livelihoods), compared to standards.

## Findings and discussion: comparing conventions

To explore the gendered values and meanings of 'ethicality' in greater depth, 180 women smallholders in Machakos, Kenya were asked to discuss how they define a 'good quality of life', using participatory action research methods. While only Fair Trade specifically claims to tackle livelihood issues, improving producers' quality of life is an implicit aim in all of the ethical codes operating here. As described previously, ethical trade regulations generally conceptualise quality of life through the lens of civic and green conventions that can be easily commodified in formal markets (such as minimum wages, working conditions, health and safety and ILO labour rights). But for women smallholders in Machakos, quality of life extends beyond those definitions in ways specific to gender, place and culture. In Table 2, women's own values are organised around income, well-being, food security and environmental sustainability; key elements of 'ethicality' that emerged during fieldwork. As there is not enough space here to discuss each of these themes in depth, I focus on just a few examples of each.

**Table 2: Overview of conventions used by women smallholders to define 'ethicality'**

Aspect of ethicality	Type of convention used by women smallholders	Priorities for measuring 'ethicality'	Comparison with conventions in ethical trade
<b>Income</b>	Market	Targets, quotas, 'fair prices', efficiency, fair market access	Competition, price premium
	Civic	Employment/unemployment, poverty	Living wage, regular employment
<b>Well-being</b>	Civic	Material, bodily and social well-being, community relations, fairness, future generations, control over own life	Poverty reduction, living standards
	Opinion	Hard work, perseverance	-
	Industrial	Discrimination, child labour	Labour rights
	Domestic	Jealousy and trust, tradition, 'good wife' norms, personal communication, gender relations	Trust in audit process
<b>Food Security</b>	Market/ industrial	Efficiency, supply and demand, risk, market access as development	Living wage
	Opinion	Identity, pride	-
	Civic/domestic	Having enough, nutrition/health, giving, caring, generosity, trust and theft, gender roles	Benevolence and obligation of North to South
<b>Environmental Sustainability</b>	Opinion	Hard work, success, failure, responsibility	Labelling and ethical consumption
	Green	Soil fertility, manure, crop rotation, low chemical use	Industrial measures of environmental impact
	Domestic	Place, traditional knowledge and techniques, gendered responsibility for environmental stewardship, gendered land ownership	Trust in audit process

Source: Author's own work (reproduced with permission from Smith, 2014: p.161)

Women's views as to the fairness of their food systems were diverse. They discussed the *market conventions* of efficiency, fair prices and market access alongside civic conventions relating to fair employment and poverty alleviation. Women's civic conventions included being able to improve living standards (shared in both ethical trade and smallholders' responses) and a multi-dimensional view of well-being incorporating material (having enough water, electricity, housing, clothing), bodily (health and nutrition) and social well-being (such as education, community/familial cohesion). For example:

- Income security was associated not just with wages, but also with the ability to invest, save and buy land, improve living standards and pay for children's education. These issues resonate with income security items in the ETI and Fair Trade,

such as a living wage, regular employment and investment in community funds (all civic conventions), although women did not use these terms.

- Despite the prevalence of market conventions (prices, targets and quotas) women smallholders were concerned with more immediate vulnerabilities such as unemployment, poverty, outmigration and drug use.
- Farming was seen as a way out of poverty, suggesting that ethical trade's civic concern with poverty alleviation resonates with smallholders – although it was not enough considering the high occurrence of hunger and food insecurity reported by participants.
- Freedom of choice, personal control over one's own life, community impacts of improved living conditions and community relations emerged as key elements of well-being, alongside personal happiness that comes from being able to 'provide everything to our family' (Jane, smallholder).

Trust and the value of personal, gender and community relationships - examples of *domestic conventions* – arose in the interviews as key elements in achieving well-being and food security:

- Food security was defined as having enough healthy and nutritious food to 'make sure there is supply of food throughout, and there is nothing stressing the grandparents and young sisters and brothers' (Agatha).
- Food security was also highly gendered, for 'when there's no food the burden is on the women' (Rose). Women's capacity to feed their families' nutritious food from their own farm was a source of identity and responsibility, and giving food to those in need was an important part of the women's culture.
- Women highlighted the gendered nature of traditional knowledge, household roles and responsibility for environmental management; 'Husbands and wives need to reach an agreement about how money should be spent if the women are to succeed in farming and improve their lives ... Because if they fail to do that, the women will remain weak, with burdens in their hearts, because their plants will never succeed. Better future for women is based on their husbands' (Caroline).
- Most of the women's *green conventions* around sustainable farming methods fit with existing industrial norms.

Women also spoke using *opinion conventions*, suggesting that hard work, pride, perseverance and success are attributes necessary for women farmers to achieve a good quality of life. As Sarah explained, 'if you want a quality of life, you must be hard working ... because without working you can't make anything for a better tomorrow'. Many of these norms were closely associated with religion and the definition of 'the good wife', just as Dolan (2001) found amongst women producers in Meru. Finally, this study found that women smallholders did not explicitly mention any of the notions of freedom of association or collective bargaining that are central to *industrial conventions* underpinning ethical trade.

## Conclusion

This paper has compared the values embedded in ethical trade standards with women smallholders' own definitions of desirable livelihood outcomes. Conventions theory has been used to analyse how diverse meanings of ethicality are constructed; that is, which 'worlds of justification' are being drawn upon by different actors when they seek to embed ethics into standards and certification schemes. This approach recognises that actors engage different norms, rules, meanings, definitions and constructions (i.e. conventions) depending on their position in food networks, and therefore, that these

meanings are subject to contestation, rejection or change. Conventions theory opens up the possibility that producers' values may differ from the norms underpinning existing ethical and fair trade standards. This is not inherently problematic, but relates to central questions underpinning the new food politics of quality (Goodman *et al.*, 2014) - of 'whose values' determine how food is produced, traded and consumed, and thus, whether it is possible for alternative ideas to replace problematic approaches of the past. Just as there is no universal understanding of quality (Ponte & Gibbon, 2005: p.7), there is also no universal understanding of ethicality. In this case study, ethical standards were found to reflect civic and green conventions that assess quality, safety, environmental and social justice through industrial processes of standards, auditing and accreditation. These combine with market conventions around price, efficiency and competition. They are normative, and specify exactly how ethicality should be measured and implemented in supply chains. But they are also highly variable across standards: quality, health, environment and labour rights were explicit across all or most of the codes analysed, while well-being was limited to living standards, living wages or labour rights. Upstream actors described the benefits of ethical trade regulations in terms of efficiency, prices and improved capacity to meet market requirements.

By contrast, women smallholders described many meanings of ethicality that have not been commodified or codified into industrial norms. While some of their well-being concerns (housing, education, sanitation, health, child labour) are codified in ethical trade's industrial conventions, many are not (i.e. most domestic, opinion and civic values, especially regarding gender roles and community relations). Many aspects of livelihoods were not seen by participants to be associated with fair or ethical trade at all, and women were largely unconvinced that the social, health or environmental outcomes promoted by standards were in their best interests. These findings support Lang's (2010) argument that within ethical standards, ethical values are more often selective, disconnected, and may not actually reflect the most important issues. They also support critiques that standards are partial, that 'value' is constructed by a multitude of actors, and that price is only one part of the process of valuing (see Blowfield & Dolan, 2008).

The analysis of conventions presented here has provided an innovative conceptual lens to better understand the processes through which priorities for ethical sourcing are justified and norms are engaged, with important lessons for ethical consumption. On the one hand, woman smallholders' definitions of ethicality appeal to civic, opinion and domestic conventions that reflect locally-based identities, domestic gender roles, community relationships and identity. These concerns do not currently figure in the conventions used by ethical trade – they could likely do so only through improved participation and empowerment of women smallholder farmers in the setting, monitoring and evaluation of ethical trade standards (see Smith, 2014). On the other hand, some civic conventions, such as saving income to alleviate poverty, are compatible with established market conventions of price. Consumers could push retailers for a more equitable setting of minimum prices in ethical markets beyond fair trade, or for more participatory guidelines for lending or savings services offered to smallholders. Finally, some quality of life indicators identified by Southern smallholders in this study would easily be shared by consumers in the North. Women's values and priorities around food security and environmental sustainability could potentially be codified, considering the pre-existence of human rights and legal frameworks (i.e. around the right to food and climate change mitigation/adaptation protocols) upon which industrial norms could be justified. Shared domestic conventions around care and obligation certainly reflect both smallholders' priorities and the charity approach to ethical consumption (see Hutchens, 2010).



According to Fuchs and Kalfagianni (2010: p.236), whether private institutions contribute to or hinder the conditions necessary to protect the poor and vulnerable is largely related to the effectiveness of the governance institution (in this case, ethical trade) to design policies that promote the public good (rather than private interests). Stakeholders will define this differently, as the application of conventions theory here has shown. Gender-sensitive research that aims to develop a deeper understanding of the processes by which particular ethical values become commodified over others is required.

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