

Caught on CAMERA

Although the banana is a mainstay in British consumers' shopping baskets, the daily experiences of its growers and pickers within the supply chain often remain a mystery.

Filmmaker and artist Jan Nimmo's recently released documentary *Portraits From Cameroon*, which is based on testimonials from workers in both Cameroon and Ecuador, contains shocking images of heavily pregnant women handling pesticides and blue bags to protect bananas from pests, containing the chemical chlorpyrifos, on plantations. Nimmo hopes the short film – which does not name individual companies – can help to increase awareness of the conditions to which she claims some African workers are accustomed.

She explains: "A lot of people don't look beyond the commodity in the supermarket and believe buying Fairtrade is a magic cure for worker exploitation when in reality around two per cent of, say, Ecuador's 250,000 banana workers are actually operating under Fairtrade and are struggling to survive."



Images from Nimmo's film

With bananas a favourite among British shoppers, one filmmaker has courted controversy in her attempt to publicise the plight of Africa's plantation workers. Thomas Hobbs finds out more

Nimmo was inspired to visit Africa after a trip in 2000 to Costa Rica, where she claims she found workers exposed to the pesticide nemagon suffering from illness despite banana producers insisting there were no issues. She says: "I went with a delegation to Ecuador, which is the world's largest exporter of bananas, and then moved on to Cameroon where doctors flat out denied that pesticides were being sprayed on plantations or disturbing workers' health."

Nimmo – who alleges seeing planes spraying pesticides over plantations in Cameroon while workers were in the fields or eating lunch, despite the doctors' denials – says trade unions struggle to gain access to the plantations due to government interference.

However, with the Ecuadorian government recently announcing labour law reforms to improve child-care rights for working mothers, it

seems the world's largest banana exporter could be taking positive steps.

Under the proposed Law for the Defence of Workers' Rights, working mothers, who currently have the right to eight 15-minute breaks a day for nine months for breastfeeding their children, will have that right extended to a period of 12 months after birth.

But despite officials in Ecuador insisting that they will now ensure workers get proper access to healthcare, Nimmo believes there is still a lot of work to be done in both countries.

"There is definitely an opportunity for UK retailers to operate a more in-depth fair trade model to ensure wages are fairly distributed to banana workers and that trade unions are supported so they can get proper access to help workers," explains Nimmo.

Cameroon's bananapickers, some reportedly paid as little as £2.25 a day for bananas that are sold in UK supermarkets for an average of 10p, are among the lowest paid in the world and charity Banana Link insists that retailers have a duty to help them.

"Research shows workers earn about one third of what they need to live on, and conditions will never be good until supermarkets pay more for bananas," concludes the organisation's Jacqui Mackay. — **FPJ**

