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A triangulated perspective on labour conditions in certified vs non-certified coffee farms in Rwanda: Farmer reports, worker narratives, and gender dimensions

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Abstract

This study examines working conditions on certified and non-certified coffee farms in Rwanda, with a focus on gender, dignity, and the role of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS). Using a mixed-methods approach, we combine survey data from 690 smallholder households with semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 hired workers across 4 coffee producing districts. This design enables triangulation of farmer-reported practices and worker experiences to assess both formal compliance and lived realities of work.

Quantitative findings reveal persistent gendered divisions of labour. Women contribute significantly more labour per season than men (77.4 versus 70.3 days), concentrating in harvesting, weeding, and post-harvest processing, while men primarily undertake pruning and chemical application. Training on occupational hazards and equipment use is similarly high across certified and non-certified farms. Access to personal protective equipment (PPE) is slightly higher on non-certified farms, a pattern that may reflect the promotion of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) on certified farms, which reduces chemical spraying and potentially lowers the need for PPE rather than indicating weaker worker protection.

Certification is associated with modest improvements in formal labour conditions: certified farms report slightly higher union membership, better access to drinking water and sanitation facilities, and a slightly higher prevalence of bonuses and contracts. Wage differences between certified and non-certified farms, however, remain modest. Non-certified farms exhibit higher rates of hiring pregnant and breastfeeding women, suggesting greater flexibility or inclusiveness in employment practices, although potentially outside formalized labour frameworks.

Child labour incidence is very low across both certified and non-certified farms, with only slightly higher prevalence among non-certified farms. Average daily working hours are comparable (approximately 6.7 hours per day), and breastfeeding time shows substantial variation but similar averages across farm types, indicating broadly comparable labour intensity and family support practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that while certification contributes to improved formal labour rights and infrastructure, it does not fully address gendered inequalities or guarantee dignified working conditions. The study underlines the importance of integrating worker perspectives and contextual labour practices into sustainability standards to better align certification with the goals of decent work, gender equity, and worker well-being.

Keywords: Coffee, Rwanda, voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), working conditions

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