

Women and Children: The Precarious Lives behind the Grains of Coffee

A Summary

1.0 The Situation of Women.

They are coffee workers – women who dedicate themselves to the work of planting and harvesting coffee beans, Guatemala’s principal export product. Though they dedicate their lives to this activity, that dedication does not mean that these women can extricate themselves from other roles that they play in their community and in the home. Rather, after finishing their daily work, they act as mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters, denying themselves a life marked by the satisfaction of their own interests.

Work in the field and household obligations are the two principal preoccupations of their lives – there is nothing else. In exchange for their work in the field they only receive between 12 and 25 Quetzales per day during harvest season. Those who do not participate in fieldwork dedicate themselves to productive commercial activities such as baking bread, making candles, selling tortillas or articles of daily consumption. The rest offer their services as domestic servants.

This reality is reflected in the investigation carried out from September 2001 until March 2002 by the Commission for the Verification of Codes of Conduct (COVERCO). The study is centered on the municipality of Colomba, Costa Cuca, located in the department of Quetzaltenango, the second most important department in the Republic of Guatemala.

Coffee cultivation is a major part of the Guatemalan economy. Colomba has been producing coffee since the 19th century; its terrain is ideal for coffee cultivation. Since that time, coffee production has attracted workers to the community, especially from one ethnic group, the Maya Mam.

Colomba and Quetzaltenango are joined in coffee cultivation by the departments of Santa Rosa, San Marcos, Guatemala, Alta Verapaz, Suchitepéquez, Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango, Escuintla, and on a lesser scale 11 more of the 22 departments which make up the Republic.

This study documents how complete family units depend economically on their work on the 97 farms that exist in the area.

As they struggle to survive, these families have no choice but to exclude from their budget such vital elements as education, professional health care, and recreation. Subsistence is the overriding concern.

The majority of the women achieve an income of between Q110.00 and Q150.00 (\$13.12 and \$19.48, respectively) each fifteen day pay period with workdays that usually exceed 12 hours.

In order to better understand the problem, Coverco selected 544 women from the designated area who ranged from 25 to 39 years of age and of 260 children and adolescents between 10 and 18 years of age. Of these minors, 110 were men and 150 were women.¹

One key for reading this study: Guatemalan society is characterized by impunity and silence. The people, especially women and children, are not accustomed to expressing their opinions or to sharing their experiences. You will find that, in many cases, the people who compose the sample choose not to respond to some questions. Anticipating this situation, we verified the tendencies signaled in the surveys by means of subsequent group exercises.

The existing patriarchal structure tends to recognize in women only their reproductive function and not their larger social roles in production or management. Women's work is considered secondary, a help or support for the man. Forty-two percent of those women surveyed did not respond to the question about how much time they spent harvesting coffee. We interpret this silence as a sign of how this work forms a part of their life in as much as eating, sleeping, or dedicating themselves to the daily needs and chores of the house.

The following sections summarize the traits of the women of Colomba who participated in our study.

1.1 Socioeconomic Information

1.1.1 Nutrition and Access to Health Care

The ongoing lack of fulfillment of basic human needs characterizes the women of Colomba. The middle-class family units manage to eat three meals per day while the lower class has only two. The basic diet is composed of beans, tortillas, herbs, and hot peppers; a meat based meal might appear twice a month.

These families rarely use professional health services such as public clinics or personal physicians. Rather, they prefer to use alternative services, only seeking professional healthcare in cases of serious illness.

1.1.2 Education and Living Space

Even though both public and private education centers are available, from pre-primary through secondary levels, the local population prefers to work in the fields for pay, rather than go to school. This leads to high desertion and repetition rates. While seventy-two percent of those women interviewed attended some primary school, only five percent finished their primary education. This statistic reflects the fact that *finca* owners in the

¹ See Section 2.0 for results of the study on children and adolescents.

region studies used to provide education centers but have discontinued this legally mandated service in recent years.

1.1.3 Living Conditions

Two modes of housing exist in the locality. The first is rental of houses, rooms, or sites where informal housing is constructed. Others live on the farms where they work, either building their own simple housing or living in housing provided by the farm.

Family units tend to share a living space. The sample indicates that 74.82 percent of those surveyed share housing with five or more people. Of that total, 76.10 percent live together with their husband or partner in addition to children. Only 9.56 percent said that they did not have a husband or partner and that they lived together with children and other relatives.

The municipality of Colomba has historically been inhabited by persons of Maya Mam descent, but, of those women questioned, 89.52 percent stated that they were *ladinas* while only 4.41 percent claimed to belong to this ethnic group.

1.2 A Day in the Life: Different Roles that Women Play

A little before five in the morning, the workday starts. Before going to the farms, the women are occupied with their personal hygiene, food preparation, and feeding the rest of family unit. Then, the work day begins in the fields, where they must accomplish a variety of tasks such as picking the coffee beans, bringing them in, and weighing them.

If they have small children, the women must take them to the work site and feed and care for them while working. Upon finishing their daily labors on the farms, they return home in order to prepare the food, do the cleaning, wash clothes, and care for any domestic animals. Of all these tasks, washing clothes is what most tires them out, according to 90.07 of the women surveyed. Washing is done by hand and usually in rivers or springs.

As we noted at the beginning, women must assume diverse roles within the social conglomerate to which they belong. Both male and female children are cared for by their mothers in the workplace. Fifty-six percent of the women had a child between 0 and 7 for whom they had to care at all times. Back in the house, only 36 percent said that they receive help with household chores from their partner, while 62 percent indicated that they receive no help whatsoever.

For the majority of the Guatemalan urban population, various household appliances ease the domestic workload. Life in Colomba is different. For example, 15 percent of those interviewed said that they had an electric or charcoal powered iron. Though electric irons are easier to use, women prefer to use them sparingly because of the cost of electricity. Some women, however, iron clothes as a source of income when it is not harvest time.

Access to a refrigerator is rare. Scarcely one percent said that they had one, and those who owned a refrigerator identified this appliance as a status symbol: a house with a *refri* will be seen in a different light.

1.3 Work Information

In a trend that has continued through various public administrations, the ministers of labor have complained they don't have the budget to enforce the law. This affects workers in Colomba. The interviewees were questioned concerning labor rights, and 84 percent indicated that they did not know what the term "labor rights" meant. Fifteen percent of those surveyed claimed to be familiar with their rights but clarified that these rights were not even respected in the case of men, much less in that of women.

Even though the Labor Code establishes an eight hour workday, the survey determined that 61.03 percent of those interviewed had on at least one occasion worked 12 hours or more. 14.89 percent said that they were within the range dictated by the law and 23.16 percent did not respond.

In terms of the employee benefits that they enjoy, 28.49 percent stated that they do not receive any at all, and only 0.92 percent was certain that they were affiliated with the Guatemalan Social Security Institute (IGSS). Only 5.88 percent were aware that they could take vacation leave.

Some farm owners in Guatemala offer transportation to their employees due to the long distances from their homes to the workplace. This practice does not occur in Colomba, seeing that 65.44 percent stated that they walked to the farms, 31.43 percent did not respond, and 1.84 percent pays for transportation in local pickups. 1.29 percent said that they pay to travel on the bus.

1.4 Discrimination

At the end of 2002, the government approved the creation of the Presidential Commission Against Discrimination and Racism (Comisión Presidencial contra la Discriminación y el Racismo). These are deeply rooted cultural problems in Guatemala, and this group was charged with working to eliminate them.

Not surprisingly, when asked about discrimination in the workplace, 81.25 percent of those surveyed preferred not to answer the question. 13 percent described salary inequality by gender as the principal problem. 3.49 percent said they had been discriminated against as women and 2.21 percent stated that men were granted longer contracts than women.

A workshop with some of the interviewees allowed us to identify other perceived cases of discrimination: no right to express their opinions, the inability to read, the lack of personal identifications documents, and even the lack of knowledge of one's age and birth date.

1.5 Participation and Organization

Three fourths of those women surveyed were not aware of the types of community organizations nor the objectives of those organizations. It follows that there is little participation from women in the community.

This trend continues when women were asked about unions, cultural, sports, or social groups. Some believe that such activities are for men only. Their only social activities are food preparation, cleaning, and taking care of the house.

1.6 Religion

In contrast to the lack of participation in social, cultural, and sporting activities, religion was different. 61 percent of the sample indicated that they had been part of a religious group at some point in their life. The women considered it a privilege to “take care of the things and the House of God,” even though their participation is confined to cleaning and decoration rather than taking a leadership role in the religious events.

1.7 Use of Income

So far as the total income generated by their labor, 83 percent said that they use it to acquire consumer goods necessary at home. Two percent said that they use part of their income for their children’s education.

The sample stated that the problem of the migration of community members does not affect them. 99 percent of those interviewed said that they do not have relatives sending remittances to them and that their work was the sole means of subsistence.

1.8 Healthcare

Doña Juana, an older woman, noted that women prefer to be attended by women and therefore go to the health center where they can find female nurses. Going to a male doctor causes them embarrassment. Also they do not want to face a spouse who does not like them being examined by a male doctor.

20 percent of the sample goes to a private doctor when they are ill. 19 percent resort to household remedies and 15 percent go to the community health centers.

The majority of births take place in the home with the assistance of a midwife. This is in keeping with local custom.

1.8.1 Family Planning

The belief persists that the use of any means of contraception is sufficient motive for suspicion of infidelity by the partner. Thus the women in the sample neither have nor request information dealing with the subject because beforehand they must obtain the consent of their husband. Women in the study told us that to look for assistance in family planning means that one will be looked upon as a prostitute by the community.

1.9 Community Management and Citizen Participation

Within the community the idea persists that women are in charge of improving, through their management, the existing infrastructure in their social surroundings. They are designated by their spouses or by their fathers keep them informed or manage affairs in their absence. The survey found that only 3.86 percent recognized having been integrated into some sort of management group.

In the field of citizen participation, the participation of women is even further reduced: 1.84 percent maintains that they have participated in political parties or civic committees. Even then, their participation is restricted to cleaning the headquarters or running errands.

Moreover, due to the lack of identification documents they cannot participate in elections. This lack of identification documents begins at birth: local custom dictates that all male births are promptly registered with the local municipality, while female births are not always registered.

1.10 The Vision of a Future

The women of Colomba, who participated in our study, have accepted from birth that there exist certain unwritten laws that they must respect. Few dare to violate them.

These norms of conduct lead them to suffer in silence their marginalization and discrimination. They think that they must not complain, that they must obey the men, their elders, in everything. They do not have the option to decide anything, neither in matters of their own body or in decisions about their actions. Their life project is to care for their children and provide for the needs of the house.

Upon being approached about the possibility of a change in their work situation, 20 percent said they planned to continue with their current situation, 22 percent contemplated a change of venue and 58 percent did not respond.

So far as plans for ongoing education, 70 percent said that they did hope to continue educating themselves, while 18 percent were comfortable with their current educational level.

1.11 Nutritional Security

During 2001 at least four municipalities of the department of Zacapa, located in the east central part of the country, suffered serious famine. Private NGOs had to provide emergency aid to assuage the crisis that, even now, has not been completely overcome. This has also been a matter of concern for the women of Colomba, who commented that “the soil is tired and doesn’t produce what is needed or desired anymore.” Added to that are the precarious economic conditions that do not always allow the women to buy the food necessary for themselves or their families.

2.0 The Situation of Children and Adolescents

The 260 minors who participated in the study belonged to the following age groups:

| Age Group | # Interviewed | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| 10-11 | 12 | 5% |
| 12-14 | 136 | 52% |
| 15-18 | 112 | 43% |
| Total | 260 | 100% |

Of the 260 children and adolescents who participated, 150 are female and 110 are male.

2.1 Level of Schooling

The survey demonstrated that 12 percent of the sample, for various reasons, did not have access to education and that 51 percent had completed part of upper primary school (4th-6th grades). Only 15 percent had actually completed primary education.

2.2 Religion

53.85 percent stated that they were Catholic, 20.77 percent evangelical, 1.5 percent Mormon and 0.77 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Furthermore 16.15 percent of the sample did not specify a particular religious group and 7.31 percent chose not to respond.

2.3 Family Integration and Work Information

74.23 percent of those surveyed said that their family units were made up of more than five people and 7 percent shared a roof with fewer than four people.

61 percent said that they were involved in productive activity. All the young men responded in the affirmative while the women faltered and preferred to say that they did not work - this in spite of the fact that the entire group was found cutting coffee on the farms. In the case of the women, they explained that they were not on the payroll and that their work was credited to their fathers or brothers.

This helps to explain why 90.38 percent of the sample did not respond when asked how many hours they work daily. 6.54 percent of the sample said that they worked between 5 and 8 hours per day while 1.15 percent confirmed that they worked between 9 and 12 hours per day.

2.4 Salaries

Remuneration is by means of a monthly salary divided into two pay periods. 28.85 percent earn between Q151 and Q200 each fifteen-day pay period in spite of the fact that the legal minimum wage in effect at the time of the study decreed that each worker must be paid Q25.08 (\$3.17) per eight hour work day (Acuerdo Gubernativo 838-2000). At that rate, for each 15 day pay period they should have received Q376.20 (\$47.50) (Guatemalan labor law requires payment of the seventh day if the person has worked six consecutive days). The following chart illustrates salaries paid to minors.

| Amount Earned Per 15 Day Pay Period | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------|
| Salary Range | # of Interviewees | % |
| From Q50.00 to Q100.00 | 5 | 1.92% |
| From Q101.00 to Q150.00 | 42 | 16.15% |
| From Q151.00 to Q200.00 | 75 | 28.85% |
| From Q201.00 to Q250.00 | 25 | 9.62% |
| From Q251.00 to Q300.00 | 25 | 9.62% |
| From Q301.00 to Q350.00 | 4 | 1.54% |
| From Q351.00 to Q400.00 | 11 | 4.23% |
| N/R. | 73 | 28.08% |
| Total | 260 | 100% |

2.5 Child Labor

Our study suggests that many employers do not observe the laws regarding child labor. 31.15 percent of the sample confirmed having begun work three to five years previously. Upon observing that 52 percent of those interviewed were between the ages of 12 and 14, it must be supposed that they began their working relationship at an early age. In Guatemala the law only allows children to work after reaching the age of 14. It also requires that minors be paid for an eight hour day even though they are only allowed to work seven hours per day. Furthermore minors are not allowed to work overtime, and the law requires that their work must be adequate to their age and permits them not to abandon their schooling.

The study also showed that 41.92 percent were contracted for an indefinite amount of time and 14.23 percent only during harvest time.

Of those that live on the coffee farms year-round, 25 percent work in fertilization and 20.38 percent weeding and cleaning the coffee plants

2.6 Benefits and Working Conditions

54 percent of the sample did not respond to the question of whether they had received payment of employee benefits, while 29 percent confirmed that they had not received payment of any of the benefits listed. Only 3 percent stated that they received benefits such as social security or the payment of legally-mandated bonuses (mid-year bonus, end-of-year bonus, and vacation time).

This being true, at harvest time, each worker dedicates more than 12 hours per day to his or her work, according to 72.31 percent of the sample. 21.15 percent said that they work 10 hours per workday.

The cultivation of coffee is the principal economic activity in Colomba. Farm owners have not diversified crops, meaning that worker tasks have remained the same. 81.92 percent of the sample said that they always do the same work: that is to say, picking coffee beans; 5.77 percent described other activities.

97.31 percent of the minors interviewed declared that they do not participate in fumigation. 24.62 percent of the sample responded that they had applied fertilizers, 8.08 percent responded no and 67.31 percent chose not to respond.

2.7 Employee Benefits

Upon asking about employee benefits, the only benefits mentioned were availability of education and childcare on the coffee farms. 70.77 percent confirmed that the places where they work have a school or provide childcare/nursery services for children 7 and older. 18.46 percent of the sample emphasized that these facilities do not provide food, medicine, or medical care to the children, while .77 percent responded that those services were provided.

2.8 Knowledge of Labor Rights

Only 24.23 percent of the sample claimed to be familiar with their rights as workers. 63.46 percent were not familiar with them and 12.31 percent did not respond.

2.9 Principle of Non-Discrimination

Those interviewed described discrimination as applying to remuneration and to treatment in the workplace. This is understood from the point of view of remuneration in the workplace or in the treatment of those interviewed. 14.23 percent said that they are conscious of this problem. 26.92 percent did not recognize it and 58.85 did not respond. Problems mentioned included different pay or work contracts depending on one's gender. Those who claimed to recognize the problem included acts such as the payment of different salaries based on gender or being offered different work contracts.

2.10 Sexual Harassment

Those women interviewed commented that the field supervisors (*caporales*) "bothered them a lot." They defined this as frequent use of sexual innuendo in conversation, unwelcome sexual advances and constant surveillance of personal and private activities.

2.11 Medical Attention

In case of illness, 54.62 percent of the young women interviewed said that they go to a private doctor while 3.46 percent opted for the public hospitals and 11.92 percent used household remedies.

2.12 Non-Field Activities

Even when now they are not working in the fields, the women interviewed said they dedicate their free time to helping their mothers with domestic tasks.

25.77 percent who said that they dedicate two hours daily to washing clothes. Housework (cleaning the house) occupies a minimum of 30 to 60 minutes of each day for 30.77 percent of those interviewed. Others help with the making of tortillas.

The weekends are also used for a variety of unpaid domestic chores. 50 percent dedicate more than 12 hours to these activities and 10.77 percent between 5 and 8 hours.

2.13 And Free Time?

Many of those interviewed preferred to go to church in their free time. 40 percent confirmed that they attend religious events. 10.77 percent chose to listen to the radio and 18.46 to go to the market. 1.15 percent dedicated their free time to studying.

2.14 Vision of the Future

Colomba offers few options for professional advancement. Most of the minors interviewed did not describe ambitious goals for personal advancement. "It is better not to be such a dreamer but rather to be present in reality" said one young person. 23.85 percent said that they were thinking about continuing to work in the same place while 28.85 percent said that they were thinking about changing jobs. 47.31 percent said that they did not know what the future would bring due to rumors that farms were going

broke, may not be able to meet payroll, and would be sold. This has forced them to consider migrating to other areas that might offer better opportunities. 45 percent said that they had considered migrating while 15 percent said that they would stay.

In spite of this pessimism, 54.62 percent still continue their education. 14.23 percent that have discounted the possibility of personal growth in this area (education).

3.0 Some Findings Upon Concluding the Investigation

3.1 Women:

- 3.1.1 The study revealed that most women workers described themselves as *ladinas* even though the majority of their roots lie in the Mam ethnic group. Moreover, they are not migrants. They reside on the coffee farms or in adjacent communities.
- 3.1.2 Patriarchy is alive and well in Colomba. Men assume dominant roles in the workplace, in the family and in society in general. Women are recognized as having a reproductive function but not productive or management functions. Women tend to be ignorant of gender issues.
- 3.1.3 Manual labor exposes women to multiple risks in the workplace. Women tend to have limited access to adequate nutrition. This has a negative impact on women's health.
- 3.1.4 Women have limited knowledge of their rights as workers.
 - 24 percent do not know what a work contract is
 - 60 percent do not know what employee benefits are and another 28 percent stated that they received no benefits.
 - 6 percent understand "employee benefits" as the right to take vacations
 - 1 percent has received their end of year bonus when the price of coffee has been high.
- 3.1.5 Women tended not to express their opinion about the marginalization and discrimination which they suffer. Also they do not know to whom they can present a complaint or request direction or support.
- 3.1.6 Their incomes are not sufficient to cover the necessary living conditions in terms of housing, food, medical attention, and education for themselves and the members of their families.

3.2 Children and Adolescents

- 3.2.1 32 percent of the sample was made up of minors who are found in that same situation of invisibility as adult women. The children accompany the mother to the cutting areas in the fields. In order that they have something to keep them busy or in order that the mothers can cut more coffee in less time or for need of more income in order to sustain the home, this same mother encourages

and therefore causes the children from an early age to participate in this work, a situation which explains their absence from school at the primary level and also many health problems

- 3.2.2 In the rural areas, to attempt to keep minors from working is difficult because poverty is a powerful incentive and the motor that moves this population towards work. At time the young are involved as a means of apprenticeship.
- 3.2.3 Many times these youths do not receive the payment that they law requires or, if they do receive payment, their work and income are reported in the payment records under the name of their father of closest relative, with which they lose all rights and benefits granted to them by law.
- 3.2.4 Due to the obligations of daily work, the children and women do not attend school, and, when they have the opportunity to do so, their performance is not optimal.

3.3 Therefore, We Recommend:

3.3.1 To the Guatemalan State

- 1. Recognize that women and children are subject to certain rights
- 2. Initiate campaigns so that women acquire identification documents
- 3. The institutions of the state, especially the Justice system, must take measures to insure compliance with labor rights and environmental rights on the coffee farms, giving special attention to the work of women and minors.
- 4. Put into place means for giving women access to work and credit for the acquisition of tools, land, and training.
- 5. Take measures to insure compliance with human rights.
- 6. The solution to the coffee crisis must include a redistribution of land.
- 7. Maintain strict methods for combating child labor, according to the norms established by the International Labor Organization (ILO).

3.3.2 To the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare

- 1. Train labor inspectors so they are equipped to take steps to insure compliance with the Labor Code.
- 2. Educate the public as to the key elements of the Labor Code

3.3.3 To the International Community and Civil Society Organizations

- 1. Support processes for the empowerment of women
- 2. Contribute to processes for holistic development of women
- 3. Combat child labor

3.3.4 To the Proprietors of Coffee Farms and the National Coffee Association (ANACAFE)

- 1. Comply with national and international law and respect the human and social rights of coffee workers.
- 2. Build mechanisms for dialogue with coffee workers

3. Explore production alternatives to generate new jobs and increased income.
4. Maintain strict methods for combating child labor, according to the norms established by the International Labor Organization (ILO).

4.0 Study Profile

The present study presents information that was obtained during fieldwork done in Colomba, Costa Cuca, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala between September 2001 and March 2002.

522 surveys were carried out with female workers on farms in the region. In the case of minors, 260 interviews were done, 110 with men and 150 with women. Moreover, a workshop was held with a group of 30 women from the agrarian communities Argentina and Chuva.

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Researchers: Elizabeth Quiroa and Juan Diego González.

Compilation and writing of this document: Abner Guoz and Dennis A. Smith

Translation: Joel Fyke and Dennis Smith.

5.0 What is Coverco?

The **Commission for the Verification of Codes of Conduct – Coverco** – is a not-for-profit group of independent external monitors focusing on working conditions. Coverco was formed in 1997 by a group of professionals active in Guatemalan civil society with experience in the areas of law, business administration, social communication, education, and religion. Our multi-disciplinary character has permitted Coverco to conduct technically wide-ranging investigations in a variety of working environments.

Coverco has studied working conditions in the agricultural export sector, the garment sector, the electricity production sector, and other industrial sectors. In addition to its principal work of verification of compliance with codes of conduct in Guatemala,

Coverco has acted as a consultant and given training workshops and conferences in Latin America, North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

In Guatemala, Coverco employs monitors for the periodic verification of working conditions. Such investigations include the independent revision of work records, sensory inspections of workplaces, and confidential interviews with workers and management. Normally the monitors' visits are not announced beforehand.

Coverco employs four standards in its monitoring and verification work: national law, international conventions ratified by the state, the brand's code of conduct, and the internal regulations of the workplace. The highest standard is always applied.

Coverco owns the information gathered, as well as the right to share key findings with the public and with all interested parties.

Coverco maintains in strict confidence partial results of ongoing investigations, as well as proprietary information belonging to the brand.

Coverco does not work as a consultant to the private sector, as a labor organizer, as an activist, nor as an enforcement agent for government. Through this non-substitutive methodology, Coverco looks to assure its independence.