



Women and fair trade coffee production in Nicaragua

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Abstract

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in Latin America with a population of 5.8 million of whom just over half are women. Systems such as Fair Trade allow consumers to express concern and take action by utilizing their purchasing power to help small scale producers. If Fair Trade is understood correctly, the system will be more affective at both ends of the supply chain, from the producer to the consumer. Yet, it has long been understood that the benefits of development do not always trickle down equally to both men and women. This paper argues that Fair Trade can make an impact on women and it must be analyzed through a gendered lens as in a case study of a coffee Fair Trade cooperative in Nicaragua. This study shows that the SOPPEXCCA cooperative would not have been such a success for women farmers without being a part of Fair Trade, which provides the means by which women are empowered as producers, mothers, and community members. Though, it is not Fair Trade alone that has created this success. It is the hard work and determination of the cooperative staff and the female producers themselves. The recent history of dictatorship, revolution, civil war and the feminist movement in Nicaragua set the stage for the cooperative to make physical and mental changes for cooperative members a more realistic endeavour.

Keywords: cooperatives, Fair Trade, gender factor, supply chain, women empowerment, women farmers

Introduction

International development agencies and big businesses have largely failed to take responsibility for the conditions of the small farmers and rural communities of developing nations. Systems such as Fair Trade allow consumers to express concern and take action by utilizing their purchasing power to help small scale producers. If Fair Trade is understood, the system will be more affective at both ends of the supply chain, from the producer to the consumer.

Aimée Shreck (2002), found that many producers in the Dominican Republic did not know the implications of their Fair Trade certification, but they understood that participation in the cooperative did provide other forms of support. Momsen (2008) found that elsewhere in the Caribbean Fair Trade was well understood and appreciated by banana growers. These benefits include technical advice, marketing assistance and a social premium. Fair Trade aims to encourage women to join producer groups and to take on leadership roles. It has long been understood that the benefits of development do not always trickle down equally to both men and women (Momsen, 2010). We argue that Fair Trade can make an impact on women and it must be analyzed through a gendered lens as in our case study of a coffee Fair Trade cooperative in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in Latin America with a population of 5.8 million of whom just over half are women in 2010 (United Nations, 2009). The total fertility rate has fallen rapidly from 7.2 births per woman in the 1950s to 2.8 today (ibid). It has the lowest overall

proportion of women in the adult labour force (30%) in the Americas and this has remained unchanged since 1985 (Momsen, 2010). Almost half the rural population is female (48 %) but 35.5 per cent of the economically active in rural areas are women although many are seen as merely unpaid helpers on family farms (Gonzalez & Macleod, 2010). Adult literacy is 81 per cent for women and 80 per cent for men but only 19 percent of political representatives were women in 2008 (Momsen, 2010). Nicaragua's Gender Equity Index was only 52, on a par with Burkino Faso and in 2008 and it had declined 16 points since 2007.

Twentieth century Nicaraguan political landscape

In 1933 the United States-created Nicaraguan National Guard assisted in bringing Commander Anastasio Somoza Garcia to power, representing a coffee dynasty with political power that surpassed all others (Paige, 1997; Metoyer, 2000). Somoza and his family would control the Nicaraguan state for the next forty-five years (Biderman, 1983; Metoyer, 2000). Modernization, helped by technology from the United States, changed rural society (Rice, 1999).

Biderman (1983) states that in 1978 only 13% of the population had access to sufficient land to satisfy family requirements, 32% of the economically active population was landless and 38% had insufficient land for family subsistence and so were forced into seasonal harvest wage labour on export crop plantations. The lack of access to land and resources, combined with pervasive poverty amongst the rural population led to violent hostility, organized land invasions and eventually the Sandinista revolution of the late 1970's (Biderman, 1983; Paige, 1997).

The Sandinista revolution and the feminist movement

The economic deprivation that had developed during the Somoza dictatorship resulted in an uprising and the Sandinista revolution started in the early 1960's (Babb, 2001). This was a revolution aimed at political and social change, focused on the elimination of oppressive, elitist rule and United States' intervention (Corraggio & Irvin, 1985). The high level of female involvement in the revolution has been explained by the demand from peasant and working class women to be economically active. This happened as the realities of unemployment, poverty and insecurity drove husbands away from home for work or into complete abandonment of their families. Mothers left responsible for their households found jobs as domestic workers, seasonal agricultural labourers, or selling food and trinkets in markets or along highways (Randall, 1981; Babb, 2001). Especially important to their involvement was the brutality of the Somoza National Guard and private army that were especially oppressive towards women (Randall, 1981; Metoyer, 2000). Women sacrificed for their children, giving them courage to defy traditional gender-role prescriptions and participate in the Revolution (Chinchilla, 1990).

The Luisa Amanda Espinosa Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE) or its predecessor the Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems (AMPRONAC) was formed in the last few years of the fight against Somoza. The organization mobilized women around concerns of particular importance to them and also the broader struggle against the dictatorship and for human rights (Chinchilla, 1990).

The Sandinista movement recognized the vital importance of women as the largest marginalized group, and saw that mobilization for social change must come from women. The Sandinista approach to feminism and flexible Marxism paralleled the thinking of modern feminists that contend that an understanding of the dialectical nature of production and reproduction, class and gender and the ideological and economic spheres of social reality and women's right to self-organize is essential (Chinchilla, 1990). It was especially difficult for women to combine participation in the revolution with the obligation to care for their households and hold jobs, often while husbands were also fighting in the struggle (Chinchilla, 1990; Babb, 2001). They recognized the double burden they shared with the general population in terms of

poverty and repression, plus the discrimination based on sex, dependence and submission to men. As noted by Chinchilla (1990) the AMPRONAC founding statement affirms, “*we see how the economic system under which we live feeds and nurtures machismo among men and for women the role of submissive and apathetic slaves, making them objects*”.

In July of 1979 the Sandinista movement defeated the Somoza dictatorship and took power with a national unity alliance (Paige, 1997). Immediately the Sandinista government started to enforce new laws to sustain the revolution’s goals. The Sandinistas transformed the rural land holding system, urban manufacturing, and the distribution of goods and services so the previously underprivileged gained access to economic opportunities (Metoyer, 2000; Babb, 2001). A civil war with the right wing U.S. backed Contras broke out, during which an economic blockade threatened the government’s efforts to bring health care, education, and employment to the broader population. (Chinchilla, 1990; Paige, 1997; Babb, 2001).

Laws were introduced that supported and recognized the importance of women in Nicaraguan society, economy and the entire revolution. Though the Sandinista control that ended in 1990, did not confront the Catholic Church by helping women in relation to reproductive issues, especially abortion, which continued to be illegal (Chinchilla, 1990; Metoyer, 2000). One important result of the Sandinista support for women’s rights was the open acknowledgement of the need for social change for women (Chinchilla, 1990; Metoyer, 2000). In 1987 the government issued a public proclamation that acknowledged the subordinate position of women in Nicaraguan society and their legitimate demands for change (Chinchilla, 1990; Babb, 2001).

During the decade of Sandinista control it was government policy to put women’s rights at the forefront of change. The AMNLAE set up discussion groups for women on sexuality, work discrimination, and domestic violence (Metoyer, 2000). Though, the daily inequalities of life were often overlooked, these meetings did create a greater sense of openness towards the societal inequalities faced by women. The AMNLAE also met with men and participated in the military training for incoming soldiers. Women were given leadership positions and allowed influential status (Chinchilla, 1990; Metoyer, 2000)

The Sandinista revolution maintained goals to liberate women. The movement stressed that for the true success of the revolution, men must also change their ideology and behaviour towards women. Unfortunately, many men expected the typical female responsibilities to continue in the historically conventional manner (Chinchilla, 1990; Metoyer, 2000). Chinchilla (1990) stated that in 1988 women who worked outside the home spent 56% of their work day on domestic labor compared to 9% for male workers, creating an 18-hour day for female agricultural workers and a 16-hour day for female industrial workers.

In 1990 with the election of Violeta Chamorro and the introduction of neoliberal policies, several of the progressive reforms achieved during the previous decade were overturned and women lost jobs and social services (Babb, 2001). This period emphasized privatization and export-led industrialization that frequently marginalized women (Paige, 1997; Metoyer, 2000; Babb, 2001). Autonomous social movements surfaced taking up a wide range of issues: maternal health, violence against women, the environment, gay and lesbian rights, and the economic crisis. Independent groups organized meetings, marches and conferences to embrace human rights and gender politics as a response to a government which was moving sharply to the right (Babb, 2001).

The history of coffee in Nicaragua

The consolidation of the Nicaraguan coffee export structure did not happen until the Zalaya administration of the 1890’s, representing the reformist elements amongst the local coffee growers, came to power. Coffee production had doubled by 1899 as a result of land reorganization,, loans to finance the construction of infrastructure, and vagrancy laws to

encourage labour recruitment (Paige, 1997; Biderman, 1983). This regime also provided incentives for coffee cultivation and for foreign immigration resulting in a greater number of European settlers focused on producing for the world coffee market, as also occurred in Costa Rica and Brazil at this time (Biderman, 1983).

The coffee boom that started in the late 19th century changed the social division of labour as both labour and land were transformed into commodities. Land was privatized and many small producers were forced to sell their labour power as a means of survival (Biderman, 1983). Precapitalist social relations continued through the initial development of coffee, especially on the cattle haciendas that had begun to grow coffee. This occurred while the partially proletariat labour force relied upon subsistence food production to supplement low wages. The emergence of a class of landlord coffee growers led to the period of capitalist development in Nicaraguan agriculture (Biderman, 1983). Biderman (1983) describes this period as an evolution into capitalism as mechanisms of surplus extraction grew, encompassing long working days and various forms of debt peonage.

A more scientific system of agriculture became standardized and by the 1900's included the use of high levels of chemical inputs (Rice, 1999). The labour intensity of this large-scale system was much more exhausting for the workers and they often suffered from adverse side effects caused by the chemicals used (Paige, 1997; Fridell, 2007). The Zalaya administration was overthrown in 1909 and the development of capitalism in Nicaraguan agriculture became much slower as the traditional oligarchy of the landed and merchant classes regained control. The coffee industry dominated the Nicaraguan economy throughout the early 1900s; while mining, lumbering and banana cultivation were also prominent (Biderman, 1983; Charlip, 2003).

Once the Somoza dictatorship took control in 1933, agricultural production made a transition in Nicaragua, to a plantation economy. Small-scale production served the domestic market in Nicaragua, while the coffee planters controlled processing and exports and many small producers were pushed off the land (Biderman, 1983; Motoyer, 2000).

From the 1950s to the 1970's the Somoza dictatorship put resources into the development of the non-coffee industries. Coffee continued as a cash crop for small producers and was still profitable for large-scale producers (Paige, 1997). During the period of the Sandanista revolution and related political turmoil, the production of all agricultural products was interrupted, but plantation production felt the greatest impact as there was little or no agricultural labour force available (Paige, 1997; Motoyer, 2000).

At this time changes in the coffee industry were most significant in terms of the formation of agricultural cooperatives, and the land reform policies which confiscated land from the planters for redistribution to the landless (Corragio & Irvin, 1985; Paige, 1997; Motoyer, 2000). However, the internal civil war brought great distress to rural communities and interrupted much of the coffee production (Paige, 1997; Motoyer, 2000). Throughout the 1980's and 1990's funding institutions, especially USAID, implemented numerous projects aimed at the modernization of coffee production in Central America. This approach saw increased production as the solution of the coffee crisis. It did not succeed, but caused detrimental societal and environmental impacts (Rice, 1999).

Following the election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990, neo-liberal policies returned the agro-export economy to its pre-Revolution private owners and privatized the national banking system (Paige, 1997) while Fair Trade was introduced to Nicaragua. Through the work of many religious organizations, cooperatives joined the Fair Trade system. By 2007 there were 18 cooperatives within Nicaragua producing and selling Fair Trade coffee and several had dual certifications for Fair Trade production of other crops as well (based on fieldwork data, 2007).

The case of the SOPPEXCCA cooperative in Jinotega, Nicaragua

"We are doing well, but we are fighting" (SOPPEXCCA President, February 5, 2007). SOPPEXCCA operates generally just as any other Fair Trade cooperative, but its director has

learned from her past experiences in its precursor cooperative. The director started SOPPEXCCA with members who had all been a part of a previous cooperative that had fallen apart. With her administrative and agronomic experience, they made agreements with previous buyers and the Fair Trade Labeling Organization (FLO). FLO and the buyers aided the organization in regaining its stability with many loans and much advice.

SOPPEXCCA was formed in 1997 and in less than ten years it had paid off all its loans. In 2007, SOPPEXCCA had 15 sub-cooperatives totaling 596 members who cultivated a total of 2,539.25 manzanas with 1,225 manzanas actually in coffee intermixed amongst other crops (1 manzana equals 1.74 acres or .704 hectare). At that time the income of their members for each individual producer averaged US\$780-800 per year while the average income in the whole department of Jinotega was about \$650. The cooperative members recognize that a strong relationship between staff and producers, and links among producers provides the strength that will help them continue.

“Fair Trade gives us good feelings of solidarity, and good feelings of cooperation...under Fair Trade producers can live...the coffee of SOPPEXCCA gives opportunities to the producers” (SOPPEXCCA Technician, February 5, 2007).

In 2007 the organization had nine technical staff, made up of one manager and eight technical officers, with four technicians in training, each with their own specialization including environment, diversification, quality, youth, and gender. Each sub-cooperative is the responsibility of one technical officer who visits them at least once a week. The activities during these visits vary from meeting with the president or other council members of the sub-cooperative to going out to individual farms and talking to farmers. Visits always include conversations and activities beyond business, often evolving into long conversations about the family, community and land while sipping coffee. In addition to their regular visits, technical officers also collaborate to organize workshops, special activities or help carry out projects at the sub-cooperatives. It is important to recognize that all projects and workshops are for entire communities and are not limited to cooperative members.

There are many issues that the technical officers must attempt to tackle. The environmental specialists teach about planting methods that will decrease erosion and the incorporation of soil stabilizing plants into the cropping pattern to help reduce the loss of topsoil. They also teach safe methods for disposing of the water and pulp waste produced during the processing of the coffee. The water that rinses the coffee after fermentation is referred to as “honey water” and can be very toxic if allowed to run into nearby waterways. They also teach about composting the large amount of pulp that is left over after de-pulping, the first step in processing the coffee beans..They are also taught to dry the pulp and spread it at the base of the coffee plants. Many of these techniques were once common, but have been lost and replaced by the use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides.

Working with the youth is an especially important specialization for the technical officers in SOPPEXCCA. As the president of SOPPEXCCA explained, the work of the cooperative and the hope that they have is for the future of their youth. He said the ideas of the cooperative are only getting started, it is a “road” that was started with the inception of the cooperative, but the youth are the ones that will really be able to benefit from what they do now and follow on from what they have started. The technical officers working with youth must help keep this “road” going and maintain the cooperative’s hope for the future. They do this by working with the schools, communicating with teachers and parents to make sure their needs are met. They also work with the communities that would like to build a school and help them organize their social fund and any other funding necessary to make the school possible.

Technical officers also hold youth workshops that teach children about avoiding violence, respect and helping in their homes and communities as well as various aspects of coffee production. The teenagers learn the details about what makes high quality coffee from cultivation through processing, while also learning about the other various careers that might be available in

the coffee industry. The technicians also help parents to establish savings for their children to help in purchasing land in the future or maybe continue their education. These programmes that are provided to the communities are available for all young people who are interested.

“We don’t exclude children of parents that are not members, we work with all equally” (SOPPEXCCA Technical officer, February, 5, 2001).

As one of SOPPEXCCA’s greatest concerns, gender inequality is a very difficult and important issue on which they have worked with diligence. Efforts are aimed at gender equality within the sub-cooperatives and its producers, but they also address it in the communities of the producers. These efforts include workshops on domestic violence, gender equality within the home, and adult education courses. They also work with women as they receive loans, acquire land and other processes necessary to succeed in the cooperative that require participation in the public sphere, which is frequently unfamiliar to women. A strong aspect of the gender programs is sex education including reproductive rights and sexual responsibility for men and women, adults and youth, which is something that has traditionally been neglected in Nicaragua.

Gender composition of SOPPEXCCA

On average, each of the fifteen sub-cooperative’s memberships includes about one-third women producers. There is a total membership of 596 people and 197 are female. The cooperative Odorico de Andrea is one exception as it was initially started by all women and only recently allowed the first man, the son of a member, to join. They did not start with any intention to exclude men. They were simply a group of women that learned about SOPPEXCCA and organized themselves so that they could be a part of the cooperative.

In the cooperatives where female membership is nearly equal to or greater than that of men, the average amount of land per member is one to three manzanas and women own roughly one fifth of the land area. It is also important to recognize the gender composition of the staff. All of the administrative team is female but the staff working directly with the coffee as it arrives at SOPPEXCCA is male, the director is female, and of the technical officers three are female, nine male and their manager is male.

The majority of women interviewed acquired their land through the assistance of SOPPEXCCA and the help of loans. The exceptions included a women abandoned by her husband, but SOPPEXCCA helped with the legal paperwork to transfer the land to her name. There was one who had land jointly with her husband until he bought his own parcel, and two others whose fathers had given them land to start growing coffee. These last two lived adjacent to their father’s land, but neither of their fathers was a member of SOPPEXCCA.

All of the women interviewed knew the current and past conditions of their farms very well and often voluntarily showed their documents for the years they had been members of the cooperative. Half of the women interviewed did say that they had their children help to document the information since their own education was limited. During times, such as the harvest, when there was a larger amount of record keeping needed the majority of women said that they did the paperwork at night when all other work had been completed.

The women interviewed said they did attend meetings. It is very important that all members attend meetings, though when both husband and wife are members the interviewees stated that occasionally only one spouse would attend. The majority of women that I spoke with felt confident about their understanding of the overall functioning of and current happenings in the cooperative.

Changes and impacts for producers as a result of the cooperative

All producers that were asked to give examples of changes in their lives as a result of their participation in the cooperative stated that the greatest difference was in the higher price they got for their coffee. They would give me examples of the purchases that they had made with the increased income. The majority of women mentioned purchases for the home first, often describing the regular daily purchases that are now possible such as oil, sugar, school notebooks and toilet paper. Then they would go on to describe larger purchases that have become possible such as furniture, school uniforms, televisions, wood burning ovens, and often a new house. An example of this came from a certified organic producer who was visited several times: *"I have bought many things for my children...and also some things for the house, I bought this table and chairs"* (referring to the plastic table and chairs where we sat). After describing these purchases most women would then go on to describe purchases for the farm such as tools, a family processing facility (always built with additional loans), additional land and livestock. Male interviewees would mention similar examples, but the larger purchases were named first in all cases, usually being a farm related items.

Non-material changes in producers' lives, family dynamics and community

Producers gave examples and told many stories about the non-material changes in their lives. Many members appreciated the financial security the cooperative provides for its members leading to greater overall peace of mind. Many people had experienced periods of financial or emotional difficulty when the cooperative was able to provide help. There was also the security of having an easy and accessible outlet for their coffee rather than having to deal with the stress and uncertainty of local markets.

All the interviewees discussed the difficulties of coffee production and the large time commitments during periods of heavy workloads. Women explained that during these times they would have the help of their children or in two cases they used hired help to finish all the necessary work at home. During the harvest period women cooked three meals a day for the hired workers, in addition to their regular work, so the cooking starts in the very early hours of the morning. All women said that their children helped to prepare food. They usually clarified this saying that both male and female children helped in the kitchen, but one interviewee specifically said with a laugh that her sons did not help cook when asked which children were helpful. The majority of the women said that their husbands helped around the house and in the kitchen, and there were no statements declaring their husbands did not help at all. Two women did explain that their husbands were especially helpful after attending the gender workshops that SOPPEXCCA offered. However, most women said that they woke up earlier than their husbands to start preparing food and frequently went to bed later.

The men interviewed were very appreciative of women being involved in the cooperative. They saw the economic benefits of female participation and often made jokes that their wives grew better coffee. Two of the men did say that they were trying to help their wives with more tasks around the house.

Difficulties for female producers in SOPPEXCCA

Many difficulties for female producers were articulated in all interviews although the lengths that SOPPEXCCA had gone to help women were noted. Male producers explained how much more difficult it is for female producers outside the cooperative. Women gave examples of how much the cooperative has helped them with various aspects of their production and household lives.

Most difficulties that they mentioned were related to their initial adjustment period when they first started in the cooperative. Completing the necessary paperwork and attending meetings was often difficult for women at first. Other difficulties such as understanding the payment system, decision-making for their own property, and adjusting to the responsibility of their own parcel were also mentioned. Some women explained to me the difficulties in adjusting to the cooperative's requirements and quality standards. A female producer explained, "*I had to learn a lot about how to produce better coffee and what the coffee does to the environment. We learned how to keep our water clean.*"

About half of the women interviewed did not work with their husbands at all, but the other half worked together for the regular management and harvesting of the parcel while the cleaning and sorting of the coffee was done separately. The two groups of women had differing perspectives on their situations. The women who did not work with their husbands took great pride in that separation, but recognized their greater responsibility. While the other women acknowledged that they needed their husbands' help on the land, they did not want anyone, except maybe their children, to help with cleaning and sorting the coffee. When women spoke about their need for help it was because of the amount of work and also the difficulty of the work. One female producer said to me, "*it is hard work for women, the machete is hard work.*" Generally, the women with larger pieces of land preferred to hire help rather than ask their husbands for help. The majority of the producers, male and female, do have to hire workers if only for one week during the harvest. This has the potential to create difficulties for women as they must manage and feed the harvesting team. However, women did recognize that if they did not have their own land they would only be cooking for those harvesting their husband's land, but they preferred to do more work and receive the monetary reward, the personal pride, and the cooperative benefits.

When discussing the amount of work it takes to produce high quality coffee and manage a household, women and men acknowledge the workload. They would respond with a smile saying it is all worthwhile for the various benefits that they receive. Women often sighed explaining that during the harvest it is especially hard, but would then give credit to their families who made it easier and the great financial reward in the end. Two women that I spoke with have now increased their income and property size to a level where they are able to hire help in the kitchen when they are especially busy.

Differences between SOPPEXCCA and other cooperatives

Producers, staff, and those outside the cooperative gave many examples of the differences in SOPPEXCCA compared with other cooperatives. These included the regular communication and visits, the personal interaction with the family, the dedication to help in every aspect of the producer's lives as much as possible and the cooperative's concerns for all the communities as a whole. When compared with other cooperatives SOPPEXCCA is considered to be exceptionally personal and this is something that was recognized to be important in the most successful cooperatives as it maintains the faith of members, builds trust and allows the staff to truly know the members in order to understand their needs. Another difference that was easily observed in SOPPEXCCA, but also noted during interviews and conversations with others outside the cooperative, is that the director makes all the difference with her determination and genuine care for her members.

My interviewees also said that SOPPEXCCA was willing "*to take on the issues*" as the FLO representative said. This was exemplified as he described their approach to gender, how they took on gender issues in a very concrete and well thought out manner. He explained the mentality of the SOPPEXCCA staff and members as they approach gender issues, "*it's not imposed, let's work on it, at our level within our existing culture.*" They worked little by little,

“*softly*” at a time when people were ready to approach the topics. He also stated that the SOPPEXCCA approach is just “*good practice*”, a model for other cooperatives.

The future of Fair Trade

SOPPEXCCA staff and the representatives from FLO and Trans Fair had perspectives on the future that were very different. They all agreed that there is a great potential for Fair Trade, but there were numerous factors that might affect its future. Some of the thoughts about the future of Fair Trade were:

- it is a practical model that really works, but not the only answer
- producers are willing to produce, but consumers need more education so that they are more willing to buy
- FLO and certifying organizations need to help find alternatives and resist the market pressures such as the intense competition for quality and the large, corporate producers that are trying to buy into this niche market
- producing cooperatives need more help with the initial certification process (expensive and complicated), administrative capacity (difficult to keep up with FLO requirements), planning, communication (with FLO and distributors) and marketing

These thoughts about the future of Fair Trade from the producer, consumer and certifier all create scepticism about the future. All those interviewed said that when it works it is great, but it does not always work. Some cooperatives fail completely, many have to sell a percentage of their crop as conventional just to sell everything, while others have trouble maintaining the necessary high quality so only sometimes they can sell as Fair Trade producers. The capitalist free market economy creates a great deal of pressure at all points of the commodity chain, which realistically creates an uncertain future.

The connections between traditional gender roles and the divisions that exist in agriculture, the functions of Fair Trade and the overall social impacts it works towards, and the volatile and intense history of the global coffee market were obviously intertwined. They all play a role in understanding how female coffee producers have arrived at the typically suppressed and marginalized positions that have historically existed throughout the conventional coffee industry. The historical context of the Nicaraguan countryside and most importantly the feminist movement is a major factor that plays a role in the success of the SOPPEXCCA cooperative as they tackle gender inequality amongst coffee producers. Also, the grassroots level leadership was required for the success of the cooperative, but most importantly for its success in empowering female producers. However, if it were not for the existence of the Fair Trade system, which provides the guidelines and cooperative structure, there would not be a starting point for changes in gender roles, making an even more difficult hurdle for the cooperative.

The Fair Trade process uses a network of people focused on reducing the international supply chain and information gap between consumers and producers. Ultimately this creates an opportunity for producers to make a sustainable living from their farms. In the case of SOPPEXCCA this network has been guided by ideology and practices that have advanced the empowerment of women through improved health care, education, product marketing, production and management practices, access to loans, community infrastructure, family relations, support for the future of their children, and overall their family’s well-being. The importance of the Fair Trade process in the accomplishment of these goals is the guaranteed price, structural & organizational support and access to consumers who also support these goals. It is necessary for the consumers to understand the process so that they are willing to choose Fair Trade products over the various other product options. Consumers play the most important role in the entire process since they hold the power for the system to grow into something even greater or be a failure. When consumers understand the impacts of the Fair Trade process on producers and

commit to buying products through this system they are connecting with the producers by supporting an improved life, healthy communities and a hopeful future. Understanding the benefits of Fair Trade and the potential impacts on women is needed for consumers so that they aid in the success of this process.

All the benefits that the women of SOPPEXCCA receive as coffee producers do not come without costs. They work longer days than male producers, they must adjust to an unfamiliar lifestyle, and they rely upon their children to help at home and with the required paperwork. However, the women continue to grow coffee, they encourage friends and family to do the same, and they are incredibly grateful to be a part of the cooperative. The female producers are self-sacrificing for their families, communities, and most importantly for the future of their children.

It is apparent that Fair Trade does provide an avenue for change, but it is not the only factor needed to create change, especially for women. It is valid for FLO to state that gender is an area of impact. However, if Fair Trade is not carefully managed and directed towards change for women it will not be able to combat local patriarchal traditions. Cooperatives must take on this area of impact as a goal that they will address individually in the manner most appropriate for them. As recognized in the literature, traditional gender roles in coffee producing regions are strong. Women must be empowered to address the issues themselves in the manner that is best suited for their situation.

SOPPEXCCA was started with a clear goal to work with female producers from its inception. The director and the producers remembered what was possible for women during the revolution. The feminist movement was still strongly felt by the director and female producers when SOPPEXCCA was started. The director worked closely with the producers and paid detailed attention to the needs individuals, their families, and communities and how they could be successfully a part of the coffee industry. The Fair Trade system matched their social impact goals and their desire to bring equity to coffee producers and their rural communities. The function of Fair Trade in this situation is that it provided a higher income to the producers, funding for social projects and offered equal opportunities to men and women. The Fair Trade certification has been the foundation from which they were able to build the cooperative that exists today. It brought the income and standardized verification that helped them gain access to outside funding that supported gender programs and other social programs.

How Fair Trade benefits the producers in the local context

During the agricultural reform of the Sandanista period in Nicaragua cooperative development amongst peasants and rural workers was emphasized along with the inclusion of both men and women in these rural organizations (Deere, 1983). However, most cooperative developments of the Sandanista period did not succeed far beyond their period of political power and the inclusion of women was not an easy adjustment so it as well did not continue without the federal support (Deere, 1983). Therefore, the rural population in Nicaragua was not unfamiliar with the concepts of cooperatives and female producers being alongside men in these organizations, but they simply needed the appropriate timing and guidance to reach success.

This study shows that the SOPPEXCCA cooperative would not have been such a success for women farmers without being a part of Fair Trade, which provides the means by which women are empowered as producers, mothers, and community members. Though, it is not Fair Trade alone that has created this success. It is the hard work and determination of the cooperative staff and the female producers themselves. The recent history of dictatorship, revolution, civil war and the feminist movement in Nicaragua set the stage for the cooperative to make physical and mental changes for cooperative members a more realistic endeavour.

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