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SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

From Cherry to Cup: The Transformative Role of Women in Specialty Coffee in Latin America

De la cereza a la taza: El papel transformador de las mujeres en el café de especialidad en Latinoamérica

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the transformative role of women in traditional coffee farming and their strategic transition into the dynamic specialty coffee market in Latin America. Although women make up as much as 70% of the workforce during key stages such as harvesting and manual sorting, their role has historically been rendered invisible under the classification of unpaid family labor. This exclusion is perpetuated by structural gaps, notably unequal access to land titles, critical barriers to obtaining agricultural credit, and a rigid gender-based division of labor. Against this backdrop, the rise of specialty coffee (defined by scores exceeding 80 points, strict traceability, and the value placed on origin stories) emerges as a socioeconomic turning point. Flagship regional initiatives, such as the pioneering "Café Femenino" program and cooperative efforts in Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, Brazil, and Venezuela, demonstrate that producing distinctive microlots generates higher income and fosters social autonomy. However, the research warns of the latent risk that the "Women's Coffee" concept could be reduced to a marketing narrative that masks the heavy workload borne by female producers due to the persistence of "triple burdens" (productive, reproductive, and community work). Ultimately, the study concludes that the viability and sustainability of Latin American coffee farming depend on genuine inclusion, transforming women's operational roles into autonomous leadership within the sector.

Keywords: Traditional coffee farming, specialty coffee, gender equity, Latin America, social sustainability.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza el papel transformador de las mujeres en la caficultura tradicional y su transición estratégica hacia el dinámico mercado de cafés de especialidad en Latinoamérica Aunque la fuerza laboral femenina representa hasta el 70% en las etapas clave de cosecha y selección manual, su rol ha permanecido históricamente invisibilizado bajo la categoría de mano de obra familiar no remunerada. Esta exclusión se perpetúa a través de brechas estructurales, destacando el acceso desigual a la titulación de tierras, limitaciones críticas para la obtención de créditos agrícolas y una rígida división sexual del trabajo. Frente a este escenario, el auge de los cafés de especialidad, definidos por puntuaciones que superan los 80 puntos, la trazabilidad estricta y el valor de las historias de origen surge como un punto de inflexión socioeconómico. Iniciativas regionales emblemáticas, como el programa pionero "Café Femenino" e integraciones asociativas en México, Colombia, Honduras, Brasil y Venezuela, demuestran que la producción de microlotes diferenciados genera mejores ingresos y autonomía social. No obstante, la investigación advierte sobre el riesgo latente de reducir el concepto "Café de Mujer" a un discurso comercial de marketing que disfrace la sobrecarga laboral de las productoras debido a la persistencia de triples jornadas Finalmente, se concluye que la viabilidad y sostenibilidad de la caficultura latinoamericana depende de una inclusión real, transformando el papel operativo femenino en un liderazgo gremial autónomo.

Palabras clave: Caficultura tradicional, cafés de especialidad, equidad de género, Latinoamérica, sostenibilidad social.

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INTRODUCTION

The coffee industry is a significant economic pillar in many countries, particularly in tropical regions where geographic and climatic conditions are ideal for coffee cultivation. Globally, approximately 125 million people depend on coffee cultivation, of whom 25 million are direct farmers. These producers operate about 12.5 million farms, of which 95% are small plots of less than 5 hectares and 84% are less than 2 hectares. Small farmers account for 73–80% of the total and are responsible for most of the world's coffee production (Bermúdez and Larrea, 2022). Approximately 70% of the labor force involved in harvesting and manual selection of coffee beans is female, and only 25% of coffee farms are managed by women.

In coffee production, the role of women is not exempt from the contradictions of the dominant capitalist mode of production, and this is compounded by its occurrence in peripheral countries that produce raw materials such as coffee, which are subject to the international commodity market, where value depends exclusively on global supply and demand.

In Latin America, from Mexico to Peru, 90% of coffee production is in the hands of small producers, a family crop where women play an important role. These smallholders have suffered from economic and climatic problems. One of the most important has been the low prices of coffee at the beginning of the 21st century, a situation that made it difficult to renovate coffee plantations, affected the income of families and resulted in the abandonment of coffee production, migration of producers to urban areas in search of better opportunities. For their part, climatic events have also affected the region, with periods of drought and extreme rainfall. As a result of the abandonment of the plantations, epidemics of diseases occurred, such as rust, particularly in Colombia in 2008 and in Central America in 2012, which significantly affected production (Canet et al. 2016).

For the reasons stated above, this essay aims to highlight the transformative role of women in the production of specialty coffees in Latin America.

DEVELOPMENT

Women: Invisible in Traditional Coffee Cultivation?

In Central America and Mexico, coffee cultivation generates about 1.8 million jobs, and a large part of the crop is grown by small producers (Canet et al., 2016). The producing countries in this region are: Mexico (SIC), Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. The main producer and exporter is Honduras, followed by Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (Perfect Daily Grind, 2025).

In the case of Mexico, it is the world's leading producer of organic coffee, and one of the first in specialty coffees. About 280 thousand producers participate in coffee production, most of them small plots, belonging to the indigenous population, from marginalized areas (Canet et al 2016). Chiapas is the region that produces 35% of the national production, of which 80% is destined for export. 91.1% of its population is rural. Women have made efforts to organize and form associations to improve their benefits and rights. In particular, the experience of the Women of the Union of Organic Producers San Isidro-Siltepec [UPOSIS]. The members are owners of a coffee plantation and participate in the projects, they have a voice and a vote. On the other hand, the wives of the members do not have coffee plantations, work in the husband's plantation, participate in training and meetings without the right to vote. In this sense, the members have real benefits and the wives of the partners participate by working throughout the process, but they do not receive payments, because it is considered that the head of the family is the one with the income. However, 81% of the members believe that there is gender equality (Cárcamo et al. 2010).

The difficulties pointed out in the experience of the UPOSIS of Chiapas, the authors indicate that women without schooling are limited and are not elected to the board. Despite being the majority, the female members participate less than men in the meetings. When they are elected to the board, they are assigned typical feminine tasks. The sexual division of labor affects almost all social spheres as in this case the coffee organization, so that it links men with production tasks and women with reproduction tasks. Women participate in the nurseries, harvest and processing since it is thought that they have manual skills, dexterity (speed and accuracy) when selecting the grains to guarantee the quality of the product. In the field they are in charge of preparing food (Cárcamo et al. 2010). At the time of sales, the female members are taken into account to participate in the commercialization process. A fifth expressed no recognition of their effort.

In the Dominican Republic, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

(CEPAL)/Dominican Coffee Institute (INDOCAFE)/National Council for Climate Change and Clean Development Mechanism (CNCCMDL) (2020) state that women's participation in coffee production is invisible because it is subsumed under family labor. Their participation is fundamental during the coffee harvest season. Smallholdings predominate, and a large number of coffee growers, both men and women, lack land titles. Despite women comprising the majority, their share of financing from the Agricultural Bank was only 9%. In some cases, men migrate, and women are left in charge of the coffee farm, but without land titles, they lack access to credit. Women's contribution to the industry is significant, but their control over the harvest product is limited, and the sector's structure reproduces gender inequalities.

In Colombia, the National Federation of Coffee Growers [FNC] (2021) states that the coffee sector launched the gender equity policy, the first such policy in the agricultural sector. The identified gaps indicate that 30% of coffee growers are women, and machismo is perceived as the main barrier. 79% of women spend over 5 hours per day on household chores. Additionally, they participate in preparing food for workers, while men dedicate more time to applying agrochemicals. By 2020, the unemployment rate for rural women was 18.5%, compared to 5% for men. Women receive 34.5% less income for the same contract in rural areas. Farms and small coffee plots are in the hands of women.

In Brazil, the main coffee producer in the region and among the 10 largest coffee-producing countries in the world, approximately 66% or 2/3 of producers are small-scale (Via Traden Mart, 2025). Da Silva and Ramos (2024) note that traditionally in Brazil, women, despite their multiple roles, have been invisible. In the agricultural sector, by 2017, an estimated 947,000 women operated as managers of rural properties, and approximately 817,000 participated in shared management. In coffee cultivation, the last agricultural census reported more than 40,000 coffee farms managed by women, representing 13.2% of existing farms. These women live "in a situation of social, political, and economic inequality" (p.9). Women involved in coffee production are present in all stages from field to cup. Despite this, they face the highest rates of poverty, difficulties in accessing health services, and experience various forms of violence as well as food and nutritional insecurity. They have the least access to productive resources such as land, credit, and training. Women spend more than twice as much time on domestic tasks, alternating coffee plantation activities with household work. Women coffee farmers in Brazil have less access to technology (internet, irrigation machinery, tractors).

In Peru, "... small coffee growers with farms smaller than 10 hectares represent 62.5%, 30% have farms between 10 and 30 hectares, and 7.5% have farms larger than 30 hectares" (Canet et al 2016 p. 6).

In Venezuela, in the last decade of the XXI century, there has been a growing interest in coffee production, resulting from the exhaustion of the oil rentier model, the improvement in product prices, the economic crisis resulting from the unilateral coercive measures imposed on the nation, among other causes. When comparing the labor force in coffee farming in Venezuela, in the past it registered more than 100 thousand producers, showing a progressive reduction to 40 thousand by the year 2021 (Confederation of Associations of Agricultural Producers of Venezuela [FEDEAGRO] (2021). The current trend reflects a reactivation that has generated a "return to the countryside." According to Gómez (2025), for the 2025-2026 cycle there are more than 60 thousand coffee-growing families that sustain their economy through this crop, covering an area of more than 237.000 hectares distributed across 20 states of the country.

In summary, from a gender perspective, what has been described shows that there is a clear sexual division of labor, where women have lower remuneration than men and in many cases no recognized remuneration. There is a gap in access to resources for women such as land ownership, access to agricultural credit, and training (Da Silva and Ramos (2024; Canet et al 2016). The International Coffee Organization [ICO] (2018) states that "women provide up to 70% of the labor in coffee cultivation and harvesting, and that 20% to 35% of family coffee farms are headed by women farmers" (p.1). Despite this, women have limitations in access to factors of production, as well as to input and output markets, which impacts low productivity.

Thus, despite the incorporation of women into various activities of the coffee value chain, they remain invisible, their work not being socially valued. In many cases, it is seen as help to the family group, without remuneration. In the case of exports and marketing, although women contribute to product quality to improve price, the buying/selling stages continue to be dominated by men. The exclusion of small producers from training and from the links where value is generated (cupping, roasting, export) limits homogeneous quality and hides the contribution of women coffee growers. It also has a negative impact on the final product, perpetuating economic inequalities in agricultural communities.

Specialty coffee as a turning point

The global coffee market has undergone major changes in recent decades. "... The most momentous was undoubtedly the rupture of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989. This pact established production quotas, which allowed supply to be maintained, guaranteeing reasonable price levels for farmers" (Semana, 2013). In addition to this factor, changes in production and consumption have occurred at the level of producer countries. In this regard, new countries have emerged, including Vietnam and Indonesia as important producers, which has influenced the international positioning of Latin American countries, impacting low coffee prices.

The specialty coffee market (coffees scoring over 80 points) has been growing. In this niche, traceability and the stories behind the bean are as valuable as the flavor itself. This growth focuses on raising quality and sustainability by adopting innovative cultivation techniques, processing improvements, and environmentally protective agricultural practices (THE FOOD TECH, 2024; Specialty Coffee Association [SCA], 2026)), which contributes to improving coffee growers' incomes.

In this context, the central theme of the III World Coffee Conference organized by the International Coffee Organization (OIC, 2009) held in Guatemala was: "Coffee for the future: towards a sustainable coffee sector." There it was established that the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the coffee chain requires highlighting and strengthening the participation of women in the coffee chain. Meanwhile, the Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA, 2026) promotes the participation and empowerment of women in the coffee industry.

In this regard, Sañudo et al (2023) note: "... that the linking of women to the coffee market in Colombia, in part, responds to the reorganization of the coffee economy worldwide and constitutes a key factor for the dynamization of this sector." p. 251

Another influencing aspect is that specialty coffee production, by requiring meticulous care, traceability, and direct market relationships, has opened a window of opportunity for Latin American women to transition from being invisible labor (family farm coffee) to recognized protagonists, improving coffee quality, their incomes, and the social fabric of their communities; however, structural barriers that limit massive impact persist.

The goal of specialty coffee is to raise the quality of the bean so that the product that reaches the cup has better sensory properties, the beans are more homogeneous, without hidden defects (poor drying, fermentation errors, etc.) since all these elements will impact the cup and therefore the value of the coffee.

The specialty market buys stories, not just beans. It demands to know: who produced this coffee?, what variety?, at what altitude is it? This makes visible the micro-producers who were previously diluted in a 'generic family farm coffee'. Production in micro-lots and women's lots, the separation of harvests by producer or group of women allows differentiated scores.

Many international roasters (Café Import, 2026; Belco, 2026) pay significant premiums when the coffee is produced by a "women's batch" with proven quality and a demonstrable social impact component. In this sense, the Café Femenino program (originating in Peru) was born in 2003 and has expanded to several countries (Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico), requiring that the batch come from women with ownership or control over the land and profits (Café femenino, 2026).

Initiatives and emblematic cases in Latin America

In Central America (Honduras/Guatemala), groups of women have organized to export directly; also in the training area, modules with gender content have been included, as is the case of ACODIHUE in Guatemala or IHCAFE in Honduras. It is noteworthy that the Cup of Excellence competitions have awarded coffees produced by women (e.g., farms managed by women that win high rankings) (Instituto Hondureño del café [IHCAFE] (2026); Asociación de Cooperación al Desarrollo Integral del HUEHUETENANGO [ACODIHUE], 2026). These policies and initiatives have had a cross-cutting impact, not only on income. Women tend to invest more in nutrition, education, and family health. New female leadership emerges in the communities.

In Colombia, the Association of Women in Huila have participated with their coffees in the I Quality Competition obtaining the first 2 places (Gobernación Huila, 2021). In Cauca, the Coffee Growers Committee of Cauca publishes in its statements that "... three women coffee leaders completed the international Q Processing Level 2 certification, as an achievement of the Women in Coffee Network 'EntreAmigas'" (Federación nacional cafeteros Cauca (fnc_Cauca 2025). Likewise, cupping courses for women have been implemented that have achieved the change of women who go from collectors to cuppers with international qualification (Q Grader) promoted by SENA and the National Federation of Coffee Growers (SENA Norte de Santander, 2026).

In Nariño, a Colombian department, the Rural Development Agency (2016) indicates that '...

women coffee growers are advancing towards new markets. In the agenda of commercial articulation between European entrepreneurs and peasant organizations'

Progress has also been made in Peru on the gender issue. The experience of cooperatives in Cajamarca, such as the Central de Cafetaleros del Nororiente [CECANOR] with the Café Femenino program and its impact on land ownership and the fight against domestic violence (Café Femenino, 2026; Schling & Pazos, 2022).

In Venezuela, despite the absence of a state credit line for specialty coffee, it is necessary to highlight the experience of the Communes and financing policies for small producer sectors, where women play a preponderant role. The experience with specialty coffees is more recent compared to other countries in the region. What exists is a movement of producers and roasters. The state has been promoting in the last 5 years an event called 'International Meeting of Specialty Coffees of Venezuela (EICEV)', where the role that women producers have been developing can be seen (León, 2025). For its part, FUSAGRI (2024 and 2024b) have published experiences with women coffee growers in the state of Lara.

Lights and Shadows: Persistent Challenges

It is important to consider the risk that the 'Women's Coffee' label is only a marketing discourse without transforming the real power structures in coffee farms and the producers' homes. In this regard, Sañudo et al (2023) point out that this 'molding is not developed with the aim of making women more productive, but to optimize female work and so that production meets the quality standards demanded by the international coffee market'. María Mies (2019), cited by Sañudo et al (2023), notes that the exploitation of women's work (reproductive, productive, and community) constitutes a condition for the dynamization of economies based on the production of exportables.

Success in specialty coffee often adds to unshared domestic responsibilities. Empowerment or overload? The double and triple workday persist, and the machista culture remains entrenched in society's perspective. Women's reproductive work remains invisible. Similarly, as an expression of the above, persistent structural barriers remain unresolved: land titling, the digital divide in accessing real-time prices, gender violence, and the lack of generational replacement (young women migrating) in search of better employment opportunities in urban areas are challenges that have not yet been overcome. In the face of climate change, women, with less access to credit, find it more difficult to invest in rust-resistant varieties or implement irrigation systems, making them more susceptible to the variations that are increasingly occurring in rural areas.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence presented shows that specialty coffee is not a magic wand, but it has proven to be a concrete platform to make women's work visible and reward their meticulousness with fairer prices in the region.

The real leap is not just in producing an 87-point cup, but in who decides on the income generated and how recognition is redistributed. The future of Latin American specialty coffee is not viable without real inclusion of women, not only as harvesters or processors, but as tasters, farm owners, guild leaders, and exporters.

Finally, a desirable scenario would be a market where gender programs cease to be a marketing "plus" and become central guild policy, with equitable access to land and technology. The fact that women have historically been assigned caregiving and detailed tasks, combined now with access to training and autonomy, translates into more controlled and cleaner processes that the specialty market knows how to value. But without that access and without a market that pays a fair price, this work will remain invisible and underpaid.

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