



International

Female Coffee Growers Find New Freedoms in Peru

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In Peru, female coffee growers have partnered with a U.S. import company to market their own brand of organic, fair-trade coffee. In addition to gaining more economic control, the women are finding their work is changing their culture as well.

NUEVO YORK, Peru (WOMENSENEWS)--Her hands move methodically down the branch, raking the red coffee cherries into the basket around her neck. She moves to the next branch, demonstrating the work of harvesting coffee. Watching her dexterity and strength, one would never guess that Rosa Cantalina Sanchez is 66 years old.

Glades Valencia, 14, is doing the same thing, running her hands down the branches as if she were braiding hair.

Sanchez and Valencia represent a life's work of coffee growing in northern Peru. Even though many of the region's farmers have attained "Fair Trade and Organic" certification in order to grow higher premium beans, the most a coffee-farming family can hope to make is \$1,200 a year, and only \$400 in poorer areas.

The average annual per-capita income for this region is about \$1,300, according to the Organic Products Trading Company, an import company based in Vancouver, Wash., that works with the growers. That level of poverty describes about 68,600 families in northern Peru who together produce 49 percent of Peru's coffee--about 273.2 million pounds--almost all of it grown for export.

In a rural, male-dominated society, the high level of poverty translates into special problems for young women, who are more often sent to the fields instead of school and who are married off as early as 12 to lighten the family's financial burden.

Sanchez is one of the 60 percent female majority of the rural, coffee-working population of Peru. For years she worked 10 to 12 hours a day during coffee harvest, only to receive whatever money her husband decided to give her after the coffee was sold. The fair trade co-ops have traditionally been a man's world supported by women's sweat, but in Peru things are changing for Sanchez and hundreds of women like her: They are demanding their own profit from their labor.

A Women-Owned Brand

In 2003, over 400 female growers in northern Peru decided to start their own coffee brand. They called it Cafe Femenino and made it a specialty coffee that would raise global awareness about the harsh gender inequality that the coffee workers face.

The growers sought the help of Isabel Uriarte Latorre, a Peruvian woman who, with her husband, has helped the country's agrarian communities for decades by showing cultivators how to form co-ops that can maximize their income and lead to local infrastructure improvements, such as roads.

Latorre, in turn, sought the help of Gay and Garth Smith of the Organic Product Trading Company, a coffee-importing firm that has a long-standing relationship with the growers in Peru. They agreed to buy the coffee, import it to the U.S. and sell it to their roasters.

Now, 60 roasters in the U.S., Canada and Australia willingly pay an extra two cents a pound over the purchase price to contribute to the women and to the Cafe Femenino Foundation, which focuses on the women's economic development. Roasters agree to donate an additional 2 percent of gross sales to the project or to a women's crisis center near their homes, and a woman in their business must sign the Cafe Femenino contract.

Cafe Femenino goes a step further than simply putting a fair-trade label on its coffee, which indicates that



Rosa Cantalina Sanchez is part of a women's coffee-growing co-op.

Credit: Sadie Hoagland.



Glades Valencia picks coffee in La Florida, Peru.

Credit: Sadie Hoagland.

it has been certified by the Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International in Bonn, Germany. The nongovernmental organization makes an independent consumer guarantee that the coffee has been bought at a fair, non-exploitative price from the farmer. This standard has been globally set at \$1.39 per pound, which can be up to \$1 above the market price for coffee.

Traditional Roles Are Changing

Women in Peru are traditionally seen as workers and mothers, not as decision-makers or landowners. "It is part of the culture that women are just for having children," Latorre says, estimating that the average woman in the most impoverished Cafe Femenino communities is the mother of seven.

In order for a woman to join the co-op, she must show that her own name is on the deed to the land she works. Since the coffee income is greater with the Cafe Femenino fair-trade program--the women make about 17 cents more per pound, or about 30 percent more than the average coffee farmer--it benefits the whole family, a persuasive argument for the husbands to cede land to their wives.

Latorre also sees to it that the money generated by Cafe Femenino is given directly to the female farmer. Another portion--the income from the two-cents-per-pound surcharge--is devoted to the co-op, for all the women to determine how it will be spent.

Cafe Femenino sent its first shipment in August 2004. Those 19,000 pounds of coffee brought in \$27,000 to the women's co-op. The first year's extra income has been invested in coffee production, but the psychological effects of the higher income are already rippling through the communities. Now women are meeting together independently to talk business, and the men are not preventing them from doing so.

Talk of Revolution

One such meeting takes place at dusk in the high mountain village of Nuevo York in Amazonia. Balloons hang brightly across the small town green as part of a celebration for the Smiths who have returned for their second visit. As a lively band plays Peruvian dance music, the women gather around Gay Smith and Latorre. They talk of needing more training in organic farming methods and better communication among themselves and with other Cafe Femenino growers across the Andes.

"We need to get into high schools and understand markets, we want to reclaim our rights as women," says one female grower, Santos Vasquez Dias, 57.

While the meetings are all about business, facilitators hope that the conversation will eventually expand to social needs. Latorre, for her part, already perceives a decrease in household violence. "Women are not being treated as badly," she says. "Men have more respect for women."

Smith notes how much more organized and confident the women are now, compared with her visit last year when the growers--even though no men were present--would hardly speak in meetings.

This year a few men stand at the edge of the circle with arms folded, as if guarding something. But the women ignore them; they want the men to be involved and to benefit from this project too. But it is clear that this time, they will be in charge.

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Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

For more information:

Cafe Femenino Coffee:

<http://www.cafefemeninofoundation.org>

Organic Products Trading Company:

<http://www.optco.com/>

Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International:

<http://www.fairtrade.net/>

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