

SDC 2018 Annual Meeting Abstracts

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Title: Micro-mills for sustainable production and women empowerment: Evidence from Costa Rica's Tarrazu region



By allowing producer households in Costa Rica to process their coffee and sell directly to specialty markets, micro-mills create opportunities to enhance the empowerment of women and sustainability of coffee production. The coffee commodity chain is commonly characterised as one that perpetuates low incomes for family producers and significant profits for retailers and commercial roasters around the world. As a commodity, coffee is associated with intensive production systems, producer specialization in primary production and the relegation of women to traditional household roles. Responding to consistently low prices under this model, Tarrazu coffee households have embraced the innovation of family-owned micro-mills and are learning to exploit direct producer-buyer relations. In this paper, we evaluate the dynamics of the Costa Rican coffee sector by analysing the experiences of micro-mill households from the perspective of the diverse economies framework. This framework recognizes the value of non-market and non-financial social relations in addition to more traditional market returns, improves understanding of the diversity of economic and environmental practices that coffee households use and contributes to the emerging literature on gender-agriculture-sustainability nexus. Using a mixed method approach, we conducted surveys and interviews with women from micro-mill households. Our results -informed by the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index- showed that women involved in micro-mills are more empowered in terms of decision making over assets and income. Likewise, it identified their leadership capabilities at the processing and value-adding stages of the coffee value-chain. Interestingly, women continue to promote sustainable farming practices despite the abandonment of certification programs with the shift to specialty markets. Our analysis of the social dynamics of micro-mills raises questions regarding the potential for individualised market actions to engender the empowerment of women and continued environmental benefits. Likewise, applying the diverse economies approach in the context of specialty coffee production affirms the contribution of women's economic strategies and non-paid activities to the household and family enterprise. Micro-mills represent an innovative example of how coffee producers are contributing to the Sustainable Development Goal 2 to double small-scale producers' income, promote women's participation and family farming access to knowledge to engage with high value-added markets.