

# The women Behind the Brands: Oxfam's investigation into supply chain practices of food and beverage companies

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## Abstract

Oxfam's *Behind the Brands* research aims to provide consumers with information to hold food and beverage companies to account for what happens in their supply chains. It measures and assesses the performance of these companies across seven themes, one of which is Women. This paper examines three years of *Behind the Brands* research, delving into the methodology and findings under the Women theme. What does good look like for food and drink companies in terms of respecting women's rights? What issues are faced by women in the labour markets associated with this sector? How far are companies from best practice? What needs to change? Despite the need for further changes, improvements have been made by all companies throughout the lifetime of the *Behind the Brands* project. This paper will demonstrate the case for third party analysis of corporate reporting as a mechanism to inform consumers and drive higher ethical standards.

Keywords: supply-chain; food; beverages; workers; women.

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## Introduction

For modern consumers, one of the biggest challenges in making ethical choices is knowing what the right choices actually are. Great strides have been made in providing information and enhancing understanding of certain issues like battery farming, the ecological impacts of palm oil and the social impacts of cheap labour in the garment sector. Many Western consumers have an understanding of labelling schemes like Fairtrade, and know that in general shopping locally is better for the planet and for society.

That does not mean making ethical choices is easy. In our increasingly globalised and complex capitalist system, we are faced with ever more products and, it seems, ever less clear information on the supply chains behind them. More often than not, these are products produced and controlled not only of the brands we see on supermarket shelves, but by much larger parent companies. These parent companies might be linked to bad practices or even scandals that they want to keep far away from their popular brands.

This is one reason Oxfam created the *Behind the Brands* campaign in 2013 - to peel back the layers of complexity in the food and drink sector, giving consumers more of the information they need to make more ethical choices and ultimately to

help drive up standards of social and environmental practice. *Behind the Brands* remains focused on policy and transparency within supply chains, and mostly about the procurement of raw materials. Informing and empowering consumers was and is only one strand of the *Behind the Brands* 'theory of change', alongside investor engagement, and direct corporate engagement (Oxfam, 2014a). The three are not, and should not be, easily separated, but for our purposes here I will focus on what *Behind the Brands* has to offer the average consumer.

This article does not claim to be an impartial critique of Oxfam's work - I am employed by Oxfam, though I cannot take credit for devising the campaign. What I will do here is explore the methodology and outputs of *Behind the Brands*, delving into the detail of its findings in relation to women. This paper aims to demonstrate the case for third party analysis of corporate reporting as a mechanism to inform consumers and drive higher ethical standards through consumer choices and actions, utilising *Behind the Brands* as an exemplar.

## Oxfam's 'Behind the Brands' campaign

In 2013, Oxfam launched *Behind the Brands* to challenge the 'Big 10' food and beverage companies on their social and environmental policies and practices, and to amplify the voices of key stakeholders such as farmers, communities, consumers and investors calling on them to take action. The aim of *Behind the Brands* is to generate a 'race to the top' among the Big Ten to improve their policies across seven themes that impact upon food security (Oxfam, 2014a).

The core of the campaign is a scorecard, which is updated annually, and ranks the companies on their agricultural sourcing policies on seven themes: transparency, farmers, workers, women, climate change, land, and water. Several of these themes inevitably intersect, but for the purposes of this article we are going to focus primarily on the theme of women. When *Behind the Brands* launched in 2013, it did so with a focus on women in the cocoa industry – at Oxfam, we call this a 'campaign spike'. The selection of the 'women' theme as the focal point of the campaign reflected not only the importance of addressing women's rights from a moral and legal perspective, but also the critical role that women play in the global agriculture industry (Kidder, 2014). The assumption on launching this campaign was that global brands would begin to use the power they have with suppliers to improve conditions for women if they were to hear from a significant enough number of their consumers and investors (Sahan, 2016).

The selection of the ten companies included in the scorecard is based on two factors: global overall revenue and position in the Forbes 2000 annual ranking (Forbes, 2016). An exception is made for Mars, which is a private company and is therefore not included in the Forbes ranking. Mars is the largest privately held food and beverage company worldwide and the decision for its inclusion is based on overall revenues. The complete *Behind the Brands* scorecard shows the results of an assessment of the agricultural sourcing policies of the Big 10: Associated British Foods (ABF); Coca-Cola; Danone; General Mills; Kellogg Company; Mars; Mondelez; Nestlé; PepsiCo; Unilever. Crucially, the assessment exclusively focuses on publicly available information, such as annual reports, sustainability reports and supplier codes. This is critical in order to advocate, as Oxfam consistently does, for transparency and accountability.

Given that the scorecard includes a broader theme looking at workers, some may question the decision to have a separate theme for women. Indeed, when Oxfam launched the *Behind the Brands* campaign with a focus on women and gender, several industry insiders were baffled, questioning the value of seeking to specifically empower women (Sahan, 2016). The

reality is that across the world, there is often a lack of equal rights between women and men, particularly in developing countries. In addition to a full-time job, women may be expected to run the so-called ‘care economy’—e.g. raising children and caring for the elderly (Oxfam, 2015a). Eliminating gender discrimination has a positive impact on communities and can increase the efficiency of food production. Oxfam’s research shows that if women’s incomes increase, this usually results in improved nutrition and educational outcomes for their children and family (ibid).

In all its areas of work, Oxfam applies a lens of ‘gender justice’, analysing the impacts for women. Therefore, the ‘women’ theme of *Behind the Brands* focuses on gender-specific issues faced by the agricultural sector and specifically considers both woman farmers and woman agricultural workers. The scorecard assesses whether company policies aim to improve women’s livelihoods and encourage their inclusion in the food supply chain on equal terms. The scorecard also looks for policies that guarantee a discrimination-free and gender-equal working environment.

## Measuring performance on the ‘women’ theme - methodology and results

While for other themes in the *Behind the Brands* scorecard, Oxfam was able to utilise or borrow from existing global standards (including the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Carbon Disclosure Project or CDP), for gender no such standards exist. Oxfam was required to come up with new indicators in order to measure performance and progress. Following extensive research and consultation, Oxfam grouped the indicators within the ‘women’ theme under four broad categories: awareness; knowledge; commitments; and supply chain management (Oxfam, 2014a). These categories recognise that companies interact with gender in multiple, complex ways, and that their approach to women cannot be reduced to a single policy but ought to be considered across many policy and practice areas. Twenty-six indicators are measured within the theme, each falling within one of the four categories. These indicators are devised to be ambitious but also to be measurable: we cannot make judgements on the performance of things that we cannot count, or see evidence of.

### Awareness indicators

Companies must understand how they interact with women, and have awareness of the issues faced by women, if they are to have a positive approach to gender in their practices (Oxfam, 2014a). The indicators include: access to inputs, markets and training; access to land; discrimination against women as farmers and as workers; disproportionate responsibilities in providing food security; challenges faced by women’s civil society organizations; time poverty specifically faced by women due to household obligations.

Awareness of gender issues is particularly challenging when the deep-seated, often cultural, realities of gender inequality are taken into consideration. In poor families around the world, women and children often eat last and least, and are therefore more likely to suffer ill health due to a lack of nutritious food. Another challenge for women, and especially mothers, is time poverty. Women run the so-called ‘care economy’, i.e. they are usually expected to raise children and take care of sick and elderly people (Oxfam, 2015a). These expectations remain when they become cash-earners or are employed in jobs with overtime. An example of an activity considered within the care economy is the provision of water for the household. However, as water sources dry up, women must travel further to access water. As a result, girls may be pulled out

of school to help with such household tasks (ibid). It is vital that food and drink companies employing women and working with women in their supply chains are aware of these realities.

These 'awareness' indicators are where companies have consistently received the highest scores since the first scorecard was published in 2013. Within the awareness indicator category, scores were highest on technical agricultural aspects of gender inequality (access to inputs, markets and training); four companies explicitly recognized the lack of access that women have to services linked to the supply chain, be it inputs, markets or training. At the launch of the Scorecard, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Pepsico and Unilever all recognized this. By March 2015, all but three companies demonstrated recognition of the lack of access faced by women to inputs, markets and training. Scores were also higher under the indicator assessing the awareness of the role women play in food security in many rural communities, with Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Mondelez and Unilever demonstrating understanding of this important issue. By March 2015, Kellogg's, Mars, PepsiCo and Unilever had also demonstrated awareness of this issue, through the publication of statements and inclusion of narrative in reporting (Sahan, 2016).

The awareness category also considers projects that companies may have to empower or support women. Empowerment, while a broadly used term, was applied through the lens of "whether efforts were made to address the power disparity between men and women in agricultural production as well as economically" (Oxfam, 2014a). Even where companies had projects in place to address women's empowerment, they focused on the economic sphere rather than empowerment more broadly, for example Coca-Cola's "5 by 20" programme, which aims to empower 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2020 across its value chain (Sahan, 2016).

## Knowledge indicators

In the knowledge indicator category, *Behind the Brands* considers whether the companies are invested in tracking the specifics of their supply chains in relation to gender inequality and women. The indicators include: number of women smallholders it sources from; which commodities have the highest prevalence of women workers or smallholders; which commodities have women in a particularly vulnerable or at risk position.

A crucial indicator of good practice in this area is whether companies conduct impact assessments related to women's empowerment in specific commodities or countries. This would mean that they were specifically interrogating whether their activities or those of their suppliers have an impact or multiple impacts on women specifically, and seeking to understand what those impacts are in order to mitigate them. At the launch of the campaign and Scorecard, the knowledge indicator category was by far the weakest area within the "Women" theme for all companies. Only Coca-Cola, in part due to recent work it had done with Oxfam to understand its social impacts more broadly, assessed to satisfy the impact assessment indicator. By March 2015, four companies (Coca-Cola, Mars, Mondelez and Nestlé) had made significant progress in relation to the knowledge indicators. Three of the companies (Mars, Mondelez and Nestlé) did so in connection to the Women and Chocolate campaign spike, which explicitly asked confectionary companies to conduct impact assessments to better understand the barriers faced by women in their supply chains (Sahan, 2016).

This modest progress is to be welcomed. However, apart from impact assessments conducted in part of a supply chain, none of the companies (apart from ABF) systematically tracks gender issues throughout their entire supply chain – or, if they



do, they do not disclose it (Oxfam, 2015b). This remains a significant and pressing gap in the performance of food and drink sector actors in relation to gender. Without the right information on women in their supply chain, company policies cannot be properly developed or implemented.

## Commitment indicators

The category focused on commitments highlights a company's intention to put knowledge and awareness to action in a meaningful and sustainable way. The commitment indicators include: intentionally sourcing from women agricultural producers; commitments to improve the role of rural women in supply chains; commitments to address women's lack of access to water, land, technology, finance, training and markets; endorsement of the UN Women's Empowerment Principles; commitments to provide training and professional development to women producers and workers.

The levels of commitment by the various companies ranged widely when *Behind the Brands* first launched. Coca-Cola had made the most commitments and achieved a full score in this category. Meanwhile, ABF and Danone received zero for this category and unfortunately neither had improved much by March 2015 (Oxfam, 2015b). The highest scores were on the indicator assessing whether companies were making efforts to deliberately source from women producers with six companies demonstrating they were making efforts to achieve this.

Initially only two companies (PepsiCo and Coca-Cola) endorsed the UN Women's Empowerment Principles and only two companies (Coca-Cola and Nestlé) committed to providing training for women throughout their supply chain. By March 2015, seven companies had endorsed the UN Women's Empowerment Principles and five were specifically committed to providing training for women throughout their supply chain (Oxfam, 2015b). In 2013 no company showed they wanted to commit to addressing this in their supply chain: by March 2015, Coca-Cola and Unilever had commitments on this and both have continued to build on their programmes since then. Unilever reported that in 2016, they enabled access to training and skills for over 800,000 women in our extended agricultural supply chain, and they have set a target of reaching five million women by 2020 (Unilever, 2017).

## Supply chain management indicators

The supply chain management indicator category looks at a company's intention to address key supply chain issues by asking whether they expect their suppliers to take gender issues seriously. A company's actions are most meaningful when suppliers across a company's supply chain are held to the same robust gender standards. Therefore, the category asks whether supplier codes or guidelines explicitly promote: non-discrimination and equal opportunity; health and safety concerns related to women workers; establishment of women's committees that report to management to address and resolve issues; maternity and paternity leave; women's access to grievance procedures; mandatory training on sexual harassment and non-discrimination policies.

Despite good practice in some other areas as outlined above, it remains the case that very few companies have any reference to women specifically in their supplier codes or guidelines. Only Unilever explicitly addresses any women's issue other than general non-discrimination in its supplier code, including issues that pregnant women might face.

This indicator category also asks if companies require suppliers to track and report on the gender breakdown of their workforce and women small-scale producers - no company could demonstrate this. This emphasizes the “gender-blind” nature of the sourcing practices of the world’s largest food and beverage companies (Sahan, 2016).

At the heart of the *Behind the Brands* campaign is the desire to see the companies that own the brands that consumers trust, use their leverage to change the way their suppliers behave on key issues. When it comes to women, this would mean real improvements in the lives of women farmers, workers and producers. While there has been an encouraging, and increasing, level of commitment from the Big 10 to understand and tackle the issues faced by women some progress, there is little evidence that the food and beverage companies are attempting to change supplier behaviour to ensure gender inequality is addressed.

## Turning research findings into consumer power

Oxfam utilises the *Behind the Brands* research process, and its findings, to influence companies directly – but maximum progress cannot be achieved without the involvement of consumers. *Behind the Brands* acts as a source of information and a call to action for members of the public, asking them to engage directly with brands and the companies behind them, to drive positive change. With its focus on transparency, it also aims to make still more information available to consumers directly from companies, through the promotion of enhanced commitments and disclosures. In order for *Behind the Brands* to be taken seriously by stakeholders including consumers, investors, and companies, Oxfam took responsibility for the fact that its research and asks had to be well researched, credible and realistic.

The whole concept of creating a ‘race to the top’ falls apart without key players making improvements, the theory being that early improvements will be followed by a continuing trend of progress and improving performance (Oxfam, 2013b). It is far more likely that progress will be made by at least some of the companies in the scorecard, if pressure is applied by the stakeholders they care about: their customers, as well as other groups like investors.

In 2013, Oxfam launched *Behind the Brands* with a “campaign spike” focused on women in the cocoa industry. “Spikes” are a tactic used to make a broad issue accessible by zoning in on a tangible level of details. In this “cocoa spike”, Oxfam did not just deal directly with the companies, it also asked members of the public to support its campaign. Focusing on the three biggest cocoa operators (Mars, Mondelez and Nestle), Oxfam supported over 100,000 people to directly tell this companies via social media that they needed to do more to address the disadvantages faced by women in their supply chains. Within a year, all three had started to move in the direction of *Behind the Brands* criteria, and others in the sector followed. Over the first two and a half years of *Behind the Brands*, over 700,000 people took action to contact companies on at least one of the themes, directly contributing to the pressure required to achieve positive change (Wilshaw, 2015). The readiness of these major brands to respond to pressure from consumers demonstrates how public campaigns, such as Oxfam’s, can highlight issues and trigger changes in corporate practices.

Critically, Oxfam’s campaign did not ask consumers to boycott any company or companies – it asked people to engage constructively with companies to drive standards up, just as Oxfam itself was doing. This is central to Oxfam’s approach as a ‘critical friend’ of the private sector. Of course, the *Behind the Brands* information is publicly available to investors and members of the public alike to do with it what they choose – it is possible, indeed likely, that this information has been used

to guide changes in shopping behaviour and decisions. There is a role for interested consumers too – they can ask themselves whether and how the action they are choosing to take in buying something (or not) is generating the maximum level of positive change. In almost all cases, a greater degree of influence can be wielded by making contact with the brand or parent company of that product to explain the decision. This feedback is amplified still further when consumers join together in a campaigning group, whether getting behind an organisation like Oxfam or forming a group of their own. Positive or negative, companies take customer feedback seriously, and the more they hear from customers about the importance of how they understand and deal with issues faced by women in their supply chains, the more seriously they will take it (Wilshaw, 2015). Behind the Brands is about leveraging the power held by large food and drink corporations – but it is fundamentally about leveraging the power of the consumer, too.

## Conclusion

The continuing work of Oxfam's *Behind the Brands* research and campaign has found that the world's largest food and beverage companies are making progress in the adoption of specific policies and commitments that contribute to the empowerment of women. Fuelled by the actions of hundreds of thousands of supporters, Oxfam's *Behind the Brands* campaign has achieved success in getting momentum behind a further focus on women's empowerment in supply chains. Sadly it remains the case that all ten are particularly weak in demonstrating that they track where women are in their supply chains and in requiring their suppliers to improve conditions for women – meaning that in this area, as well as others, work remains to be done by Oxfam and by consumers in driving further change.

*Behind the Brands* is just one example, in one sector, that demonstrates the importance of focusing on issues faced by women when considering problems in the global agricultural economic system. Although we have focused on gender in this article, and the gender-aware approach advocated by Oxfam is a necessary one, it is neither practical nor sensible to isolate gender when thinking about supply chain issues. Indeed, broader issues affecting markets and supply chains, including workers rights and the direction of travel of public policy, have significant impacts on women too (Oxfam, 2016). *Behind the Brands* explores these under other themes, but for reasons of space they are not explored in detail here.

This campaign also demonstrates the value of credible information in enabling the public to be part of a campaign for change. Oxfam's work to influence the private sector relies on deep engagement with the target companies and industry experts, research expertise within the team, and rich, complex indicators and datasets. This complex picture is necessary in order to achieve the level of accuracy and credibility that this topic demands and deserves – but it does not make for an easy campaign “story” to share with the public. That is why Oxfam's scorecard, at the heart of the campaign, is so important. It allows consumers, investors and companies to see at a glance what the performance of the food and drink sector looks like across seven ethical themes, including gender. The more that this can be done, with complex information simplified and presented in an accessible to consumers, the better able we will all be to make informed decisions and be part of driving positive change. This could and should mean real change in the lives of women – responsible consumers do not want food to reach their plates at the expense of women in some of the world's poorest countries, and information like that in *Behind the Brands* helps empower them to make ethical choices and hold corporations to account.

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