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Do Certification Schemes Influence the Role of Nicaraguan Women in Small-Scale Coffee Production Systems?

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Abstract

Coffee sales constitute the main income for 25 million families in East Africa, South Asia and Latin America. In mountainous regions of Guatemala, Nicaragua, southern Mexico, southern Colombia and Ecuador coffee is the most important sector. Yet, these areas remain among the least developed ones in Latin America. In Nicaragua, the second poorest country in Latin America, coffee contributes 25 % to total exports, and provides employment to 13 % of the population. Although women participate in the coffee production, they have in general little economic, social or political power in this process or in their communities. Despite intensive research on coffee production systems, little is known about the situation of women in small-scale coffee production systems in Latin America.

Our research evaluated organic and organic-fairtrade certification schemes, by looking at gender roles and impacts of certification on small-scale coffee producers. Seven cooperatives in northern Nicaragua were chosen and individual and group discussions with women and men, with and without certification, were carried out.

Results showed in general no difference between certified and conventional producer groups regarding the status, behaviour and role of women within the household and coffee production system. Also, the living conditions of women do not differ significantly between them. Irrespective of the certification, most married women do not own land because land titles are registered in the husband's name. Labour division is usually quite strict and women tend to work more hours than men. Women are afraid to speak in public, often because their educational level is very low. In combination with the burden of domestic tasks, many women are not very involved in cooperative activities and do not occupy leadership positions. In all observed cooperatives, neither women nor men usually know to whom the cooperative sells their coffee.

Keywords: Coffee, cooperatives, fair trade, gender, Nicaragua, organic certification