Basket Case:
Women’s empowerment, fair trade, environmental sustainability, and international development

Laura Parisi
Associate Professor, Departments of Gender Studies and Political Science, University of Victoria

Despite the World Bank’s claim that “gender equality is smart economics,” the literature on gender equality, women’s empowerment, fair trade, and green co-operatives raises a number of issues that call for further exploration, as the evidence with regards to women’s empowerment is mixed and paradoxical. What are the impacts of participating in green fair trade cooperatives on women’s participation in community decision making, promotion of women’s human rights, and the development of environmentally and economically sustainable livelihoods for women? This will be analyzed through a case study of the Senaga basket co-operative in Zambia, which is supported through a partnership between Women for Change in Zambia and VIDEA in Victoria, BC, where most of the baskets are sold. Currently, much of the research on fair trade cooperatives focuses on Central and Latin America and the Asia Pacific as well as the co-operative production of goods, such as coffee and chocolate, for large multinational corporations. This case provides a unique opportunity to examine smaller scale markets as well as a different geographical focus through a feminist lens.