



Gender equity, labor rights, and women's empowerment: lessons from Fairtrade certification in Ecuador flower plantations

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Abstract

Certification programs seek to promote decent work in global agriculture, yet little is known about their gender standards and implications for female workers, who are often the most disadvantaged. This study outlines the gender standard domains of major agricultural certifications, showing how some programs (Fair Trade USA, Rainforest) prioritize addressing gender equality in employment and others (Fairtrade International, UTZ) incorporate wider gender rights. To illuminate the implications of gender standards in practice, I analyze Fairtrade certification and worker experience on certified flower plantations in Ecuador, drawing on a qualitative and quantitative field research study. (1) I show how Fairtrade seeks to bolster the wellbeing of female workers, addressing their workplace needs via equal employment, treatment, and remuneration standards and their reproductive needs via maternity leave and childcare services. My research demonstrates that for female workers, addressing family responsibilities is critical, since they shape women's ability to take paid jobs, their employment needs, and their overall wellbeing. (2) I show how Fairtrade seeks to bolster the rights of women workers through individual and collective capacity building standards. My findings reveal how promoting women's individual empowerment serves as a precondition for collective empowerment, and how targeting traditional labor rights is insufficient for empowering female workers, since their strategic choices are curtailed largely outside the workplace. While Fairtrade certification bolsters the wellbeing and rights of female workers in and beyond the workplace, much still needs to be done before women can claim their rights as workers and citizens.

Keywords Gender · Empowerment · Certification · Fair trade · Labor standards · Ecuador

Abbreviations

ILO International Labour Organization
NGO Non-governmental organization
SDG Sustainable Development Goal
UN United Nations

Introduction

Voluntary certifications addressing labor conditions in global production have proliferated over recent decades. Many of these programs target gender issues alongside concerns such as child labor and workplace safety. This focus aligns with a rise in global gender initiatives, including corporate social responsibility programs championing

women and girls and the UN Sustainable Development Goals' identification of gender equality as a "fundamental human right" and "necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world" (UN 2019). Yet some scholars argue that the recent wave of gender concern is largely just rhetoric, intoned by corporations to increase consumer loyalty and enhance profits and by multilateral agencies to rally public support for aspirational goals (Calkin 2016). Are gender commitments made by voluntary labor certification programs simply talk, or are they linked to more substantive advances in gender equity? Voluntary certifications might be expected to do more than voice popular rhetoric since the most robust programs are overseen by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rather than profit motivated corporations, and their goals are rendered concrete through standards audited for compliance (Bartley 2012). While recent reviews identify extensive research on NGO labor certifications in global agriculture (Kissi and Herzig 2020; Rathgens et al. 2020), few studies focus on these programs' gender dimensions or their ramifications for female

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workers (Terstappen et al. 2013). Utilizing a feminist political economy framework, this article helps fill this research gap by (1) comparing the gender standards of four major agricultural labor certifications and (2) providing a grounded case study of the program with the most extensive gender commitments, Fairtrade International.

My comparison of the gender domains addressed by Fairtrade International, Fair Trade USA, Rainforest Alliance, and UTZ certification finds that all four programs have multiple labor standards focusing on gender equality in the workplace and female worker wellbeing, but that regulations targeting gendered rights and women's empowerment are less common. Fairtrade International has the most far-reaching gender standards, including several standards addressing gender rights within and beyond the workplace. While this programmatic comparison suggests important differences in NGO gender commitments, I argue that deeper analysis is needed to reveal certification's gendered implications in plantation agriculture.

This study advances the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of Fairtrade International's gender policies and standard criteria and the ramification of certification for female workers, drawing on field research in flower plantations in Ecuador. Fairtrade can offer important insights since besides having extensive gender standards, it is well-established and far reaching, with certified plantations around the world and annual sales of over US\$ 11 billion (FTI 2020a). While scholars investigate gender issues on Fairtrade tea and horticultural plantations in Africa and Asia (e.g. Nelson and Martin 2015; Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014; Smith 2015), gender research on Latin American plantations is limited. I deepen our understanding by analyzing Fairtrade's gendered implications in flowers, the certified product with the highest share of female workers (FTI 2018), grown in Ecuador, one of the world's top producers (ITC 2015).

My analysis enhances our understanding by showing how voluntary certification programs can foster gender equity through their labor standards, yet also how in practice these gains may be curtailed by women's social devaluation and disproportionate household responsibilities. Fairtrade's workplace gender equality and worker wellbeing standards have helped bolster decent work for female floral workers in Ecuador, increasing women's access to equal wages, stable jobs, and employment benefits. These programmatic efforts are important in addressing women's needs in the workplace, yet as I demonstrate, improving the livelihoods of female workers also requires addressing the social constraints which fuel women's time poverty and economic insecurity. This study reveals the importance of Fairtrade standards which go beyond labor rights grounded in freedom of association, to promote women's individual and collective empowerment within and beyond the workplace. My analysis shows how certification has helped strengthen the enabling environment

for female flower workers, particularly in enhancing their individual empowerment, yet highlights how women's capabilities are constrained by their social subordination and care work obligations. The article's conclusion summarizes the study's central findings, reconsidering the nature of the gender commitments made by voluntary certification programs and the promise as well as limitations in their ability to advance gender equity and rights for female agricultural workers.

Agricultural labor certification, gender equality, and gendered rights

Agriculture employs 10% of the world's workers, yet most of these jobs do not meet decent work expectations: that employment be safe and healthy, involve equal treatment, pay a decent wage, and uphold labor rights (FAO 2017; ILO ND). Female agricultural workers typically hold jobs characterized by poor work conditions, low pay, insecure contracts, and few rights (FAO 2010, 2011). Although most national governments around the world voice support for decent work and gender equality, their laws have in practice failed to ensure either. Seeking to bolster public regulations, International Labour Organization (ILO) core conventions address equal employment and decent work; the UN Sustainable Development Goals also call for gender equality (SDG 5) and decent work and labor rights for all (SDG 8) (UN 2019). While these multilateral efforts articulate aspirational global goals, they lack enforcement capacity and fail to meet the needs of female workers (Rai et al. 2019).

Corporate social responsibility programs suggest that they can ensure decent work conditions for workers by regulating production practices in their supply chains. Yet extensive research finds that private regulatory initiatives have brought limited gains for workers in global agriculture and manufacturing: in some cases bolstering labor standards, particularly in occupational health and safety, but rarely improving labor rights in areas like freedom of association and gender equality (Anner 2012; Barrientos and Smith 2007; Bartley 2018; Distelhorst and Locke 2018; Fransen 2012). As Barrientos (2019, p. 225) argues, corporations "have singularly failed to identify or address gender discrimination prevalent within global value chains," because they are unwilling to challenge the commercial practices and social inequalities that fuel women's exploitation.

NGOs have forged alternative systems of social regulation, using certification to challenge sweatshop conditions and promote decent work in global production (Auld et al. 2015; Reynolds 2012). Social certifications are more credible than corporate programs, since they involve multi-stakeholder governance, publicly available standards, and third-party oversight (Bartley 2012), and are better able to

challenge the ideas and practices underlying worker exploitation around the world (Barrientos and Smith 2007). The most robust NGO-based labor certifications go beyond protecting worker welfare to advancing workers' rights (Raynolds 2018). Numerous studies analyze how NGO programs address labor needs in global agriculture (Kissi and Herzig 2020; Rathgens et al. 2020), but few focus specifically on female workers (Terstappen et al. 2013). For labor certification programs to advance the wellbeing and rights of women, they must address their gender specific needs and priorities as well as the deeply entrenched social norms which devalue women's paid work and assign women the majority of unpaid work (Barrientos 2019; Barrientos et al. 2019).

Many feminist political economy scholars document how employment patterns are gendered and how women's subordination in the realm of production—the world of paid work—is tied to their disproportionate responsibility in the realm of reproduction—the world of unpaid care of children, households, and communities (e.g. Benería 2003; Meehan and Strauss 2015). Around the world, gender norms undervalue women's contributions in agriculture and manufacturing, relegating women to jobs which are poorly paid and categorized as “unskilled,” though they often require significant manual dexterity (Elson 1999). Improving gender equity in employment requires countering social expectations that workplaces are male domains, expectations which foster the mistreatment of female workers, most notably sexual harassment, and disregard of women's specific needs, like those related to motherhood (ILO 2012). Advancing the wellbeing of female workers depends also on addressing their disproportionate household responsibilities which fuels “time poverty” particularly for women struggling to meet basic needs (Rai et al. 2019). As Barrientos (2019, p. 195) argues, fostering decent work for women entails “addressing issues ‘beyond the workplace’ that affect women's combined productive and reproductive roles.”

Certification programs which go beyond promoting the welfare of female workers to enhancing their enabling rights, must address women's immediate “practical needs” and their more long-term “strategic gender needs” (Moser 1989), within and beyond the workplace. Understanding these strategic needs requires a gendered view of worker agency, labor rights, and empowerment. While worker agency is traditionally seen as the ability to voice concerns, pursue grievances, and seize opportunities, as Kabeer (1999) demonstrates, women often do not have the social and material prerequisites for this agential action. Female workers around the world frequently lack the social standing to raise employment concerns and the time and resources to pursue their goals in work and other arenas (Meehan and Strauss 2015). Efforts to promote labor rights typically target associational rights and other institutionalized opportunities, but gender

inequities curtail women's capacity to advance their interests through male dominated unions (Moghadam et al. 2011) and other social and political institutions (ILO 2012). Fostering women's strategic needs thus involves a broader process of empowerment: expanding the “assets and capabilities of people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives” (World Bank 2002). Research on women's empowerment highlights the need to (a) enhance individual as well as collective power and (b) challenge the informal societal norms as well as formal policies curtailing women's opportunities (Rao et al. 2016). Scholars identify the gender specific constraints faced by women working in plantation agriculture and the “gendered pathways to empowerment” entailed in improving their position in the home, workplace, and community (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2015).

Comparison of agricultural certification program gender standards

While NGO programs may voice support for gender goals, their ability to advance concrete changes depends on how these commitments are operationalized via their certification requirements. A review of 247 voluntary programs finds that 60% have no gender related standards (Smith et al. 2018). To reveal how NGO programs in global agriculture seek to foster gender equity, I analyze the standards of four major certification programs with clearly stated gender commitments: Fairtrade International, Fair Trade USA, Rainforest Alliance, and UTZ. As outlined in Table 1, my analysis of an international database of certification standards finds that these four programs address a range of gender domains.

Most of the gender standards included in these programs focus on workplace equality and female worker wellbeing, addressing from five to eight gender domains. To counter the pervasive discrimination faced by female workers, all programs require that companies uphold ILO core labor conventions pertaining to non-discrimination and equal remuneration and have standards promoting gender equity “in principle,” “at work,” or both. All four have regulations countering sexual harassment, the most ubiquitous form of labor abuse faced by women. Two programs require gender “best practices” in employment. Addressing workplace hazards, two certifications target women's specific occupational health and safety needs; another requires a gendered risk assessment. In addition to tackling these practical needs within the workplace, three programs promote women's practical needs outside work through maternity leave mandates.

Gendered rights and women's empowerment standards are less extensive and less broadly included in these NGO programs, with certification standards addressing from one

Table 1 Gender standards of major NGO labor certification programs in global agriculture

Gender related standard domains ^a	Fairtrade International	Fair Trade USA	Rainforest Alliance/SAN ^b	UTZ ^b
Gender equality and female worker wellbeing				
Non-discrimination	x	x	x	x
Equal remuneration	x	x	x	x
Sexual harassment	x	x	x	x
Gender equity principle	x	–	x	x
Gender equity at work	x	x	–	x
Gender best practices	x	–	–	x
Women's health & safety	x	–	–	x
Gendered risk assessment	–	–	x	–
Maternity leave	x	x	–	x
Subtotal (out of 9)	8	5	5	8
Gendered rights and women's empowerment				
Women's rights at work	x	x	x	x
Participation in management	x	–	–	x
Female specific training	x	–	–	x
Family-friendly policies	x	x	–	x
Gender development	x	–	–	–
Subtotal (out of 5)	5	2	1	4
Total (out of 14 domains)	13	7	6	12

Source: Compiled by the author from ITC (2019)

Drawn from the ITC database of the standards of 247 voluntary social and environmental programs which are reviewed by each program for accuracy

^aThese 14 gender related domains were identified from ITC's full list of social standard areas (95 standard domains listed under human rights and local communities, conditions of work and social protections, employment and employment relationships, and human development and social dialogue). The distinction between gender equality and female worker wellbeing/gendered rights and women's empowerment domains is made by the author

^bRainforest Alliance and UTZ have merged, with joint standards in preparation in 2020

to five gender domains. All four agricultural certifications promote women's strategic needs via a general standard upholding "women's rights at work." Two programs seek to fuel women's advancement via management participation and training. Acknowledging that promoting women's strategic needs necessitates addressing their obligations beyond work, three certifications require family-friendly policies. One program has additional gender development standards.

In sum, all four certifications include standards to promote the wellbeing and rights of female agricultural workers and most tackle women's practical and strategic needs in and outside the workplace. Fairtrade International, followed by UTZ, address the greatest number of gender domains, with many more standards focusing on gender rights and empowerment than Rainforest Alliance or Fair Trade USA. While this analysis suggests important differences in programmatic priorities, a tally of standards does not adequately capture gender commitments as demonstrated by the merger of UTZ, which has extensive gender standards, and Rainforest Alliance, which has the fewest gender standards. To understand what program gender commitments and standards mean in

practice, I pursue a detailed analysis of Fairtrade International's certification system.

Fairtrade International, plantation certification, and gendered impacts

Fairtrade International seeks to support "disadvantaged farmers and workers" around the world, by "empowering producers to combat poverty, strengthen their position and take more control over their lives" (FTI 2020b). Producers from 73 countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia participate in Fairtrade, selling labeled goods valued at over US\$ 11 billion per year predominantly in Europe and North America (FTI 2020a). Fairtrade International sets certification standards which are third-party audited (FTI 2018). The program incorporates *trade standards*, requiring that buyers provide stable markets and pay a Fairtrade Premium based on purchased quantities, and *producer standards*, stipulating that farmers and workers be democratically organized, farmer/worker groups invest the Fairtrade Premium

in development, and production follows social and environmental guidelines (FTI 2018). Fairtrade includes products sourced from small farmers, most importantly coffee, cocoa, and sugar, as well as large enterprises, particularly in flowers, tea, and bananas (Raynolds 2017). Participating plantations employ about 193,000 workers, with women comprising a substantial share of the labor force (FTI 2020a).

Fairtrade International has over the years increased its focus on women's specific forms of disadvantage and empowerment needs. While the organization has always been committed to gender equality in principle, it has historically pursued a "gender-blind" approach to improving the wellbeing of "producers," based on the assumption that women and men would benefit equally. Given the mounting evidence that women generally benefit less than men from gender-blind policies, Fairtrade has adopted a more explicit gender emphasis (Smith 2015). The NGO's increasing attention to gender is visible in its outward facing "Latest News" series, which has gone from focusing 3% of its stories specifically on gender, women, and girls between 2008 and 2011; to 5% between 2012 and 2015; and up to 10% between 2016 and 2019.¹ Fairtrade International has also adopted a more explicitly gendered approach in its internal activities. In 2016 it launched a *Gender Program* to identify and target women's disadvantages (FTI 2016a) and *Gender Strategy* "to increase gender equality and empowerment of women and girls through systematic mainstreaming of gender throughout Fairtrade operations" (FTI 2016b, p. 14). Fairtrade references Rao et al. (2016) feminist empowerment framework in arguing for a "transformative" approach which: strengthens "women's human, social, financial, and physical capital;" challenges "accepted gender patterns and structures;" and tackles "unequal power relations in order to promote gender equality and women's empowerment" (FTI 2016b, pp. 10–12).

Although Fairtrade certification addresses key gender issues, available evidence suggests that program benefits may not accrue equally to women and men. Smith (2015) argues that women are more likely to reap consistent benefits from fair trade efforts in handicrafts than agro-food products, due to women's more limited control over agricultural production. Research analyzing Fairtrade's gendered impacts in agriculture is limited and existing studies focus largely on small farmers in Latin America and Africa (Kissi and Herzig 2020; Terstappen et al. 2013). These studies conclude that Fairtrade has improved the situation of at least some women but raise concerns regarding gender inequities in access to farm resources and organizational opportunities (Bacon 2010; Lyon 2008; Lyon et al. 2010; Nelson and

Martin 2013). A growing literature analyzing Fairtrade plantations suggests that while workers often benefit economically (Krumbiegel et al. 2018; Riisgaard 2009), certification does not guarantee decent work (Makita 2012; Siegmann et al. 2018), and gains are often distributed unevenly, based on existing gender and other social hierarchies (Nelson and Martin 2015). Fairtrade certification typically increases worker participation in labor organizations (Riisgaard 2009; van Rijn et al. 2020), including women's representation (Smith 2010), but the efficacy of participation may be limited (Besky 2013; Siegmann et al. 2018). Female workers often have a weaker voice, due in some cases to unequal representation, but more often to social constraints which limit their ability to pursue strategic interests (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2014; Smith 2010). Studies of Fairtrade in other types of enterprises and other regions can help situate this research, but since the impacts of Fairtrade certification on women is strongly influenced by contextual factors (Smith 2015), further research on Latin American plantations is needed. This study contributes to the literature by providing the first independent systematic analysis of the gendered implications of Fairtrade plantation certification in Ecuador.²

Research methods

This article analyzes the implications of Fairtrade International certification via a case study of workers on certified flower plantations in Ecuador. Information on Fairtrade certification standards and procedures are drawn from organizational documents and interviews with program staff as well as industry, government, and NGO representatives. To reveal Fairtrade's implications for firms, I studied five certified Ecuadorian flower plantations, conducting semi-structured interviews with three to five senior managers, reviewing company documents, engaging in informal discussions, and touring farms. To understand the organization of labor, worker experiences, and gender issues, I focused on four Fairtrade plantations,³ selected to represent the major rose regions (two in Cotopaxi; two in Cayambe) and the varied scale of production (two above and two below the average size). (1) I interviewed six to eight elected worker representatives, reviewed worker organization reports, and observed work activities on the four plantations. (2) I conducted focus groups including 10–14 female workers—selected with the company personnel director's help to include workers

¹ Author's analysis of 441 Fairtrade News Stories from October 31, 2008 to October 31, 2019.

² Fairtrade International commissioned many of the above studies and none provide a systematic analysis of certified flower plantations in Ecuador.

³ Due to time constraints, all research activities could not be completed on all farms.

varying by age, ethnicity, and job assignment—on three plantations to access gendered knowledge and inform my survey. (3) To collect representative data on worker experiences, I surveyed a random sample of 36 workers on four plantations, using personnel records of all fulltime rank-and-file workers as my sample frame, stratified to ensure equal representation of women (N = 72) and men (N = 71).⁴ The survey included close-ended employment questions, prompts to explore workers' answers, and open-ended inquiries soliciting extended narratives on plantation work experiences, benefits, and concerns and the gendered nature of flower work, family responsibilities, and social expectations. Facilitating respondents' ability to speak freely, surveys were conducted in workers' homes and communities.

My analysis of interview, focus group, and survey respondent extended narratives involved an iterative process, using open coding, coding for major internal themes, and coding for key themes raised in other research components. Survey data were analyzed statistically. Unexpected statistical findings caused a re-examination of qualitative data to increase contextual understanding. Triangulation of data from multiple sources increased the validity of findings. Overall, there was substantial agreement between respondents. But not surprisingly, randomly selected workers surveyed in their homes were more likely to raise concerns than worker representatives and focus group respondents interviewed on company grounds. While managers and workers disagree on some issues, several areas of difference reflect differential experiences, for example with employment conditions on other plantations, or different levels of comfort in discussing sensitive topics like sexual harassment. Taken together my data provide a robust account of the gendered implications of Fairtrade certification.

Research context

Flowers provide an insightful context for studying the implications of certification since this is Fairtrade's second most important plantation product, with 835 million blooms sold annually, and a central hired labor arena, with 60,000 workers employed on 64 certified plantations in Latin America and Africa (FTI 2019a). Cut flower production has the highest share of female workers in the Fairtrade system and women comprise roughly half the total workforce (FTI 2019a). Ecuador, the world's third largest floral exporter (ITC 2015), specializes in high-quality roses and is a major supplier of Fairtrade certified flowers. Rose exports worth

Table 2 Fairtrade International certified flower enterprises in Ecuador

Name	Year certified	Workers	Female labor force
Agroganadera Espinosa Chiriboga	2002	141	–
Agrocoex-Compania Agropromotora Cotopaxi	2002	184	54%
Flormare	2010	113	–
Hojaverde	2002	210	49%
Inversiones Ponte Tresa	2003	133	–
Jardines Piaveri	2003	144	52%
Joygardens	2006	130	50%
Nevado Ecuador	2002	520	56%
QualisA Roses	2015	320	48%
Rosas del Monte Rosemonte	2003	143	–
Roses & Roses	2008	263	–
Total		2301	52%

Sources: Compiled by the author from company documents and research interviews

US\$ 649 million per year are sold primarily in the United States, the European Union, and Russia (Expoflores 2019). Floral production represents a key segment of Ecuador's economy and employs over 100,000 workers (FAS 2009).

Ecuador has 11 Fairtrade International certified flower plantations, the second largest number in the world (FTI 2019a). While these predominantly family-owned flower companies are in international terms small to mid-sized enterprises, compared to other rose producers in Ecuador, certified flower companies are above average in size and capital-intensity.⁵ Located in the major floral regions of Cotopaxi and Cayambe, Fairtrade certified enterprises cultivate from 20 to 86 acres under greenhouse conditions, producing dozens of rose varieties. The high-quality rose bouquets are taken by refrigerated trucks to the airport for export to the United States, Europe, and Russia. As outlined in Table 2, Ecuador's Fairtrade flower companies employ about 2300 fulltime workers, 52% of whom are female.⁶

Export flower production has since the 1990s provided one of the few areas of regular employment available to rural women in Ecuador (Blumberg and Salazar-Paredes 2011; Korovkin 2003). The historical decline of Ecuadorian peasant agriculture has increased rural poverty and reliance on waged employment (Martínez Valle 2017). Forty percent of the rural population lives below the poverty line, with

⁴ Low-level area supervisors are included in the sample; one respondent was excluded because he was promoted to mid-level supervisor.

⁵ According to flower industry officials.

⁶ The Latin American Fairtrade Producer Network reports similar labor force numbers for Ecuador's flower plantations but suggests that 56% are women (CLAC 2018).

Table 3 Fairtrade flower plantation worker characteristics by gender

	Total (n = 143)	Men (n = 71)		Women (n = 72)		Sig
	Mean/%	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD	
Demographics						
Age	32.5	32.6	10.353	32.4	8.622	
Ethnicity (indigenous/black)	20.3%	20.3%	.405	20.3%	.405	
Education (years)	8.3	8.8	3.543	7.7	2.966	**
Household size	4.6	4.1	1.705	5.0	2.146	***
Marital status (single)	35.0%	31.0%	.466	38.9%	.491	
Migrant to province	27.3%	39.4%	.492	15.3%	.362	***
Household Amenities						
Household owns tv	99.3%	100.0%	.000	98.6%	.118	
Household owns stove	97.9%	97.2%	.167	98.6%	.119	
Household owns radio	93.7%	97.1%	.168	90.3%	.298	*
Household owns refrigerator	75.5%	73.2%	.446	77.8%	.419	
Household owns house	33.6%	31.0%	.466	36.1%	.484	
Household Farm Assets						
Household owns farmland	51.8%	47.1%	.503	56.3%	.500	
Amount land owned (acres)	1.0	1.0	3.736	0.7	3.264	
Household owns animals	42.2%	38.0%	.489	46.5%	.502	
Proletarian Background						
Father worked for wages	45.0%	44.6%	.501	45.4%	.502	
Mother worked for wages	10.0%	04.4%	.205	15.5%	.364	***

Source: Author survey

Significance levels: *** $\alpha = .01$, ** $\alpha = .05$, * $\alpha = .1$

poverty rates far higher for indigenous than mestizo populations, and for women than men (INEC 2016; Masala and Monni 2020). Ecuador's labor market is highly gendered: women are less likely to be employed than men (women's labor force participation rate is 55%; men's is 81%); less likely to have agricultural jobs (26% of employed women work in agriculture; 31% of men); and more likely to be unemployed (women's unemployment rate is 5%; men's is 3%) (World Bank 2020). In Ecuador, women's earnings average 62% of men's (Hausmann et al. 2012) and their asset are substantially smaller (Deere and Twyman 2012).

Ecuadorian women's job opportunities are constrained by social norms which prioritize their roles as mothers and caregivers (Lind 2005). Yet over recent decades, women's responsibility for ensuring family welfare has increasingly required that they seek employment (Lind 2012a, b). Rural women in Ecuador work about 23 h more per week than men, when unpaid care work is tallied along with paid jobs (UN Women 2020), fueling their time poverty. As in many countries, Ecuadorian women's capabilities and contributions are undervalued. Investments in the education of girls are lower than of boys, with only 68% of girls, as compared to 72% of boys, reaching secondary school (World Bank 2020). Rates of gendered violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, and property rights violations, are extremely high in Ecuador (Deere et al. 2014). One out of

four Ecuadorian women experience sexual violence (UN Women 2020); violence which is often socially pardoned as a reflection of "natural male dominance" (Friederic 2014).

Fairtrade certified flower plantation workers⁷

Female worker focus groups on Fairtrade plantations illuminate the gendered nature of the local labor market, reaffirming the flower sector's central role in generating employment for rural women. Asked to discuss women's local job opportunities, all groups began by saying there are "no options" outside of the flower industry. Only after being prompted did participants suggest that women could do domestic work if they were willing to travel to urban centers or possibly work locally in small shops. As one participant explains: "It is very hard to find work. If I did not work in flowers, I don't know what I would do...I guess be a maid in Quito." Focus groups concur that flower companies have substantially increased local employment, particularly for women. Participants recount how in their parents' generation "only

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all observations presented in the next three sections are from the author's field research.

men worked...women couldn't find work, even if the children were hungry," yet now it is common for single and married women to have flower jobs.

Fairtrade flower worker survey data summarized in Table 3 elaborates these gendered labor force patterns.⁸ Male and female respondents both average 32 years of age. Reflecting rural Ecuador's ethnic composition (Masala and Monni 2020), 80% of floral workers are mestizo, the remainder identify largely as indigenous. Education is limited and women have significantly less schooling than men (averaging 8 and 9 years respectively). This educational disparity mirrors national patterns (World Bank 2020), and reflects the social devaluation of girls. Surveyed workers are mostly married or in consensual unions; 39% of women are single (a slightly higher share than men). Although flower plantation workers are predominantly from the local province, men are significantly more likely to be migrants (39%) than women (15%). Male migrants typically attribute their move to the region's floral job opportunities. Highlighting Ecuadorian women's more restricted economic autonomy and mobility, no female respondent reports migrating to improve her own employment prospects, though some came as partners of job-seeking men.

Fairtrade flower worker living standards are modest, reflecting conditions across rural Ecuador. Worker households in my sample have some amenities: 99% own a television; 98% own a stove; 94% own a radio; 76% own a refrigerator; and 34% own their house.⁹ Although ownership patterns do not vary greatly, they uphold gender norms—male workers are more likely to own entertainment devices and female workers to own kitchen appliances. Roughly half of surveyed households have some farm assets: 52% own a small farm parcel; 42% own farm animals. Female flower workers appear slightly more likely to come from peasant households. Highlighting the importance of household economic need in fueling female employment, female plantation workers come from significantly larger households, than male workers.

Flower workers explain female employment patterns in terms of generational changes and the increasing reliance of households on women's wages. While 45% of surveyed workers report that their fathers worked for wages (the remainder making a living via subsistence farming or small businesses), only 10% report wage-earning mothers. Significantly more women had wage-earning mothers than men, suggesting their greater childhood poverty and exposure to

non-stereotypical female roles. Most respondents say that in the current era, female employment is essential for household upkeep and "advancement." A young mother explains, "Women need to work, not just men...to help the family advance. Married women work to sustain the children and ensure they achieve. Single women to move forward. Certainly, single mothers must work, their children's survival depends on it." All working mothers surveyed describe their need for employment in relation to their children, in paying for food and medicine, and importantly for schooling.¹⁰ A married woman explains, "We need to both work in the flower plantation because if my husband was the only one working, our children couldn't study and advance." Suggesting widespread acceptance of female employment, a 61-year-old male worker concludes bluntly: "Of course women work in the flower plantation...how else would families around here survive?"

Flower worker focus groups and survey respondents highlight working women's time poverty and care work challenges.¹¹ A 25-year-old male worker whose wife also has a plantation job, acknowledges women's double day, stating: "Work is hard for men, but for women it is more difficult. They have more responsibilities in the house. When my wife gets home, she still must care for the children, prepare the food, to keep working. I come home and rest." Female focus groups highlight the emotional and physical strain of caring for young children, when "the children ask their mothers not to go to work," "they are sick and you need to leave them," and "the children want help with schoolwork but you have to prepare dinner." A few women (5% of those surveyed) propose that mothers should not work, though they themselves do, explaining: "It is not good for mothers to be working, because we don't have time for the children...women should be in the house, not at the farm all day." More male flower workers (11%) say married women should stay home, referencing cultural norms regarding men's role as family breadwinners, but these respondents are all young single men. The fathers interviewed know from experience that their spouses must work.

⁸ Samples are merged to facilitate analysis since labor forces do not vary greatly by plantation.

⁹ In Ecuador household assets (except those inherited or brought to the partnership) are owned jointly by legally married or registered consensual union partners (Deere et al. 2014).

¹⁰ Primary school is free in Ecuador, but parents must pay for supplies, fees, and transportation, fueling educational disparities (Masala and Monni 2020).

¹¹ Although the Ecuadorian government in 2008 instituted policies framed as having "a woman's face"—including recognizing women's role in ensuring family welfare and identifying care work as part of the "good living" enshrined in the constitution—these policies have done little to address women's conflicting responsibilities for income earning and caregiving (Lind 2012a).

Table 4 Fairtrade labor standards: employment conditions, gender equality, and female worker wellbeing

	General provisions ^a	Gender specific provisions ^a
Freedom from Discrimination	No discrimination in hiring & employment Fair treatment for workers including grievance procedures & reprisal protection policies	No discrimination by gender & marital status; no use of pregnancy tests in hiring or termination No sexual harassment by managers or workers; sexual harassment policy, training, & grievance procedures; female contacts; disciplinary action
Freedom of Labor	No forced labor No child labor; child rights policies for previously employed minors	No mandatory spousal work Previously employed minors protected from entering sex work
Occupational Health & Safety	Health & safety committee, procedures, & training; chemical use rules, equipment, & training Worker medical facilities & exams; worksites safe & clean	Gender best practices; pregnant & nursing women barred from hazardous work Separate toilet & washing facilities for women
Conditions of Employment	Workers hired directly with written contracts; wages meet legal minimum & regional average; progress to living wage; legal benefits; pay timely Overtime voluntary, limited, & paid a premium; sick leave & 2 weeks paid annual leave; lunch & work breaks	Gender equity in employment; equal remuneration required for women & men Eight weeks paid maternity leave; additional daily break for nursing mothers

Source: Compiled by the author from FTI (2014)

^aRequired prior to, or in first year after, certification unless otherwise indicated

Employment conditions: gender equality, and female worker wellbeing

Fairtrade certified flower plantations in Ecuador provide important job opportunities for women, but do they provide equitable employment and decent work? To answer this question, I analyze Fairtrade International's workplace and employment standards, the operation of these regulations in the Ecuadorian context, and their implications for flower workers. As Fairtrade's senior Labor Rights officer explains, the program's promotion of gender equity is tied to its vision of decent work: "It's not just about better pay—though of course that's important—it's about having a decent work and home life, and that includes equal pay and conditions for women, as well as a safe and healthy workplace" (FTI 2019B). Fairtrade's equity goals are grounded in international human rights and labor conventions and operationalized in its "Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour" (FTI 2014). As outlined in Table 4, Fairtrade has core employment standards—including general and gender related provisions addressing freedom from discrimination, occupational health and safety, and employment conditions—which are critical in the Ecuadorian case. Fairtrade's freedom of labor protocols are less important, since forced and child labor are rare in Ecuador's flower sector (Martínez Valle 2017).

Fairtrade standards restricting discrimination are more stringent than Ecuadorian legislation (ILO 2020) and focus groups attest to their importance in fostering equal employment. Certified plantations post signs asserting their commitment to non-discrimination. Flower workers point to

these policies as limiting bias against those with disabilities and indigenous heritage as well as against women. Fairtrade specifically bars the use of pregnancy tests in hiring and the firing of pregnant workers, practices common in Ecuador's flower sector (ILRF 2010). Workers identify, and field visits verify, the employment of pregnant women on certified plantations. Despite their limited schooling, many respondents use and understand the concept of discrimination. Echoing statements made by numerous workers, a young woman says, "There is no discrimination for men or women...men and women have the same capacity...everyone works the same." Supporting this view of equal employment on certified plantations, women in my sample have been employed for significantly longer than men (averaging over five as compared to 4 years).¹² Certified flower plantations have a clear division of labor. As Table 5 shows, 67% of surveyed women work in production: maintaining the flower beds, pruning the bushes, harvesting the roses, and cleaning the greenhouses; 19% work in post-harvest: trimming, sorting, and bunching the roses. Male respondents are employed more evenly across work areas: in production, post-harvest, and (unlike women) in fumigation and maintenance. On certified plantations men are only slightly more likely to be low-level area supervisors than women, but following national patterns (World Bank 2020), men hold almost all senior management positions.

¹² Female workers' longer tenure may also reflect restricted alternative job opportunities.

Table 5 Fairtrade flower plantation worker employment conditions and wellbeing by gender

	Total (n = 143)	Men (n = 71)		Women (n = 72)		Sig
	Mean/%	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD	
Plantation work						
Years worked for company	4.7	4.0	2.748	5.5	4.057	***
Production job	42.0%	16.9%	.377	66.7%	.475	***
Post-harvest job	20.3%	21.1%	.411	19.4%	.398	
Fumigation/maintenance job	16.1%	32.4%	.471	00.0%	.000	***
Area supervisor job	08.4%	09.9%	.300	06.9%	.256	
Best part of current job						
Manager/co-worker treatment	20.7%	26.8%	.446	14.5%	.355	*
Work conditions	30.0%	25.4%	.438	34.8%	.480	
Everything	36.4%	35.2%	.481	37.7%	.488	
Worst part of current job						
Manager/co-worker treatment	16.2%	14.1%	.350	18.3%	.389	
Work conditions	38.7%	38.0%	.489	39.4%	.492	
Nothing	32.3%	32.3%	.471	32.3%	.471	
Prior employment						
None	9.1%	2.8%	.167	15.3%	.362	***
Another flower company	42.7%	42.2%	.497	43.1%	.499	
Prefer current job over prior	79.7%	81.2%	.394	78.3%	.415	
Wages						
Wage	249.9	252.3	50.106	247.5	36.531	
Minimum wage earners	91.6%	90.1%	.300	93.1%	.256	
Like to work seasonal overtime	75.2%	81.3%	.393	69.2%	.465	
Additional income						
Wage > 60% household income	43.4%	47.9%	.503	38.9%	.491	
Worker earns extra income	39.9%	42.2%	.497	37.5%	.487	
Spouse generates income	85.1%	83.7%	.373	86.7%	.344	
Investments permitted by job						
Better household food	90.1%	88.6%	.320	91.5%	.280	
Improved education of children	84.5%	81.8%	.390	86.8%	.342	
Household furniture purchases	76.6%	74.3%	.440	78.9%	.411	
Home renovations	63.4%	68.6%	.468	58.3%	.496	
Wage insufficiency						
People minimum wage supports	2.0	2.2	1.094	1.8	1.068	**
Time unable to cover food costs	56.4%	50.0%	.504	62.9%	.487	

Source: Author survey

Significance levels: *** $\alpha = .01$, ** $\alpha = .05$, * $\alpha = .1$

To promote workers' fair treatment, Fairtrade stipulates accepted practices, grievance procedures, and reprisal protections, including regulations addressing sexual harassment. Certification requirements are stricter than Ecuadorian law (ILO 2020) and challenge forms of labor abuse common in the flower industry (ILRF 2010). Prior research finds that nearly half of Ecuador's female floral workers have experienced sexual harassment, although grievances are rarely filed (US LEAP and ILRF 2007). My investigation suggests that abusive treatment of women in the workplace and home is widespread and yet seen as inevitable, as Friederic (2014) argues. Female focus groups and individual

workers acknowledge that workplace sexual harassment and domestic violence are pervasive but are reluctant to discuss specific incidents, whether due to their resignation to poor treatment or fear of reprisals.¹³ As a local NGO representative explains, "There is abuse, but women guard their silence." Fairtrade plantation managers acknowledge that sexual harassment is a problem in flowers and their own companies. Managers criticize the "machismo" that fuels

¹³ A few women discuss their prior domestic abuse; none discuss ongoing violence.

abusive behavior and argue that while harassment persists, they address the problem following certification guidelines via annual supervisor and worker trainings, systematic grievance procedures, and disciplinary action.¹⁴ While a few workers point to harsh supervisor conduct; others note with satisfaction how abusive supervisors are reprimanded.

Fairtrade flower workers report being largely satisfied with their treatment: 21% identify manager and co-worker treatment as the “best part of their job” and only 16% as the “worst part of their job.” But suggesting potential inequities, women are significantly less likely to identify workplace treatment as the best part of their job (15%) and somewhat more likely to see it as the worst (18%).¹⁵ Regardless, 80% of surveyed workers say they prefer their current job to their previous employment—often on another flower plantation—including 78% of women. Even though plantation jobs are physically demanding, female workers are generally satisfied with employment conditions. Women in my survey are somewhat more likely than men (35 versus 26%) to identify work conditions as the best part of their job and nearly as likely to say these conditions are the worst part.

Fairtrade's extensive occupational health and safety standards include detailed agrochemical regulations and specific provisions protecting female workers. These standards are particularly relevant for flower plantations which often rely on highly toxic chemicals which are legal in Ecuador but banned in Europe and North America (US LEAP and ILRF 2007). Pesticide exposure fuels health problems for Ecuadorian flower workers and communities, evidenced for example in women's high levels of pregnancy loss (Handal and Harlow 2009). My research finds that workers speak articulately about the importance of Fairtrade's chemical use rules, particularly the banning of “red list” chemicals, provision of protective gear, and required delay before entering fumigated greenhouses. Several workers point specifically to greenhouse reentry rules¹⁶ as what distinguishes their certified enterprise employment from prior flower plantation jobs where “we had to enter the block and harvest right after fumigation.” Respondents concur that women do not fumigate, pregnant and nursing women are transferred from hazardous work, and all employees get health checkups. Yet

many interviewed (male and female) workers voice concerns about chemical exposure from flower employment.¹⁷

Fairtrade standards ban employment irregularities common in agriculture, including Ecuadorian plantations' historical reliance on intermediaries to hire temporary workers ineligible for employment benefits (ILO 2000). Although this is now illegal in Ecuador (ILO 2020), respondents suggest that many flower companies still “hire off the books” to limit labor costs. Surveyed workers credit certification with ensuring that they have written contracts, punctual pay, and legal entitlements. Reflecting an understanding of, as well as appreciation for, formal employment, one worker states simply: “I have all that the law mandates.” Personnel records verify that pregnant and nursing workers receive additional benefits required by Fairtrade.¹⁸ Female workers credit company leave policies with facilitating their reproductive roles and several women in my sample recount how paid maternity leave allowed them to continue working after having children. Respondents substantiate reports that many flower plantations do not provide maternity leave and routinely fire pregnant workers (ILRF 2010). A 36-year-old production worker relates: “I left the other flower farm when I was pregnant. Because they did not have certification, they had no maternity leave, no benefits...working here is better for me and my family.” Although Fairtrade leave rules largely match national legislation (ILO 2020), program participation appears to bolster compliance.

Overtime policies are of major importance in Ecuador's floral industry since production increases sharply for Valentine's and Mother's Day (Expoflores 2019). Fairtrade duplicates Ecuadorian law in requiring that overtime be voluntary and paid a premium (ILO 2020) and sets additional overtime limits. Workers in this study confirm reports that flower companies commonly ignore overtime laws (ILRF 2010) and often compare employers based on overtime policies. As a young woman recounts: “I have worked on other flower farms and there is no comparison...at the last farm we had to stay late to finish, and they didn't pay overtime...my sister works on another farm...they keep her late without pay, she wants to work here.” Although all surveyed workers say they need the time-and-a-half overtime pay, only 69% of women (compared to 81% of men) report liking seasonal overtime. A mother of three working in postharvest explains, “It helps a lot economically to work extra hours, but I don't get the time I need for the children, sometimes I get home at 11:30 and they are asleep. My children are going to forget me.”

¹⁴ Company documents confirm that the four plantations have annual sexual harassment training, harassment grievance filings, and disciplinary actions, including firing and demoting supervisors and reassigning workers and supervisors.

¹⁵ It could be that there is equal treatment, but men and women assess this treatment differently.

¹⁶ Greenhouse entrance signs record fumigation timing, chemicals applied, and when workers can reenter.

¹⁷ All residents of Ecuador's major flower regions appear to have high chemical exposure, whether they work in flowers or not (Handal et al. 2016).

¹⁸ One personnel office has a wallchart depicting worker status and assignments. During my research, no employees were identified as pregnant, three as on maternity leave, and three as nursing.

To address gender wage disparities, which are pervasive in Ecuador as elsewhere (Hausmann et al. 2012), Fairtrade requires that men and women receive equal remuneration and that all workers be paid minimum wages. My research confirms that certified farm employees are paid equally: women have slightly lower average earnings than men, but there is no significant relationship between gender and wages. Ninety-two percent of surveyed workers are minimum wage earners, the remainder earn more.¹⁹ Surveyed workers are aware of minimum wage laws and attribute their pay levels to these laws. While Ecuador's minimum wage is defined as a "dignified salary" (INEC 2016) and is calculated to be just 8% below a rural "living wage" in 2016 (Ulloa Sosa et al. 2020), flower workers argue that the legal floor is too low. Survey respondents consider the minimum wage sufficient to support only two people. But local households average five members. Due to their greater responsibility for stretching meager earnings to satisfy family needs, women view the minimum wage as more inadequate than men. A single mother with two children explains, "The little you make you pay for school, for food." Even with a wage-earning husband and only one child, a woman reports, "Sometimes we just eat bread and coffee because there is not enough money." Reflecting the scope of food insecurity, 56% of surveyed workers can recall a time while they were employed at their current job when they were unable to cover basic food expenses. Women are slightly more likely than men to report household food insecurity.

Despite these shortfalls, Fairtrade plantation workers report making important investments. Respondents say that their flower earnings have allowed them to improve household food consumption (90%); invest in children's education (84%); purchase furniture (77%); and renovate their homes (63%). Although investment patterns do not vary significantly, they follow gender norms: female workers are slightly more likely to report upgrading food, education, and furniture; male workers to making home improvements. Most households supplement their flower wages by relying on multiple earners and farming or small business income. Reflecting traces of a male breadwinner model, male respondents are somewhat more likely to bring in most of household earnings via their floral wage, earn extra income, and have non-income earning spouses.

This analysis suggests that Fairtrade standards have helped improve employment conditions and gender equality on certified plantations in Ecuador. My research finds that Fairtrade plantations offer female workers relatively stable jobs, maternity leave and other employment benefits, and equal wages. Most male and female workers prefer their

current job to their prior employment. Yet worker livelihoods remain precarious. Due to their socially prescribed role in ensuring family wellbeing, female workers are more acutely aware of the insufficiency of plantation wages in ensuring household welfare. Despite Fairtrade certification's efforts to promote gender equality on the job, women's physical and economic insecurity is maintained via their subordination beyond the workplace.

Enabling environment: gendered labor rights and women's empowerment

Fairtrade International's stated purpose in certifying plantations goes beyond improving employment conditions to fostering enabling rights for workers, "empowering them to combat poverty, strengthen their position and to take more control of their lives" (FTI 2014, p. 3). Certification standards grounded in international labor rights conventions and empowerment protocols seek to strengthen workers' individual capacity to make strategic life choices and collective capacity to "build independent, democratic organizations, improve their negotiating position...make joint investments and increase their collective influence" (FTI 2015, pp. 6–9). Fairtrade recognizes that women typically have the most limited rights and empowerment due to restricted individual assets and capabilities and collective representation and influence (FTI 2016b). In Ecuador, labor rights and empowerment requirements are critical since rural workers often lack the ability to claim their rights as workers and citizens (Martínez Valle 2017) and women are particularly likely to have their rights violated due to inadequate knowledge and power to assert their rights via institutional channels (Deere et al. 2014). As outlined in Table 6, Fairtrade has individual and collective worker capacity building standards that plantations must meet to be certified, additional women's rights and empowerment provisions become mandatory within 6 years.

Fairtrade's individual capacity building regulations focus largely on worker training to increase human and labor rights awareness and the ability to assert those rights in the workplace and broader society. According to focus groups and survey respondents, this emphasis aligns well with the needs of flower workers, whose opportunities are restricted by inadequate education and "understanding" of formal institutions. Mirroring national patterns (Deere et al. 2014), female workers' power to protect their rights and make life choices is curtailed by their more limited schooling and experience with institutions beyond the home. Women in my study identify knowledge deficiencies as a major barrier to their advancement. For those who are illiterate, the barriers appear insurmountable: "I did not go to school. I have no understanding, so I cannot advance," one woman explains.

¹⁹ Martínez Valle (2017) argues that most flower plantations abide by Ecuadorian wage laws.

Table 6 Fairtrade labor standards: worker rights, gendered rights, and women's empowerment

	General provisions ^a	Gender specific provisions ^a
Individual Capacity Building	Worker training on Fairtrade, labor rights, human rights; skill upgrading; extra training for representatives; all training during work hours	Additional women's capacity building, training, & assistance; programs to foster employment equity including management training (year 3)
	Children of all workers have access to primary education	Provide childcare onsite or facilitate access to existing services (year 6)
Freedom of Association & Collective Bargaining	Democratically elected worker representation, preferably union; FoA guaranteed; no anti-union reprisal; meetings during work hours	NA
	Respect for collective bargaining rights; support for CBA	NA
Collective Capacity Building	FT Premium Committee (elected worker representatives & management advisors) manages Fund & projects; meets during work hours	Proportional representation of women on FT Premium Committee (year 3)
	Premium projects selected by worker vote in General Assembly	NA
Worker & Community Assets & Capabilities	Premium funds used to benefit workers, their families, & communities, not company costs	Premium project funding must consider needs of female workers
	Twenty percent of Premium can be a cash bonus if approved by Worker Committee/ union	NA

Source: Compiled by the author from FTI (2014)

^aRequired prior to, or in first year after, certification unless otherwise indicated

Although most plantation workers are literate, women find their knowledge insufficient to navigate the contemporary world and identify generational increases in girls' education as a key sign of progress. A middle-age worker elucidates education's transformative power based on her own recent high-school completion: "Everything has changed, I have understanding. From this comes capacity. There is freedom. I have more opportunities." Emphasizing the power of experiential knowledge, focus groups and survey respondents describe how for women, employment itself increases understanding and life choices. Almost all women who were not previously employed prior to their plantation job say they prefer working, for the increased autonomy and social engagement as well as financial reasons. "I like to work. I am independent with this job... I have more contact with the world," explains one female worker.

Beyond their job assignment training, certified plantation employees get 15 h of annual instruction on labor rights, fair treatment, company benefits, harassment and grievance procedures, and Fairtrade; women also get domestic violence training.²⁰ Managers and workers credit Fairtrade's extensive training requirements with increasing women's self-confidence, awareness, and capacities. Focus group

members—including those who are illiterate and have limited Spanish—attest to their increased voice.²¹ Most flower workers are aware of legal entitlements, company policies, and Fairtrade expectations; many can discuss complex empowerment issues. One worker explains, "The door was smaller before, now we women are more empowered. Trainings help us learn our rights, increase our understanding, how to give our opinion." A female worker who only completed sixth grade elaborates, "Women have the same rights as men, freedom of work, the same freedom of expression." Confirming the importance of company skills training, most female area supervisors were promoted from rank-and-file laborers; a few women have moved from low-level office positions to middle management.²²

Focus groups propose that by working, women increase their economic autonomy, decision making power, and freedom of movement: "women can now earn wages like men," "make decisions," "have more respect," "they can go out more." Yet flower workers in this study highlight women's continued subordination within the family and broader

²⁰ Company records list further health, safety, and environmental trainings.

²¹ One illiterate focus group participant asked that the response chart be read aloud to ensure that her opinion had been correctly recorded.

²² My research documents female advancement: a secretary promoted to Quality Control Manager, an assistant accountant promoted to Certification Officer, and another Certification Officer elected to provincial office.

Table 7 Fairtrade flower plantation worker rights and empowerment conditions by gender

	Total (n = 143)	Men (n = 71)		Women (n = 72)		Sig
	Mean/%	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD	
Wage use & management						
Part of wage for personal use	81.1%	84.5%	.364	77.8%	.419	
Female head manages money	37.8%	41.7%	.498	33.3%	.477	
Male head manages money	12.2%	06.2%	.245	19.0%	.397	*
Both spouses manage money	33.3%	31.2%	.468	35.7%	.485	
Female head decides spending	12.0%	06.1%	.242	18.6%	.394	*
Both spouses decide spending	85.9%	93.9%	.242	76.7%	.427	**
Care children < school age						
Current: spouse	21.0%	40.8%	.501	03.3%	.183	***
Current: female relative/friend	23.1%	16.9%	.377	29.2%	.458	*
Current: daycare center	21.0%	14.8%	.362	26.7%	.450	
Prior use of daycare center	12.6%	07.0%	.258	18.1%	.387	**
Priority needs of workers						
Non-discrimination	79.0%	80.3%	.401	77.8%	.419	
Overtime limits & wages	71.1%	64.8%	.481	77.5%	.421	*
Freedom of association	53.1%	60.6%	.492	45.8%	.492	*
No child labor	51.4%	52.9%	.503	50.0%	.503	
Payment of legal wages	42.2%	39.4%	.492	45.1%	.501	
Fair trade committees						
Know of Workers Com	92.3%	93.0%	.258	91.7%	.278	
Know of FT Premium Com	92.3%	91.5%	.280	93.1%	.256	
Have been on Workers Com	15.4%	14.1%	.350	16.7%	.375	
Have been on FT Premium Com	11.2%	14.1%	.350	08.3%	.278	
Use of FT Premium programs						
Educational programs	95.7%	92.9%	.259	98.6%	.119	*
Medical services	88.7%	85.7%	.352	91.5%	.280	
Dental services	68.8%	69.1%	.466	68.5%	.469	
Credit	59.4%	57.7%	.497	61.1%	.491	
Scholarships	38.7%	34.3%	.478	43.1%	.499	
Computer center	32.9%	33.3%	.475	32.4%	.471	

Source: Author survey

Significance levels: *** $\alpha = .01$, ** $\alpha = .05$, * $\alpha = .1$

society. Many women report having to get their husband's permission to seek work. Male and female workers concur that some men in their communities will not let their wives work. Even if women can work, they cannot move freely. Most female workers surveyed say that they can only go out with their husband, parents, or children, not alone or with friends. A male worker confirms these social restrictions, "Women have advanced...but there are big limitations. Women can't go out alone...they can't do anything without letting a man know, even go out to buy bread." Female floral workers—like other employed Ecuadorian women (Deere et al. 2014)—appear to have some control over household finances and derive decision making power from their economic contributions. As Table 7 notes, survey respondents report that family funds are typically managed jointly (33%) or by female household heads (38%). While most workers

say that spouses make spending decisions jointly, female workers are more likely to claim credit for spending decisions. One young woman explains, "If I help bring money to the family, my view on what we spend counts more." Although women's wages may bolster their financial decision making, since most income is devoted to household necessities, empowerment is limited. Female flower workers appear somewhat less likely than men (78 versus 84%) to have a portion of their wage available for personal use.²³

Fairtrade standards require that workers' children have access to primary school and childcare services. Primary

²³ Women in my survey report having less money available for personal use than men. When asked to identify their purchases, 79% of women identified items for family members, not themselves.

school requirements are unnecessary in Ecuador since primary education is widespread and all workers' children under 16 attend school. But Fairtrade's childcare provisions are critical, since care for young children is scarce in Ecuador, even though large employers are legally required to provide childcare (Lind 2012b). Focus groups attest to the importance of preschool facilities in enabling female employment, suggesting that childcare increases the individual capacity of mothers. Several female respondents propose that "mothers work here, because there is childcare." Reflecting childcare's importance to women, 27% of female and 15% of male plantation employees with pre-school-age children currently use company childcare and significantly more female than male workers have used these facilities in the past (18 as compared to 7%). Care for children is almost invariably women's work: while male workers in my sample often depend on their wives for this care, female workers rely on company services or female friends and relatives. Only one female respondent has a husband who cares for their young child during the day.

Despite access to educational facilities, my research finds that mothers are very concerned about gaps in child supervision during the workday (6:30 am to 3:30 pm). Female workers often voice anxieties regarding their children's safety since they leave home before school starts and return hours after it ends. One mother explains, "The children go to school and come home alone. When I am at work, I get so worried it makes me sick." For mothers, the inability to oversee and fully engage with their children threatens their very identity. Framing these concerns within her time poverty, a young worker notes, "There is never time...I get up at 4 to wash clothes and prepare breakfast. I leave before 6. The children eat alone. At night I rush to look over their schoolwork, cook dinner. I feel bad I do not have time for them...not like a good mother." My research finds that their plantation work also limits women's ability to participate in community and school activities.²⁴

Fairtrade has extensive standards to foster collective empowerment, rooted most fundamentally in stipulations that workers be democratically represented and guaranteed core labor rights. Ecuadorian law protects freedom of association and collective bargaining, but rural unions are rare and exist in only two of 850 floral plantations (FENACLE 2011). My focus groups underscore the importance of collective representation. Yet only 53% of surveyed flower workers identify freedom of association as a priority—fewer than identify non-discrimination or overtime issues—and women are significantly less likely to prioritize associational rights than men. Respondent narratives suggest that women are less likely to identify themselves as "workers" due to

the primacy of their family roles²⁵ and less likely to see unions as representing their interests.²⁶ Although Fairtrade endorses unions, workers can opt to be represented by Workers' Committees, as is the case on all Ecuadorian certified flower plantations. Workers' Committees consist of about 10 elected worker representatives who meet regularly during work hours alone, with the all-worker General Assembly, and with managers. Over 90% of workers on the four flower plantations know about the Workers' Committee and its representative function; most credit this Committee with increasing their collective voice.

Worker-led management of the Fairtrade Premium Fund—the fund generated by the 15% buyer premium on the FOB-value of certified flowers—also strengthens collective organization and capacity. The Premium Committee, typically including eight elected workers representatives and two management advisors, meets monthly to develop and manage projects selected by workers in the General Assembly. Over 90% of surveyed workers are aware of the Fairtrade Premium Committee and its activities; many describe how collective capacity is fostered through worker's selection of projects and Committee project management.

Although Fairtrade committees are intended to bolster collective capacity, committee involvement also greatly increases the individual capacities of representatives. Committee ledgers confirm that women are proportionately represented. Seventeen percent of female respondents have served on the Workers' Committee (slightly more than men) and 8% on the Premium Committee (slightly less than men). Women with experience on the Workers' Committee credit their extra 13 h of leadership and labor rights training and collective engagement with increasing their knowledge and self-confidence, a conclusion confirmed by representative interviews. Those with Premium Committee experience credit their even longer 30 h of leadership, accounting, and project management training with substantially enhancing their capacities. A female respondent with a second-grade education recounts with pride, "I have gained a lot from being a Premium Committee member. I was very scared at first, but I learned so much...I can now plan and oversee projects on my own, even budgeting." Yet this woman goes on to discuss the marital strife her committee participation caused, highlighting the costs women may pay for seeking new opportunities. Although Fairtrade expects committee meetings and trainings to be during work hours, representatives say activities often extend later. My research finds that

²⁴ Confirming findings by Grosse (2016).

²⁵ Henderson (2018) argues that in Ecuadorian floral regions most people identify as "peasants" rather than "workers," even though they live largely off wages.

²⁶ Ecuador's major rural union admits to historically prioritizing men's concerns (FENACLE 2011).

many women are unwilling to be Premium Committee representatives due to the workload.²⁷ Women are more willing to join the Workers' Committee, but survey respondents reveal how marital and household obligations constrain their participation: one woman's husband got so "jealous" of the committee she had to quit; another husband beat his wife for staying late for meetings; and a mother resigned due to concerns about her unsupervised child.

Fairtrade requires that the Premium be invested in projects benefitting workers, their families, and communities and that funding allocations consider the needs of both male and female workers. Fairtrade Premiums on Ecuadorian flower plantations average US\$ 550 annually per worker and are invested in a range of educational, health, and other services. Focus groups describe how Premium projects improve local living conditions, addressing key gaps in rural social services. Workers in this research often cite Fairtrade projects as the rationale for their preference for certified company employment. Almost all workers in my sample report that they and their families have benefitted from Premium projects: 96% have accessed educational programs; 89% have used medical services; 69% have used dental services; and 60% have gotten low-interest loans. Program usage does not vary greatly by gender, except that female workers and their children are significantly more likely to access educational programs.²⁸ Premium projects may be particularly important for female workers, since they address areas of social reproduction typically assigned to women in Ecuador (Lind 2012b). On two plantations, Premium projects address women's care responsibilities directly by subsidizing laundry facilities. The laundry project was introduced at one plantation meeting as a way to reduce women's weekend workload; demonstrating this issue's salience, virtually all the female workers present raised their hands to support pursuing the project and many started to clap.²⁹

This analysis suggests that Fairtrade does help promote gendered rights and empowerment, but for female flower workers in Ecuador this is a very complex process. My findings suggest that for these women individual capacity building is a necessary precondition for collective capacity building, given their limited education, skills, and power to assert their basic human rights, most clearly their right to personal safety. Employment outside the home in and of itself appears

to help rural Ecuadorian women develop an understanding of their rights and assert those rights due to their greater economic contributions to the household. Yet the paradox in female floral worker's employment is clear: while women take plantation jobs to better the lives of their children, their jobs limit their ability to care for their children.

Conclusions

This study explains how NGO-based certification programs address gender concerns in plantation agriculture, augmenting knowledge about programmatic alternatives (Rathgens et al. 2020) by expanding the limited research on the gendered implications of certification (Terstappen et al. 2013). My analysis of four major agricultural labor certifications reveals significant variation in their gender standards. While programs with limited gender regulations (Fair Trade USA and Rainforest Alliance) focus largely on promoting gender equality in employment, those with more extensive gender standards (Fairtrade International and UTZ) have additional criteria fostering gendered rights and empowerment. As a feminist political economy approach suggests, this broader focus is critical in addressing the immediate "practical needs" of female workers and their more long-term "strategic gender needs" (Moser 1989) and in countering women's subordination in employment, the home, and wider society (Benería 2003). I argue that social regulations which challenge gender inequities in and beyond the workplace hold the most promise in advancing the wellbeing and rights of women.

My analysis of Fairtrade International certification and worker experiences on participating plantations in Ecuador grounds this theoretical argument, illuminating the implications of gender standards in practice. Workers on Ecuador's certified plantations share many similarities. Yet their differences reflect global patterns of women's social devaluation, the centrality of economic need in fueling female employment, and the importance of role models in shifting gender norms (Barrientos 2019; ILO 2012): female workers in this study have significantly less education, come from significantly larger households, and are significantly more likely to have had wage-earning mothers than their male counterparts. Fairtrade certified plantations offer women stable fulltime jobs, equal wages, and legally mandated benefits, employment conditions which are rare for women in rural Ecuador, as in much of the world (FAO 2011, 2017). In addition to addressing women's practical needs in the realm of production, Fairtrade addresses women's practical reproductive needs via maternity leave and childcare services. This study demonstrates how Fairtrade certification can improve conditions for female as well as male workers, countering findings from large under committed plantations with weak

²⁷ Although I find no statistically significant relationship between Premium Committee experience and gender, women in my study are less likely to have been members than men, and less likely to have served on the Premium than the Workers' Committee.

²⁸ Premium Committee records list women and men equally as project beneficiaries.

²⁹ This meeting, which I attended, was not a General Assembly where projects are selected. The laundry idea was introduced to gauge interest prior to project proposal development.

benefit streams (Nelson and Martin 2015; Siegmann et al. 2018).

Despite major worker gains, this study finds that for female flower workers there remains a substantial “decent work deficit,” understood as “the gap between the world that we work in and the hopes people have for a better life” (ILO 2001). As is the case for many Ecuadorian women (Deere et al. 2014; Friederic 2014; Lind 2012a), women in this study find that their hopes for a better life are curtailed by their disproportionate care responsibilities and resulting time poverty, their lack of personal safety in the face of socially sanctioned male violence, and their limited access to societal institutions benefiting themselves and their families. These gendered threats to decent work are pervasive in global agriculture and industry, making it hard for women to “capture the gains from their work” (Barrientos 2019).

My findings support the argument that certification's greatest challenge in improving conditions for female workers is in fostering gendered rights and women's empowerment (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire 2015; Smith 2010, 2015). Fairtrade, like many labor certifications, promotes rights of association. Yet female workers in this study are significantly less likely than their male counterparts to prioritize these conventional labor rights, since women are less likely to identify themselves as “workers” due to the primacy of their family roles (Benería 2003) and less likely to see unions as advancing their interests, given their male-dominated history in Ecuador, as in much of the world (Moghadam et al. 2011). My research substantiates the importance of feminist empowerment priorities in enhancing women's individual and collective power and in challenging the social norms and institutions curtailing women's opportunities (Rao et al. 2016). While Fairtrade moves beyond most certification programs in endorsing a feminist empowerment view (Smith et al. 2018), this transformative agenda is not easily realized.

This study reaffirms a central tenant in the feminist literature: that expanding women's individual capabilities—to voice concerns, make informed choices, and pursue strategic goals—is a pre-condition for fostering their collective rights (Kabeer 1999). Fairtrade's extensive training requirements have, in the Ecuadorian case, increased female workers' individual self-confidence and voice, strengthening women's workplace advancement via promotions and household decision-making power. Fairtrade premium funded social services, and most pragmatically, laundry facilities, address areas of social reproduction assigned largely to women in Ecuador, as in most countries (Barrientos 2019; Meehan and Strauss 2015). Yet despite these efforts to meet gendered needs, female flower workers' ability to participate in worker organizations remains constrained by their marital and household obligations. I conclude that strengthening women's collective capacities requires increasing women's power in the home as much as in the workplace. While

certification can help strengthen the enabling environment for female workers, much still needs to be done for women to be able to advance their individual and collective rights as workers and citizens.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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