

BerryWorld – Women’s Health in South Africa



BerryWorld Ltd are experts in international berry breeding and marketing. With over 25 years’ experience developing the soft fruit market, working with a dedicated global grower base and presence in multiple retail sectors around the world, they supply to many of the leading supermarkets in the UK including Co-op, Waitrose, Tesco and Marks & Spencer. Their major sourcing countries include South Africa, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Spain, Portugal, Egypt and UK. The head office is in Hertfordshire, with several packing sites based around the UK.

Summary

Through BerryWorld’s ongoing human rights due diligence, they wanted to understand the barriers that prevent women in South Africa from being able to attend work due to female health and consider what support was required to improve worker attendance and productivity. In 2022, they conducted a needs assessment to understand the challenges and barriers that females may face, which identified a clear need for more awareness and education on female health topics. As a result, in 2023, they partnered with Waitrose Foundation to organise and provide female reproductive health workshops.

These workshops were facilitated by SPIEEL, a service provider contracted by the Waitrose Foundation. The focus was on increasing awareness of mental health and wellbeing practices around reproductive health and affordable and re-usable menstrual products. The success of the project laid the foundation for potentially rolling out the workshops across more sites and scoping out the need for similar initiatives in other sourcing countries, such as Zimbabwe.



This case study has been developed with the support of Co-op as part of Co-op’s 2024 ‘Treating People Fairly Awards’ at which BerryWorld was Highly Commended. The awards celebrate excellence in human rights practice, encourage suppliers to learn from each other and inspire new ways of mitigating current or future risks to worker welfare. Supplier entries were assessed by an independent, expert panel and awards were presented at a Co-op supplier event in May 2024. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about human rights at Co-op.

Understanding the need

Globally, an estimated 500 million people who menstruate lack access to menstrual products and hygiene facilities. This can affect individuals’ mental health and wellbeing and result in health problems due to poor hygiene. The issue is prevalent in South Africa, where there is social stigma surrounding periods and it prevents women and girls from attending work and school.

The majority of the blueberry workforce in South Africa is female. Various discussions with South African growers identified the possibility that the menstrual cycles of women working together could synchronize, resulting in multiple members of a team missing work, potentially due to lack of access to menstrual products and stigma around periods. Gender equality and empowerment is a key strategic area for BerryWorld in their supply chain human rights due diligence. In this instance, they wanted to understand the severity of the impact of lack of access to menstrual products and hygiene facilities on the workforce and what actions could be taken to avoid stigma, support women and improve worker attendance and productivity.

Days for Girls is a charity that increase access to menstrual care and education, and Berryworld engaged with them and with the South African Human Resources managers to support their initial research in 2021 to understand both the need and the possible solutions. In 2022, a needs assessment was conducted, using an anonymous survey, across five sites in South Africa, four sites in the UK and three sites in Zimbabwe.

Results showed that there was a priority need in South Africa. Here, 25% of women had to take time off work during their period and 81% wanted to understand more about menstruation and the different products available. When being asked what could be done to support them at work during their menstrual cycle, the top answers included provision of disposable sanitary products, and an increase in understanding and awareness.



Taking action

The survey results were used to support the aims of the women’s health workshops, which were to increase understanding and awareness of mental health and wellbeing practices around reproductive health. Berryworld recognised the need for interactive workshops to ensure effectiveness and partnered with Waitrose Foundation who engaged with SPIEEL, a local South African creative arts therapy collective, to facilitate the sessions. There was also engagement with the M-cup project, to deliver a reusable, sustainable and affordable menstrual sanitary option. Psycho-educational techniques were utilised to discuss the four phases of the menstrual cycle and how they influence wellbeing. Dance and art were used to help women open-up and discuss topics of concern and to introduce practical self-care tools, including support during menopause.

The workshop trials were conducted at one of BerryWorld’s grower partners, Chiltern Farms, Western Cape, RSA, who supply retailers such as Co-op, Waitrose and Tesco.

In addition to the workshops, survey findings were shared with various grower sites in South Africa, and sites were encouraged to provide emergency disposable sanitary items in first aid boxes and to supply sanitary bins in field toilets.

“The experience increased my confidence and self-esteem and taught me how to handle my family and children.”

– Workshop participant, South Africa

Making an impact

The outcomes of pilot workshops at the Chiltern Farms site included an increase in awareness and confidence among women in managing their menstrual health and wellbeing and adoption of cost saving, reusable menstrual products.

The feedback from the workshop offered the site management a chance to hear from their workers and understand their needs. Topics raised by the workers included mental health, women's rights, retirement support and addiction issues. It also supported a review of their ethical vision.

Some of the participants shared their thoughts on the sessions:

"I can recommend this training to other ladies at other farms as it will open up their eyes about life, stress and exercise and it will give them more information on menstrual health and the costs saved by using sustainable menstrual products, such as the menstrual cup."

"I learnt about the different seasons in your life and how they relate to different moods during your menstrual cycle. We also discussed how to take care of yourself as a woman, to take care of each other and talk to each other about problems."

"The women's reproductive health training provided by the Waitrose Foundation through BerryWorld exceeded all expectations. It was both informative and engaging, explaining the reasons behind menstruation and offering practical solutions to ease its physical and emotional effects in a way everyone could easily grasp."

- Chilterns Group Human Resources Manager

Moving forwards

Next steps include rolling out similar women's health workshops to other South African sites and supporting sites with continuous engagement on this topic. They are considering two larger group sessions next season in different locations, to capture a range of growers. Consideration will also be given to running surveys with the participants to understand the project's impact.

The needs assessment was also carried out at three sites in Zimbabwe, so another step will be to engage with these sites regarding the assessment findings and possible actions to tackle the issue, with an awareness that a local partner would need to be utilised to adapt to the local context. There are also plans to continue the engagement with UK sites and other sourcing countries.



Lessons learnt

- It was important to find the right angle and language to convince the farm owners and management about the importance of tackling this issue. Women's menstrual health is not normally discussed openly and not generally considered of high importance by male-dominated leadership teams. The business case was presented focusing on worker absenteeism and its impact on productivity and output.
- The practical lessons learnt included the importance of translators for a multi-lingual workforce and providing transportation to the venue for the workshops, to enable people to attend who would otherwise not be able to.
- It was important to ensure enough time was given for developing group cohesion and sharing stories around womanhood and wellbeing.
- It is also useful to consider the roles of women present and whether there are dominant individuals or even members of seniority in the groups which may hinder the fluidity and openness of the discussions.



This is a leadership* approach because:

Proactivity

The need for these workshops was identified through BerryWorld's ongoing human rights due diligence, which identifies risks and the topics where action could bring real improvements to workers' lives. This project will be proactively followed up in the different countries in a way that's appropriate to the local context and that is directly related to the findings of country-specific needs assessments.

Ownership

BerryWorld offers support and guidance to their growers to deliver best practice and engagement whilst ensuring the welfare of employees. They take ownership by organising initiatives to address key risks and improve workers' livelihoods, and also by holding regular internal ethical forums for its growers where good practises and updates are shared.

Partnership

They work in partnership with high-risk suppliers to improve the lives of workers, their families and communities. This particular project required close partnership between BerryWorld, Chilterns Farms, Waitrose Foundation and its local service provider, SPIEEL.



*Key behaviours that Co-op champion in its supply chain are proactivity, ownership and partnership. Click [here](#) to learn more about Co-op's supplier engagement programme. Co-op's 'Supplier's Guide to Ethical Trade' sets out the standards suppliers are expected to meet.