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Gendered Dimensions of Labor and Living Incomes Among Coffee Farmers in Southern Mexico

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Abstract

The Fairtrade Standard for Small-Scale Producer Organizations was recently adjusted to reflect core International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on good working conditions. The standards require smallholders to offer permanent and temporary workers training on labor rights as well as gradual salary increases to close the gap between existing wages and living income targets. However, many smallholder coffee producers depend on inexpensive labor sources like wage laborers, household members, or other community members who engage in reciprocal or collective labor exchanges to meet quality demands and comply with certification standards. Coffee producers in southern Mexico face labor-intensive farm renovations, tight labor markets, and the advancing age (and declining size) of farm families. These shifting labor burdens have differential gender impacts, and farmers find it difficult to finance long-term farm investments at current Fairtrade prices. Thus, a living income—whether for farmers or laborers—remains a distant dream, not an achievable, short-term objective. Using data from nearly 500 smallholder coffee producers in Oaxaca, Mexico, this article explores i) how Fairtrade-certified smallholders manage the labor demands of coffee production and ii) how these practices are specifically gendered. We explore how smallholders meet labor demands and the rationales underpinning their methods, noting the constraints, opportunities, and why these labor practices matter for smallholders, their communities, and long-term Fair Trade supply chain resilience.

Keywords coffee, Fair Trade, living income, smallholders, gender

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1. Introduction

Selling Fairtrade-certified products through differentiated market channels that prioritize quality requires increased labor inputs from coffee producers. To meet these quality demands and comply with certification standards, many smallholder coffee producers in Latin America rely on inexpensive labor sources (e.g., household members, wage laborers, and neighbors who work for pay or engage in reciprocal labor exchanges). Fairtrade labor certification standards are guided by an "enhanced labor rights approach" that upholds national laws and international conventions on employment conditions. This includes the right to association and collective bargaining, a prohibition on forced and child labor, and the right to occupational health and safety.

Fairtrade labelling historically neglected labor standards on small farms. However, in recent years, Fairtrade has developed Standards for Small-Scale Producer Organizations (Fairtrade, 2019) that reference the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) core conventions on good working conditions. For instance, the standards require smallholders to offer their workers (permanent and temporary) training on workers' rights (3.3.17) and gradual salary increases (3.3.25). These standards, while laudable, are difficult or even impossible for smallholders to meet. Coffee producers in Latin America often have limited formal education and their earnings barely cover the cost of production. A recent survey of participants in the "Producción para el Bienestar" assistance program (Mexican Secretaría de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural) found that coffee producers technically operate below the break-even point (when food and firewood production are excluded).

Thus, this worker-enabling compliance model faces substantial problems in realizing its empowerment objectives (Raynolds, 2018). The standards are supplementary—even adjacent—to the movement's central focus on poverty alleviation. Fairtrade has promoted increased prices, market access, and social premiums while excluding more robust understandings of transformation, which might include greater attention to labor conditions and quality logistics. Recently, Fairtrade has acknowledged the need to expand the living income approach to smallholders (through sustainable pricing, increased Fairtrade sales, sustainable farm yields, strategic use of the Fairtrade premium, and enhanced efficiencies within producer organizations). This living income approach is important: Fairtrade is the only certification system that requires annual increases to close the gap between existing wages and living income targets (Raynolds, 2018). However, in the context of coffee production in southern Mexico, this living income seems more of a distant dream than an achievable, short-term objective.

This article explores how organizational efforts to implement Fairtrade requirements are particularly onerous in the context of coffee production in Latin America. Many Fair Trade producers are growing elderly and their coffee trees are aged, diseased, unproductive, and in need of renovation. We draw on survey, interview, and certification data from nearly 500 smallholder coffee producers in Oaxaca, Mexico, to explore how Fairtrade-certified smallholders manage the (gendered) labor demands of coffee production. We examine how smallholders meet labor demands, the rationales underpinning their methods, and the constraints and opportunities they face. Lastly, we consider why these labor practices matter for smallholders, their communities, and long-term Fair Trade supply chain resilience.

2. Background: Labor in Fairtrade-Certified Coffee Production

The vast majority of the world's very poor live in rural areas and depend on agriculture-based livelihoods. Smallholder farmers—those who cultivate for both food security and income on small plots using primarily family labor—represent 75% of the world's farms, 60% of the global agricultural workforce, and provide over 80% of the food consumed in the developing world (Donatti et al., 2019). Many scholars and practitioners see improving smallholder productivity and increasing their participation in commercial agriculture, while buffering against unpredictable commodity markets, as an important step in poverty reduction (DeFries et al., 2017; Smith, 2015). Fairtrade certification has become a central mechanism for achieving these goals, and, as Oya et al. (2017) point out, smallholders are often identified as a target population for certification systems. Fair trade, as a concept, "refers to a critique of the historical inequalities inherent in international trade and to a belief that trade can be made more socially just" (Raynolds & Bennett, 2015, p. 3). However, the definition of this term can be problematic when applied to smallholders, whom

Fairtrade defines as producers dependent on family labor, not non-family labor. This allows large producers, who may only hire seasonal laborers, to enter Fairtrade markets and benefit from associated higher prices and premiums, which are linked to volume.

Fair Trade producers are organized into vastly different organizational structures—from small groups to large business enterprises encompassing thousands of smallholders—with significantly different producer participation, organizational structure, and power dynamics (Terstappen et al., 2013). Fair Trade impacts are shaped by local patterns of inequality including unequal land distribution patterns (Darko et al., 2017) or gender inequity (Smith, 2015). Producer variability determines which production costs accrue to farmer organizations and individual farmer-members, including significant labor costs and fees (monetary contributions). Fairtrade certification's *organizational* costs include administration and record-keeping, farmer training, auditing, and labeling fees (Bray & Neilson, 2017). These expenses are often paid fully or in part by value chain partners (e.g., exporters, processors, or retailers) and are sometimes subsidized by nonprofit or governmental partners. Nonetheless, some of Fairtrade's organizational fees are borne by smallholders and their community organizations in the form of cash payments or in-kind contributions to organizations. Additional costs accrue to producer households from Fairtrade-mandated organizational participation. Maintaining Fairtrade certification requires organizational work like attending meetings, acknowledging sales payments, debating and approving community improvement projects, and electing organizational leaders (Lyon et al., 2010). This organizational work is costly: hours devoted to organizational labor cannot be spent pursuing other forms of work.

Significant household efforts may also be required since i) Fairtrade buyers require labor-intensive "gourmet," specialty, and quality products, and ii) meeting certification standards requires expensive inputs and labor. These (indirect) costs increase organizational and farmstead overhead which, in turn, reduce farmer income. The increased labor inputs required to achieve and maintain Fairtrade certification are magnified for smallholders. Many fair trade studies identify increased workload as a major indirect cost of certification (Oya et al., 2017). While certification can lead to higher incomes, its impact on poverty is minimal (Jena et al., 2012) since significant labor and monetary costs are not always adequately accounted for in assessments of Fairtrade's financial impacts (Wilson & Mutersbaugh, 2015). To comply with quality and certification standards, smallholders must either self-exploit (by paying themselves a lower wage) or draw additional labor from household members, migrant laborers, and community members who engage in wage labor or participate in unpaid reciprocal labor practices. Hired laborers often lack their own coffee land and may be less well-off.

In this sense, the Fairtrade markets create a small number of community jobs in production and processing or through social premium investments in community programs (Terstappen et al., 2013). However, despite the often-heightened labor demands associated with Fairtrade-certified production, fair trade scholarship has tended to neglect issues of labor distribution, labor standards, and gendered labor impacts on small farms (Darko et al., 2017; Neilson & Pritchard, 2010; Smith & Dolan, 2006). Davenport and Low (2012, p. 332) identify a "hidden hierarchy" of labor within agricultural production that Fair Trade movement discourse does little to illuminate.

Indeed, Fair Trade's promotion of an archetypal small farmer who works the land alongside family members obscures the role of both paid and unpaid household labor in smallholder production (Guthman, 2004). Wage labor is often provided by landless and impoverished workers who migrate for seasonal contract work on smallholder farms; they complete discrete tasks like applying fertilizer, harvesting products, or working in processing facilities. Furthermore, recent feminist labor research has underscored how un- and under-paid household (in this case, communal) labor is mobilized to support Fairtrade-labeled production (Lyon et al., 2010, Barrientos, 2023). These empirical realities raise questions about the Fair Trade movement's failure to address the well-being and labor rights of hired and unpaid workers (Utting, 2009; Valkila & Nygren, 2010). Importantly, smallholder coffee farmers themselves are often resource-poor, subject to volatile market conditions, and unable to offer adequate work standards, minimum wages, and other benefits (Oya et al., 2017).

3. Research Questions and Methods

We examine how smallholder coffee producers in Oaxaca, Mexico, manage the (gendered) work of coffee production to better understand the labor demands of Fairtrade-certified commodity production. We ask i) how Fairtrade-certified production reshapes labor practices associated with coffee production, ii) how Fairtrade requirements affect labor mobilization and gendered labor distributions, and iii) what consequences exist for the long-term resilience of Fairtrade coffee's supply chain.

Fieldwork (2014–2022) was undertaken by a team of geographers and anthropologists from the University of Kentucky and the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca. We conducted participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, life history interviews (114 producers), and a stratified survey of 489 coffee producers who belonged to one of five producer organizations in major coffee-producing regions in the state, including the *Sierra Norte*, *Sierra Sur*, *Mixteca*, and *Istmo*. The participating coffee producer organizations represented diverse producer experiences (e.g., levels of out-migration, organizational age, and market position). Seventy-seven unaffiliated, or *libre,* coffee producers—those who do not belong to Fair Trade organizations—were also surveyed. The survey collected gender-disaggregated data, and we interviewed male and female coffee producers separately.

We also conducted informal, unstructured interviews with cooperative members, management, and staff and engaged in participant observation at cooperative meetings and in producers' homes. Team members later conducted follow-up life history interviews and agricultural field surveys in one community per region; these results were analyzed using SPSS and Atlas.ti; human subjects approval was obtained through the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board. The life history interviews specifically explored the intersecting rationales and meanings of membership and participation in Fairtrade certified coffee organizations and production practices. The fact that the Oaxaca research was conducted by a team potentially resulted in response bias among participating coffee farmers. However, we took steps to minimize this through the triangulation of data gathered, a mixed-methods approach, and the validation of findings with focus group participants. The research focused exclusively on the members of Fairtrade producer organizations (and some *libre* coffee producers who do not belong to Fairtrade coffee organizations). Consequently the results do not provide deep insights into the experiences of landless laborers or coffee farmers who choose not to join Fairtrade organizations.

3.1 Research Site Description

The examples discussed in this paper are principally drawn from two Fairtrade-certified coffee producer organizations: *Café de Oro*, which has maintained its Fairtrade certification for over 20 years and *UPCOBJ* (Unión de Productores de Café Organizados Benito Juárez), which only recently achieved Fairtrade certification. We compare these two groups to highlight how long-term Fairtrade market participation does not significantly impact smallholders' incomes, labor practices, or resources to address livelihood challenges.

Café de Oro is a large cooperative in southwestern Oaxaca (in the *Costa* and *Mixteca* regions) with members in 25 different communities and an office and dry mill in a regional commercial center. It has a total of 711 members, 312 of whom are women (44%). The number of female members has increased substantially over the past 10 years: only 12% of women have belonged to the cooperative for more than 20 years versus 36% of men; 49% of female members joined in the last 10 years, while only 14% of men joined during the same time period. This rate parallels the sample as a whole, which showed 42% of women joining organizations in the last 10 years (in the whole sample, 34% of men joined during the same time frame).

Café de Oro has a long history in the region. Many members trace their participation back to 1989, the end of the International Coffee Agreement and the governmental regulatory coffee agency INMECAFE (Instituto Mexicano de Café). The group originally formed as a second-tier member of a larger state-wide organization. However, in 2006, Café de Oro members voted to leave that group and independently export their own coffee. Their organic coffee is primarily sold to roasters in the United States through an importer, while their transition coffee (not yet certified organic) is sold to an Oaxaca-based roaster and coffee shop chain. The group is well-known for its high-quality Fairtrade- and organically-certified OCIA (Organic Crop Improvement Association) coffee, and produces

about eight containers each year (154,560 kilos or 280 sacks of 69 kilos per container). They own a dry mill and warehouse where they store the coffee in parchment, process it, and load it onto trucks for shipment. The group's relatively strong market position influences members' views of coffee's long-term viability: 70% of surveyed members agreed that coffee was more or less a worthwhile activity.

Café de Oro members cultivate an average of 2.6 hectares of coffee, yielding 533 kilos annually. They live in modest homes: 51% of members had dirt floors, 65% had dry or rustic latrines, and only 16% had running water inside their homes. Perhaps more importantly, 67% of the members reported experiencing days without sufficient food in the past year, although a number of participants linked the food deficit to a mudslide-induced road blockage rather than to insufficient money. Lack of food is a common concern among Latin American coffee producers (Kimmel, 2011; aftertheharvestorg.blogspot.com/p/watch.html). While each Café de Oro member owns their own coffee parcels, 43% also reportedly worked for cash as casual day laborers for other producers. Despite this, members were heavily dependent on their coffee income, with 63% reporting that it constituted half or more of their total household income (18% said that it is their sole source of income).

UPCOBJ includes members from 11 different communities scattered across the *Sierra Mixe* and Northern Isthmus regions. Formed in 2008, the organization has only 150 members (43% women). Unlike Café de Oro, from its inception, UPCOBJ has always had more female members, with its first-year membership including 39% women. Many of the members joined out of dissatisfaction with a previous coffee organization (69% of men and 33% of women members previously belonged to a different group). UPCOBJ produces Fairtrade-certified, organic coffee that is primarily imported into the U.S. market by a New York-based firm. UPCOBJ operates with a lower level of capitalization: it rents a bodega in the center of a small community which doubles as office space. The members are currently paying off a large debt due to losses incurred after a buyer failed to ship their green coffee, allowing it to degrade for several months after it was milled. The green coffee lost value and the buyer reportedly refused to honor the original contract price, leading to substantial losses. This debt created financial precarity that the organization is working diligently to overcome. UPCOBJ struggles to secure high coffee prices and long-term contracts since variable altitudes across member communities lead to uneven coffee quality. Many members also suffered substantial losses due to the spread of coffee rust across the region. Most members (67%) did not think coffee production was currently a worthwhile activity. The typical surveyed UPCOBJ member owned 3.3 hectares of coffee but produced only 267 kilos of coffee during the last harvest, a yield substantially lower than Café de Oro members (likely attributable to coffee rust). Furthermore, most UPCOBJ members speak either Zapotec or Mixe (79% of women and 86% of men). In Café de Oro, only 14% of members reported speaking (currently or previously) an indigenous language. (In the full Oaxacan study sample, 57% of coffee farmers reported the same.)

4. Gendered Labor Demands of Coffee Production

Gender-segregated or gender-sequential labor is common in rural Oaxacan communities. Women and men perform substantially different tasks in the household and in coffee production. Many coffee tasks—particularly those critical for achieving gourmet quality—were performed primarily by women (e.g., seedling preparation, picking, washing/drying, quality selection, and roasting/grinding). However, women's participation in coffee commercialization and organizational leadership was limited. This was partly due to cultural practices limiting women's mobility beyond the confines of their homes or agricultural spaces (e.g., coffee plots). Land inheritance customs also favor men over women. Many households do not practice income pooling; instead, men and women manage coffee income separately, and contribute to joint projects within conjugal contracts.

The surveyed members of Fairtrade-certified producer organizations in Oaxaca hired workers for an average of 25 days each year, and nearly 8% of coffee producers reported hiring workers for more than 50 days each year. There were strong gender differences. Women were much more likely to report that they never hired workers (61% vs. 39% of men). Within Café de Oro, men were significantly more likely to hire workers for up to two months of daily work (94% of men vs. only 51% of women). However, UPCOBJ smallholder members hired workers at comparable levels—44% of men and 39% of women reported hiring workers for up to two months of daily work. Per-

haps these gender differences stem from men having more land than women (median coffee holdings for men were three hectares versus women's two). Men also had more access to cash income, while women routinely used their coffee income to pay for household expenses. Women may also struggle to mobilize household or paid labor due to social and cultural constraints (Lyon et al., 2017).

4.1 Gender Difference and Labor Exchanges

Women's coffee plots frequently became spaces for women to gather and collaborate in unpaid coffee production tasks. Much of this work involves coffee and agricultural labor, and many of those who work together are also co-members of coffee organizations. Women were 60% more likely to participate in reciprocal labor and 30% more likely to participate in formal work exchanges. The greatest gender disparity was found in "heavy" labor tasks (e.g., shade regulation, pruning, and removing tree branches).

Women preferred to participate in collaborative labor on their coffee plots, while men often undertook their tasks alone or with hired laborers. This may be one way that women in Café de Oro compensate for their underutilization of paid labor. In Café de Oro, 51% of women and 46% of men reported participating in a labor exchange of some kind during the last production cycle; in UPCOBJ, these numbers were 36% of women and 25% of men (42% vs. 35% in the sample as a whole). These differences are not statistically significant. However, when considering our entire sample of Oaxacan farmers, the difference between men's and women's participation in labor exchanges is statistically significant (the two-tailed p value is .0132 using Fisher's exact test). Women's participation in labor exchanges may also respond to cultural norms that limit women's free movement in the community and surrounding countryside (coffee plots may require a 1–2 hour walk). In the whole Oaxacan sample, 32% of women reported never traveling to their most distant coffee plot alone (compared to only 6% of men). Similarly, 89% of women reported that they usually walk to their coffee plots with a family member or friend (as opposed to only 55% of men).

Women reported significantly more coffee-related labor than men (in addition to their domestic labor obligations). We asked farmers about who was primarily responsible for various coffee production and processing activities (for the respondent's own coffee only, not their spouse's). In both organizations, women identified themselves as the primary laborer in charge of coffee processing tasks (washing, depulping, and drying), while surveyed men were more likely to report that *they* themselves performed this labor. The reports for some activities were strikingly different. For example, in UPCOBJ, 82% of women reported that they were primarily responsible for drying coffee; only 53% of men reported that their wives performed this task (the findings were similar among Café de Oro at 81% vs. 53%). Similarly, within Café de Oro, 75% of women identified themselves as primarily responsible for harvesting the coffee in their own plots, whereas only 31% of men reported that their wives harvested their own coffee. These findings are based on self-reports and may not be completely accurate. However, they are worth mentioning because they: i) indicate that men may not recognize the labor women contribute, and ii) underscore methodological difficulties inherent in household survey methods by illustrating how gender norms may affect accounts of labor participation.

4.2 Gender, Labor Inputs, and Coffee Yields

In both Café de Oro and UPCOBJ, men produce significantly more coffee than women. This is partially due to differences in land holdings—men held more coffee land than women. However, women also have a significantly lower yield per hectare. Within Café de Oro, women produced, on average, 189 kilos/hectare (parchment) during the last cycle, while men produced 222 kilos/hectare. Within UPCOBJ, women produced 67 kilos/hectare while men produced 83, low averages that were attributed to substantial losses many members experienced as a result of coffee rust. Women's coffee parcels only yield (per hectare) 85% and 81% (respectively) of those owned by men. These differences in yields are slightly lower than the yields reported within the sample as a whole, with women yielding 93% of their male counterparts' production.

We believe these differences most likely manifest because men mobilize more hired labor for their coffee production. In some cases, they also have more experience with organic norms and practices. However, these differences in labor practices should not be narrowly construed as constraints on women's opportunities and livelihoods. Women invest their labor and assets into coffee plots partially for economic reward,

but also because their coffee fields sustain a "home away from home." Farms provide a space for women to meet with family and friends, cook food over open fires, let their children roam, and cultivate an array of medicinal plants and subsistence agricultural crops. For instance, our transect data show that women cultivate 10 times more bananas per hectare than men.

Coffee smallholders in Oaxaca meet the labor demands of production through variable combinations of paid labor, reciprocal labor exchanges with members of other households, and their own labor. These complex conditions of production are at odds with the archetypal Fair Trade farmer who cultivates coffee using only their own labor and occasional help from nuclear family members. These labor relations illuminate the difficulty in implementing worker rights training and salary increases for paid employees since a majority of the labor is unpaid and most hired labor is used only for discrete tasks, not routine production, planning, or supervision.

5. Discussion: Labor and Income Challenges

Thirty percent of coffee farmers did not think coffee production was a worthwhile activity and 44% planned to pursue other livelihood options in the future. However, more than 50% of the surveyed coffee producers reported that coffee sales constituted half or more of their household's annual income. Oaxaca is one of Mexico's poorest states (alongside Chiapas), with a Human Development Index score of .681, significantly below Mexico as a whole (and roughly on par with Botswana). Coffee production plays an essential role in sustaining the fabric of rural communities against this backdrop of poverty. Therefore, it was especially troubling that the average amount earned per kilo was only $40 MXN, significantly lower than the suggested "fair price" of $78.37 MXN. Coffee production—one of the only livelihood options in the region—fails to provide a living income, even for the members of Fairtrade certified producer organizations. This is problematic given that living incomes help to relieve smallholders' economic anxieties and contribute to their empowerment.

If coffee production remains one of the area's few viable livelihood strategies, the use of hired labor will likely increase in the coming years. This is because coffee producers in Oaxaca are relatively old (median age of 52 years old in our sample: women 49 versus men 56). Youth have been driven from the region by rural poverty and a lack of wage labor opportunities. Thirty percent of women and 44% of men in Café de Oro have at least one child living outside the community. The situation is even more intense for UPCOBJ members, where 39% of women and 56% of men have at least one child living outside the community. As one male member of Café de Oro explained, "there's a weakness here in our community that many people are older in age and it's definitely very rare that their children want to continue being farmers, so I think that within 10 years maybe there aren't going to be any coffee producers, on the one hand because of this old age and on the other because of the plagues." Aging coffee smallholders will need to augment with hired labor to meet the needs of production, further reducing their coffee profits.

Labor demands will also increase due to the need to renovate and replant spurred by chronic underinvestment and climate change. A coffee seedling typically takes three years to begin producing cherries, after which it will produce for 15 to 20 years. As coffee trees age, they become less productive and more vulnerable to diseases like coffee rust. Forty-three percent of the coffee plots owned by the surveyed Oaxacan producers are planted with trees that are older than 20 years, and yields are steadily decreasing. Replanting is a particularly laborious task, and many smallholders cultivate their own coffee seedlings in self-built nurseries. The old coffee trees need to be removed and the soil properly prepped with heavy organic fertilizers before seedlings can be planted. Furthermore, it often takes one to two hours to walk to the coffee plots, and few smallholders in the region own cargo animals to transport materials. It is estimated to cost between $3,000 and $5,000 USD to renovate one hectare of coffee in Latin America, not counting the three years of lost income while a producer waits for the seedlings to mature. This is a daunting expense given the low earnings reported by Fair Trade smallholders. Most are unwilling to make this investment. Only 10% of farmers whose fields were decimated during the coffee rust outbreak chose to replant with new rust-resistant seedlings. The remaining farmers chose to treat with copper fungicides or aggressively prune diseased trees, both less expensive and less labor-intensive options.

6. Conclusion: Gender and Supply Chain Resilience

In Oaxaca, women's participation in Fairtrade certified coffee cooperatives is uneven—ranging from 20% to 70%. Certified coffee networks are associated with significant equity challenges to gendered labor and cultural relations *within* producer communities and community-based cooperatives. For example, our research revealed that as the number of women coffee farmers in the region increased, so too did struggles over gendered land tenure, household and communal labor norms, and local gender forms of political participation. Struggles for gender equity have become part of life in the coffee communities. Local discourses of rights reflect on local lived experiences, including the productive labor performed by coffee smallholders of both genders. As one male coffee farmer shared, "People say that we need to be equal, that women have rights as do men. We do fight about this [in the community]: some say that we can't be equal because here, unlike the city, there are no wages; others say that women have equal rights because they work every day and never rest."

The women coffee producers reported high levels of household decision-making power and were more likely to report control over their income than their male counterparts. However, these significant advances in women's agency were offset by women's significant time poverty. They engaged in coffee production while bearing a disproportionate share of domestic labor obligations. This time poverty limited their ability to fully participate in coffee organizational governance (Lyon et al., 2017). As women seek to renegotiate their access to agricultural resources and spaces of community decision-making, such as those formed within Fairtrade certified coffee organizations, they also challenge local gender norms that have historically limited their access to economic and political spaces (Lyon et al., 2017, 2019). Improving female coffee farmers' livelihoods will require more sustainable, living incomes and structural changes that address women's time poverty and limited access to institutions. In short, the gendered threats women smallholders face in accessing decent work are pervasive across global agriculture (Raynolds, 2021).

This study on the intersection of Fairtrade certification, households, and gender has several policy implications. First, Fair Trade agriculture is not only differentiated by producer size, organizational framework, and commodity type, but also by variable modes of household production. Women-headed households have different labor needs and would benefit from specifically gender-oriented projects. Second, while Fairtrade-certified coffee production typically requires extra labor—work that falls upon women—no labor standards address this imbalance. Coffee designated for Fairtrade markets is additionally subject to a degree of "gourmet or specialty intensification" (i.e., coffee will not find a buyer in Fairtrade markets unless it meets demanding quality and flavor standards). Third, integration into Fairtrade production undoubtedly affects power relations within unpaid labor relations. It is unclear how a market-oriented movement like Fair Trade can address growing concerns over the myriad ways unpaid household labor undergirds profit relations in global commodity value chains. Grievance or pay-claim procedures might help, but, as noted above, these depend on Fair Trade support for strengthening gender equity in farmer organizations.

Fairtrade acknowledges the importance of a living income for smallholders. This could be realized through sustainable pricing, increased Fairtrade sales, sustainable farm yields, strategic use of the Fairtrade premium, and enhanced efficiencies within producer organizations. This aspirational living income would do more to appropriately recognize the substantial labor of specialized agricultural commodity production and the specific contributions of women or men (paid or unpaid). An enhanced Fairtrade living income policy would enable smallholders in Oaxaca to invest in their coffee production, using both hired and collaborative labor and agricultural inputs. This could translate into more sustainable farm yields, higher farm incomes, and better gender equity. However, the long-term resilience of coffee supply chains is increasingly in doubt, given the challenges facing many smallholders. The market alone cannot solve the living income problem: competing certifications and changing consumer preferences potentially weaken Fairtrade's efforts to enact required structural changes. Realizing a living income for smallholders in the coffee sector (and beyond) will depend on our ability to raise awareness and successfully partner with governments, businesses, and civil society organizations to effect change.

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