

# Sexual Violence Among Nicaraguan Coffee Growers and Laborers

#CoffeeLives Brief 2017-1

Arctic and Mountain Regions Development Institute



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As part of its ongoing #CoffeeLives program, AMRDI initiated Phase I of its research component to better determine persistent barriers to health, well-being and climate resilience of coffee farmers under conditions of climate change.

We are beginning with an in-depth look at Central America, and Nicaragua specifically, where mean annual temperatures are projected to increase by between 1 and 2 degrees Celsius by 2050<sup>i</sup>, with some models predicting an increase as high as 2.5 degrees in Nicaragua's coffee-producing regions<sup>ii</sup>.

Each of four Policy Briefs underscores new empirical research results that are crucial and often overlooked factors affecting sustainability. Though presented in isolation initially, these themes interact and complicate coffee community sustainability from a holistic perspective. This Brief explores the role of sexual violence among coffee growers and laborers.

## Sexual Violence

In spring of 2017, AMRDI conducted a cross-sectional survey on a convenience sample of 28 male and 24 (n=52) female coffee farmers in the Matagalpa and Jinotega departments of Nicaragua.

- 25% of female respondents reported having been sexually assaulted.
- Furthermore, 25% of male respondents had also been victims of sexual assault.

It is important to note the downward bias likely in these estimates, especially among the male respondents, who have cited in previous studies feelings of shame or embarrassment as a barrier to reporting rape and sexual assault<sup>iii</sup>. These results suggest a disturbing prevalence of sexual violence among coffee laborers that has gone largely unreported.

## Analysis

According to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, 29.5% and 11.9% of Central American women have experienced intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, respectively<sup>iv</sup>. In the Nicaraguan city of Leon, 52% of women aged 15-49 reported having experienced physical partner abuse during their lives<sup>v</sup>. 20% of men and 26% of women in Leon reported that they had experienced sexual abuse before age 19, including 15% of women and 7% of men who had been victims of attempted or completed rape<sup>vi</sup>. In our study, 25% of rural male and female coffee farmers and laborers, specifically, acknowledged "having been sexually assaulted in the past."

Despite its prevalence, sexual assault is rarely addressed in or included as a component of coffee-specific development or climate resilience programming. However, addressing this and other social issues is a crucial element for sustainable development. Side effects of sexual and partner abuse include:

- Negative maternal health outcomes, including infant and child mortality, low birth weight, and adolescent and unwanted pregnancy<sup>vii</sup>.
- Negative mental health outcomes, such as chronic mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>viii</sup>; substance abuse<sup>ix</sup>; feelings of shame, isolation, entrapment<sup>x</sup>; and emotional distress<sup>x</sup>.
- Diminished social trust and diminished willingness to engage in essential social networks<sup>xi</sup>.

## Recommendations

There is evidence of sexual assault awareness interventions reducing incidence of sexual assault. Specific targets of these interventions, and related outcomes, vary widely. Some components of successful interventions include:

- Training men on how to help a survivor of sexual assault decreases likelihood of being sexually coercive<sup>xii</sup>.
- On North American university campuses, the "most promising" means of sexual assault prevention is self-defense training<sup>xiii</sup>.
- Longer interventions are more effective than shorter interventions<sup>xiv</sup>.



However, the efficacy of such programs has not been studied in rural Central America, and especially not among vulnerable coffee farmers. We therefore recommend the culturally-relevant design and implementation of a sexual assault awareness and trauma counseling intervention among a segment of coffee producers in Nicaragua, conducted in concert with regular participant feedback and participatory impact assessments.

Ideally, this intervention would be conducted in collaboration with both governmental and nongovernmental agencies, including legislative reform and improved availability of wide-spectrum services for victims<sup>xv</sup>. Given limited resources, privacy concerns, and corruption, however, a more plausible option would be to implement interventions in partnership with well-established coffee cooperatives. A partnership like this might be able to utilize existing social networks, codified decision-making mechanisms, as well as other training programs (in accessing credit or farming techniques for example), in order to recruit participants and deliver services more effectively.

A critical component of any intervention will be, as noted above, the monitoring and evaluation of its implementation and impact assessments, to determine the degree to which such social interventions achieve their immediate goals, and assist with wider climate and sustainability goals.

## Conclusions

The coffee sector has largely viewed development through the prism of income generation. This AMRDI #CoffeeLives Policy Brief, and others to follow, underscore the interaction between social, political and environmental factors that continue to inhibit more robust returns on development investment.

Coffee farmers are rural farmers, highly susceptible to climate change, and will require each robust health, education, social networks, and access to decision-making, in order to adequately prepare and adapt to changes. Sexual violence, it is clear, is one impeding factor that has been largely overlooked to date and which will require attention by existing donors and partners.

## References

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