

**Interview with Bertha Gity Baroi**  
**by Llanos, Communication Officer WFTO Europe**  
**Andrew, WFTO Europe Intern**



Bertha, Acting Director  
CORR-The Jute Works  
Fair Trade Cooperative in Bangladesh  
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**Llanos:** Hi Bertha, let me thank you for being with us today.

Bertha: It is my pleasure.

**Llanos:** Let's talk about what Fair Trade means to you.

Bertha: Fair Trade means to me to be a great movement for the betterment of artisans. And this movement carries benefits for everyone from grassroots level to producers. So I think everyone benefits from it.

**Llanos:** To what extent do you think your community has been positively affected by Fair Trade?

Bertha: Although we have been successful, there still remains much work to be done. Whenever we reach a new village or different sector of Bangladesh society, we see the results of our work very clearly. We have seen our producers lives improve as a result of the employment and work with which we provide them.

**Llanos:** In relation to that, to what extent do you think Fair Trade influences the economic development of a country?

Bertha: Fair trade is obviously related to economic development. However, it's more than just financial growth; it is also the development of total humanity, of a better life for anyone involved in fair trade.

**Llanos:** Which type of work force is your organisation?

Bertha: Our business model was characterized as an NGO. Caritas is our mother organisation; they separated us after 3 years, when we became self-sustainable. From there we became a marketing trust and our producers are currently organized under cooperative types of groups.

**Llanos:** Are producers involved in the organisation's decision making?

Bertha: Yes. In each individual group of producers there is an election process. The producers elect five group leaders, like the chairperson, the treasurer, the secretary, and two others. The groups are small and have 20 to 25 members. We have four regions. The

leaders of all of a region's groups compete against each other in a general election. The winner gets to sit on the board. So we have four elected members from four different areas that are directly present on the board and who speak on behalf of the producers and work to meet their demands.

**Llanos: Your organisation emerged in 1973, how has it evolved?**

Bertha: Initially, we had groups organized in villages as cooperatives. The number of producers and groups increased day by day. First came the central station, then the production department, then the quality-checking department, then the packing, shipping, and accounting ones. There is a separate department for education. We believe not only in improving the financial well being of our producers, but also in their holistic development as individuals. We created a separate educational wing that looks after the producers' works to help them learn skills and avoid and fight the problems of child trafficking and the dowry system. We mainly focus on training and the development of labour skills.

**Llanos: What kind of products do you offer? Is it mainly handicraft?**

Bertha: Yes, mainly handicraft products. We have textile products but not clothing. We make some bags. The textiles are made by handloom and have an incredibly soft and beautiful texture.

**Llanos: What percentage of your sales goes to supply Fair Trade retailers and to traditional businesses?**

Bertha: About 13 percent of our commercial business goes to the mainstream market and the rest goes to Fair Trade.

**Llanos: Your organisation is known to empower women. How do you do that?**

Bertha: It's amazing how far our business environment and country has evolved in regards to the treatment of women. Previously, women were always kept inside the house. We were never allowed to leave. Women were kept inside the house from dawn to dusk doing hard work. Bangladesh is an Islamic country. Women were not earning money.

**Llanos: They couldn't get out of the house?**

Bertha: Previously not. It was not allowed. Eventually husbands realized that their wives could help make money for the family and help support it. So when they realized that more and more husbands allowed their wives to work.

**Llanos: How common is it nowadays for women to work?**

Bertha: Today many women are working. People realize that it is worthless to keep women inside and now women are being empowered to participate financially. Many of

those who work cover themselves with veils. They're wearing burkas when coming out of the house.

**Andrew:** **So there is a compromise occurring between very traditional social norms and unused workers who could reduce poverty?**

Bertha: Yes, exactly. The reality is that in our producer level we see the benefits of women who send their children to school and who simultaneously take care of their family. Women feel better now that they have a voice in the family. Even in the extended family when people are getting ready for a wedding, women play a more important role in planning. Previously not. It is a very big change. And even sometimes in community governments, women are getting leadership positions. In villages there are chairmen and others elected to be leaders of the community in the village. Nowadays through elections, more and more women are competing for chairmanships.

**Llanos:** **Going back to your organisation, how many people are a part of it?**

Bertha: We have around 60 permanent people at my operation. There are also part-time, seasonal workers. It is a type of temporary employment. We try to create many jobs for them.

**Llanos:** **What is the breakdown between female and male employees?**

Bertha: In permanent staff, it is 60% men and 40% women. At our producer level, it is 95% women and 5% men. For our temporary staff, it's about 40% men and 60% women.

**Llanos:** **You select the women who create the products based on their financial needs. The person who needs the work the most is the one who will receive the project.**

**Andrew:** **How do you balance business demands with your social goals? In other words, how do you know that the woman who is selected is the one who will make the product the best?**

Bertha: Our production department keeps track records; they know which group does each product. So if we get products that are subpar from them, through training we enhance their skills and production capacity. Financial need is taken into account when all members of a group have proven through their records that they are capable of making the product properly. The group leaders decide who receives the work.

**Llanos:** **Is CORR-The Jute Works supported by the Government?**

Bertha: No, we are separate from the government. We have to produce to get an export license and we get it from the Bangladesh government. When we export, we have to fill out many documents about shipment for them. At the end of the year we have to give them our export figures.

**Llanos:** **So, you are entirely independent?**

**Andrew:** **They don't support you financially or with manpower?**

Bertha: No, never. However, we are lucky that they don't demand bribes from us. They treat us with honour and respect. They have given us chances in the past to speak on behalf of producers. When an export needs to be rushed, they help us with getting it shipped out quickly. We have very a good image to the government, which helps us a lot.

**Andrew:** **Is it common for other organisations to bribe the government?**

Bertha: Yes, but we know what is our role, why we are working, and for whom we are working. So we have a very good image. Although the government is not supporting us directly, by giving us respect, they have helped. The government has given us business awards 13 times.

**Llanos:** **What about the private sector? What kind of relationship do you have with them?**

Bertha: We don't have very much of a relationship with the private sector. We have some common platforms... there is a type of chamber of commerce. They asked me to sit on the board. It is such a great honour. There are others lobbying to be the member of the committee, and despite of that they asked me.

**Llanos:** **Having alliances in both the public and private sectors is important. What about other NGOS?**

Bertha: We have very good relations with other organisations who are NGOs who are in the artisan business just like us. We frequently take the responsibility exporting on behalf of them. We are exporting for 8 or 9 NGOs, as they don't have their export license.

**Llanos:** **NGOs in Bangladesh?**

Bertha: Yes, in Bangladesh. We help export for NGOS in the handicraft sector like the YWC, MWC, Tafta Handicraft, MCC, and Enterprise. We have about 6 to 8 projects for NGOs for whom we export. The purchasers send the money to us and we directly send it to the producing NGOs. We don't even wait for the money to come in from abroad. The artisans need to be paid. The NGOs say to us, please, give us the money or else our artisans will suffer. We must have the money. So we don't wait for the money to arrive from abroad. We just give it...

**Llanos:** **I am sure that means a lot to them. Bertha, I have a last question for you. What does the WFTO mean to you?**

Bertha: WFTO is our core. We feel confident that we should be gathered under the same umbrella in the future and believe that WFTO should be stronger so that it can act

like a WTO, a World Trade Organisation. Fair Trade is our fight against oppression. It is our right as artisans.

**Llanos:** **Is there any last thing you would like to say?**

Bertha: First, I would like to extend my heartiest thanks to you for giving me this opportunity to have this interview and speak on behalf of my artisans, my country, and of WFTO. It is a great opportunity because I believe that this is a movement for which we have to fight. We have to keep our strength. We still have a long way to go. Thank you.

**Llanos:** **Thank you, Bertha.**