

Feminine empowerment and cooperativism: Three study cases of cooperatives in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the perception about challenges and opportunities that women who lead agricultural cooperatives face in Colombia, and their relationship with feminine empowerment.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative approach was used by means of the study of three cases of agricultural cooperatives, through structured interviews that addressed three dimensions: 1) sociodemographic data of producers, 2) women's experience in cooperativism, and 3) challenges and limitations faced.

Results: Important challenges were identified in feminine cooperativism, such as limited access to credit, the double workday that women practice within their households, in addition to the complexity of reconciling the demands of agricultural production with domestic responsibilities. There is also a lack of government support, scarce specialized training, and lack of accompaniment and counseling for efficiency in the commercialization of their products. Cooperativism is a platform for collective decisions and social participation, promoting leadership among women in rural zones.

Limitations/implications: Some participants manifested caution when providing key information for the study.

Findings/conclusions: Strategies must be generated to strengthen collective and business capacities of women, with the aim of improving the organizational and economic structure of cooperatives. Policies to promote inclusive governance, financial education, and access to new markets were suggested for a greater impact in gender equity in the sector.

Keywords: Organization, leadership, coffee, women, management.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, women perform 40% of tasks in the farmland, and a fourth of the world population is constituted by rural women, of which 43% are devoted to agricultural tasks, in addition to household tasks (ONU Mujeres, 2018).

Women have an important role in the rural economy, especially in developing countries, and they represent nearly half of the farmers in the world (Banco Mundial, 2017). They are also drivers of the economy at the global level and even more in the agriculture and livestock



sector, which has particular exogenous and dynamic variables (Bancolombia, 2021), where women carry out a strategic role in economic and social development process. In Colombia, the farming sector generates more than 20% of national employment and represents half of the employment in rural areas. In the case of rural women in Colombia, they are concentrated primarily in the departments of Antioquia, where 11.3% reside, followed by Cauca with 8.1%, Nariño with 7.8%, Córdoba with 7.4%, and Cundinamarca with 6.9% (DANE, 2021).

Despite the advances found in the rural environment, there are still gender inequalities in every dimension of sustainable development, and in many areas progress is slow, so that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be attained by the year 2030 (ONU Mujeres, 2018).

Empowerment can be a means for women to show the importance of the meaning of their autonomy, since it leads to improvement of their social conditions and allows them to gain control of the decisions they make (Hernández *et al.*, 2018).

In Colombia, the vulnerability of women is linked to cultural conditions in which patriarchal gender schemes predominate, which restrict their opportunities and establish mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination (Garzón-Segura *et al.*, 2022).

For this study, the empowerment of women through cooperativism is analyzed, which has been understood as a doctrine, a set of principles, a system, a strategy, a movement, and an activity that classifies cooperatives as a model or type of organization directed at the interests of all the members (Dhein *et al.*, 2022). The social importance of cooperatives is relevant because they provide full-time or part-time jobs to a number of local women who do not have other opportunities (Hernández *et al.*, 2018), and the principle of for-profit personalist non-priority and verification of broadened social transferences in kind are elements that are characteristic of every cooperative (Alarcón and Álvarez, 2020).

Cooperatives of rural women are essential to unite and gather women together, so they can make their voice heard, defend their interests and represent them in political and economic spheres, and they also allow women to influence the decisions and institutions that affect their lives (ONU Mujeres, 2018). Ozdemir (2013) points out that the creation of cooperatives implies showing women a way of earning money, generating employment and fighting poverty, which is generally more harrowing for them.

Therefore, women farmers that constitute cooperative societies are women who serve as example for society due to their individual and cultural characteristics (Bezboruah and Pillai, 2015; Bonnan-White *et al.*, 2013; Kamberidou, 2013).

This particular form of social collective undertaking has empowered women members in three different ways: 1) economic security, 2) development of entrepreneurial behavior, and 3) increase of contributions to the family (Datta and Gailey, 2012). Under this context, the objective was to analyze the perception about the challenges and opportunities that women who lead agricultural cooperatives in Colombia face, and their relationship with feminine empowerment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study's approach was qualitative, which allowed identifying patterns and relationships that can complement the qualitative approaches (Yin, 2018). The interview

technique was used and the interview guide as instrument of data collection, with the aim of building cases that are presented through a formulation of questions that had the purpose of gathering information related with variables that help to understand the experience of women as members of cooperatives.

The technique of study case was also applied, which is characterized by being a social process with the aspiration of researching under a methodological purpose (Jiménez-Chaves, 2012), where techniques such as participatory observation and interview were used, in which the researcher interacts with key informants (women farmers, cooperative leaders, among others).

To apply the data collection instrument, the women were contacted for interviews through the Agrarian University Foundation of Colombia; the approach was by means of the women researchers, who were in charge of inviting women who had the following characteristics: a) leaders of agriculture and livestock cooperatives, b) minimum two years of experience in the agricultural market, and c) true willingness of participating in the interview. The study area considered the municipalities of Anolaima and Villa del Rosario de Tena in the Department of Cundinamarca, Colombia, and the study units were three agriculture and livestock cooperatives, which are described in Table 1.

The interviews were applied in the meetings of the Administration Council of the agricultural cooperatives, through a rigid or intentional non-probabilistic sampling, where women were selected in a deliberate manner with the aim of obtaining qualitative data for the research. The interviews were divided into the following themes: 1) data from women farmers; 2) experience of women as members of cooperatives; and 3) challenges and limitations of feminine cooperativism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Case 1: Anolaima Avocado and Other Fruit Producers

Association-APROAFA

APROAFA, founded in 2014 in Anolaima, Cundinamarca, is devoted to the cultivation and transformation of avocado (*Persea americana*). The women farmers' age ranges between 40 and 61 years, and they mention that they have been taught the value of work and

Table 1. Description of the cooperatives.

Case study	Activity carried out by the cooperative
Anolaima Avocado and Other Fruit Producers Association-APROAFA	Promote and develop the cultivation of avocados and other fruit trees in the municipality of Anolaima and the province of Tequendama, thereby achieving the well-being of associated producers, and promote, develop, and research the activity throughout the country.
Association of Women Coffee Growers in Anolaima-MUCCA	A solidarity organization of women coffee growers and entrepreneurs from the municipality of Anolaima, who work throughout the coffee production chain.
ASOFRUGUASIMAL	A rural association that cultivates regional agricultural products, including mangoes, citrus fruits, and avocados, through sustainable production processes using organic ingredients, thereby offering the market a safe, high-quality product.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on fieldwork (2024).

entrepreneurship since they were young, through the sale of products and help with households and farm tasks. Under this idea, Amine and Staub (2009) and Mordi *et al.* (2010) mention that the family characterized by a structure of power is essential, since it carries out a predominant role in women's activities of entrepreneurship and empowering, which drives them to strengthen their self-esteem and vision for work from the family core. There is evidence that cooperative societies empower women since they move beyond being solely entrepreneurial projects; they are capable of generating intangible benefits and promoting women's autonomy (Ferguson and Kepe, 2011).

Women from this organization mention the importance of working under the cooperative approach, because since they joined, the vision has been of being united and committed with the sustainable growth of the association. Under this panorama, Bastida *et al.* (2021) found that some specific characteristics of the cooperatives, particularly their organizational culture and governance model, suggest that this model of collective entrepreneurship is particularly attractive for women entrepreneurs. This is important, since cooperatives have also been viewed as a way of contributing to economic development, especially in developing countries (Guzman *et al.*, 2019; Paudel and Acharya, 2021).

Among the main challenges that the women farmers emphasize, there is lack of access to technology and specialized equipment for transformation; likewise, among the challenges they face in the medium term, they identify creating a processing plant to diversify the offer of products.

APROAFA considers as one of the main factors for success of the cooperative, which has allowed it to remain in the market, the transformation of products and the procurement of a prototype that the women themselves elaborated; this served them to trade their product and also to accelerate processes in the production area.

When the women were asked about who are better, whether men or women, they responded without hesitation that women, because they have the sense of responsibility and dedication, as well as the attentiveness to elaborate manual tasks that guarantee quality products; these factors have helped them to strengthen the loyalty of their clients. In relation to the traditional roles that women fulfill in society, they were asked about whether they contribute or hinder the development of the cooperative, indicating that sometimes traditional roles limit them because they must fulfill domestic activities and care for family members, but also that these challenges make them resilient to face upcoming challenges.

Throughout the interview, women farmers were asked to mention the strengths of the Colombian agricultural sector, emphasizing in their answers the interest for Colombian products from international markets. On the other hand, the main limitations they face is the lack of commitment of people and some women, as well as the limited support from the government.

Study Case 2: Association of Women Coffee Growers in Anolaima-MUCCA

MUCCA, with headquarters in Anolaima, Cundinamarca, gathers women with an average age of 68 years, who are mainly devoted to the production of coffee, mango,

citruses, and other fruit trees. From its start in the year 2016 and with only 10 members, it has sought to improve the living conditions and sustainability of their farms through product transformation. The women farmers highlight their persistence, organization and ability for teamwork, which has helped them to become empowered and to advance towards their objectives. In this regard, Mahmud *et al.* (2012) consider empowerment as a life process and continuous movement of each woman, so women need to reinforce their self-esteem, their position in decision making, freedom of movement, and to have access to cash. Under the same order of ideas, Fundora *et al.* (2017) and Munster and Fleitas (2019) suggest that when a woman attains empowerment and takes the reins of her life, it is possible for her to gain access to various spheres and thus obtain greater representativity, attaining a fairer and more equitable participation.

In relation to leadership, women are described as responsible, with the gift of authority, collaborative, resilient, innovative, persistent, and organized; these qualities have driven them to generate improvements for the cooperative. However, although women's participation in rural development has had important protagonism in recent years, they are not always offered opportunities and conditions for their participation from knowledge and capacities in institutions and cooperatives of their localities, so that their role and personal development is fractioned and minimized (Camejo *et al.*, 2024). On the other hand, Arias *et al.* (2013) mention that women who reside in rural areas experience low investment in human capital training, fewer connections with labor markets, more time devoted to household tasks, low income, fewer connections with the State and greater poverty, which agrees with the limitations of this study case.

MUCCA has achieved milestones such as the development of transformed products, the creation of a local brand, and the strengthening of their transformation abilities, despite women's participation in the sector being limited. As mentioned by Elam *et al.* (2019), Guzman (2019) and Marlow (2019), in spite of the logical variation in the rate of women entrepreneurs between countries, there is wide consensus that women's contribution to entrepreneurship is considerably lower than that of their male counterparts, although the reach of the work that women perform is not just for them, but rather for their families and society.

Cooperative members perceive challenges such as lack of modernization, improvement of communication pathways and transport, as well as the lack of more state backing. Under this scenario, Balachandra *et al.* (2019) and Gupta *et al.* (2014), proposed a gender framework to identify the specific barriers that women face to start a business, including the difficulties to gain access to markets and financial resources (less provision of organizational resources) (Brush *et al.*, 2017), restrictions related to the life sphere, and exclusion from entrepreneurial networks (Bogren *et al.*, 2013; Welsh and Kaciak, 2018), which prevents them from efficiently entering markets and trade channels.

One of the main elements that cooperative members mention to start and coordinate a cooperative is to have management abilities to capture women who are interested in entering the cooperative, since, without an important group of members, cooperativism is projected as limited in its operation. Meanwhile, regarding the success factors that they have achieved in the cooperative, women farmers indicate coffee (*Coffea arabica* L.) exports

as well as the satisfaction of having maintained and driven the cooperative and the creation of a local brand.

Concerning the issue of: Who is better at business, men or women? Half (50%) of the women answered that both men and women are competent to conduct business, and that they only need experience and strengthening of entrepreneurial capacities to reach good agreements and close sales, since men have been naturally devoted to overseeing businesses and in recent years, women have also been included in these activities. The rest mentioned that women are better at conducting business, since they are careful, committed and decided, in addition to having the quality of considering common wellbeing; this statement agrees with what was pointed out by Lee and Huang (2018) describing that women feel rewarded when they center their objectives in collective aims.

Authors like Bastida *et al.* (2020, 2021) point out that women who work under the scheme of cooperativism prioritize mutual help, collaborative work, and non-profit objectives over economic benefit, motivations that are incompatible to a certain extent with the classic individualist behavior attributed to businesspeople (Ahl and Marlow, 2021).

Regarding the traditional roles that women have, they were asked whether they contribute or hinder business development, to which women responded that in certain aspects they are limited to promote the business since there is an unshakable belief that women must oversee domestic responsibilities and family care.

Women identified as the greatest strength of the national agricultural sector the diversity of products that Colombian lands provide because of their geographic and climatic diversity; regarding weaknesses of the sector, they mentioned the lack of modernization and efficient training, as well as the absence of management for commercialization processes.

Study case 3: Fruit-Producing Association of Guasimal-ASOFRUGUASIMAL

Asofruguasimal, located in Tena, Cundinamarca, was established in 2015 with 34 members (men and women), devoted primarily to growing mango (*Mangifera indica*) and citrus (*Citrus* sp.), and they also have hens (*Gallus gallus*) which they received as donation when they formed the association; however, currently only around 15 associates remain. Regarding this, Camejo *et al.* (2024) mention the importance of strengthening cooperatives with a development program that favors the organization of agricultural, commercial and cooperation processes, with the aim of attaining the consolidation of organizations and increasing the number of members.

Authors like Labrador *et al.* (2018, 2020), Marín de León *et al.* (2021), and Núñez Llerena *et al.* (2021) suggest that cooperatives are constituted as economic entities that have a legal personality of entrepreneurial nature and that cooperation between cooperatives is considered as a necessary principle for the full development of the cooperative identity.

The approach of Asofruguasimal is centered on the commercialization and transformation of products, facing obstacles such as the failure to fulfill the calls and the lack of agronomic resources such as fertilizers. The women farmers emphasize the need for financing, the lack of access to networks to broaden the markets, adequate capacities and better support in programming harvests and post-harvests, since they do not have access to updated and efficient training. This agrees with many authors who identify

specific barriers that women face to begin in business or cooperatives, as the difficulties to gain access to markets and financial resources (Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Gupta *et al.*, 2014); likewise, they have less provision of organizational resources (Brush *et al.*, 2017), restrictions related to the life sphere, and exclusion from business networks (Bogren *et al.*, 2013; Welsh and Kaciak, 2018).

Concerning the traditional roles that women have, they mentioned that the household responsibilities continue to fall on women and this often implies unpaid work and a devotion to family welfare beyond personal or professional aspirations outside the home, which often causes women to have to allocate more time to the family and to not focus completely on improving management of the cooperatives; members of the cooperatives identify this as a weakness to drive the business and commercialization of their products. Under this context, women recognize feminine leadership as a strength, although they face challenges such as incompleteness of key activities, which affects their productivity, as well as machismo. Despite the difficulties, they work to consolidate their limits with clear commitments in transformation, they have a plant where they make fruit pulp, which has contributed to expanding the local market.

A limitation identified was the presence of intermediaries in the entire commercialization chain, which reduces the income of women farmers, since they impose low prices, taking advantage of their power in the market; on the other hand, the excess of intermediaries lengthens the supply chain and causes costs to increase and delivery times to extend.

Therefore, cooperativism in Colombia refers to the participation of women in agricultural cooperatives, which are described as spaces that serve to foster solidarity, mutual help, and strengthening of social networks for support between women, where they provide tools for women farmers to generate income, improve their quality of life, and mainly, reduce their economic dependency. With these elements, women can drive empowerment and thus expand and improve the abilities and talents of the members of feminine cooperatives.

Because of this, the development of rural women in economic activities reinforces their autonomy, gender equity, improves their family context, and expands the opportunities for local and national development (Gasperín-García *et al.*, 2022).

In this sense, Table 2 shows a SWOT analysis, with the purpose of analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that feminine cooperatives represent for women.

The SWOT analysis shows that the presence of intermediaries all along the commercialization chain is identified as a limitation for cooperativism in Colombia, as well as the lack of adoption of sustainable and efficient technologies, and the shortage in organizational and entrepreneurial strengthening.

The constant strengthening of the base of women who are members of cooperatives, the promotion of feminine leadership, and the experience women have established in relation to collective work are established; all these elements have driven the active participation of women to strengthen work for equal opportunities, as mentioned by Gasperín-García *et al.* (2023), where the authors indicate that farmers value the collective work and interpersonal relationships that are fostered by cooperativism.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of the 3 case studies of cooperatives in Colombia.

Case study	Strengths	Weaknesses	Threats	Opportunities
Anolaima Avocado and Other Fruit Producers Association-APROAFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational commitment Prototypes of transformed products Strong peasant identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited access to equipment and technology Traditional role still present in women cooperators Lack of administrative organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitive avocado market Price volatility Lack of continuous public policies Weak government support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for commercial expansion Interest in processing plant Future institutional support Growth of the local and national market
Association of Women Coffee Growers in Anolaima-MUCCA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening the women-only organization Solidarity economy Own brand and teamwork 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of financing Institutional bureaucracy Lack of continuous technical support and advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Machismo in rural areas Climatic difficulties Price volatility Unfair competition Lack of efficient road infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local brand growth and positioning Participation in rural women's fairs and networks Community support Brand expansion in the national and international market
ASOFRUGUASIMAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pulp plant installed Female leadership Diversified production (citrus, mango, etc.) Women with a track record and experience in cooperatives (46-76 years old) and practical knowledge in traditional production. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction of active members Internal disorganization Poor technical harvest planning Limitations on the members' education (primary to secondary). Little associative stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failure to comply with public calls for proposals Machismo and overload of domestic tasks for women Variability of input prices Climate change Social conflicts and violence Presence of intermediaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demand for processed products Generate contacts for linking to improve technical and specialized training. Potential for rural tourism

Source: Prepared by the authors based on fieldwork (2024).

Table 3. Description of the social, productive, economic and cultural aspects of the 3 case studies of cooperatives in Colombia.

Case study	Social aspects	Productive aspects	Economic aspects	Cultural aspects
Anolaima Avocado and Other Fruit Producers Association-APROAFA	Number of members: 6 Age: 40 to 61 years Education: primary to university	Avocado cultivation with a focus on transformation; prototype development; processing plant goal	Need for equipment and technology; limited government support; seeking income diversification	Redefining the traditional female role; integrating peasant identity and entrepreneurship
Association of Women Coffee Growers in Anolaima-MUCCA	Number of members: 10 Age: 48 to 77 years Education: primary to university	Sustainable coffee production; value-added product transformation; active participation throughout the value chain	Brand development; solidarity economy practices; local marketing; limited access to financing; and road infrastructure	Revaluation of the role of women coffee growers; promotion of female coffee identity; cultural transformation from the collective perspective
ASOFRUGUASIMAL	Number of members: 6 Age: 46 to 76 years Schooling: primary to secondary	Mango, citrus, and fruit pulp production; difficulties with harvest and post-harvest scheduling	Lack of agricultural inputs; difficulties in consistent marketing; low external investment	Presence of traditional practices in rural communities; female leadership challenging patriarchal norms

Source: Prepared by the authors based on fieldwork (2024).

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that agricultural cooperatives are constituted as transformational spaces for rural women, allowing them access to financial resources, strengthening personal and entrepreneurial capacities, as well as increasing the visibility of women to actively participate in leadership positions for decision making. Challenges were identified such as limited access to credit, the double workday of women who participate in the cooperatives and tend to family needs, given the complexity of reconciling the demands of agricultural production with domestic responsibilities, as well as the shortage in government support, the scarce specialized training, and the lack of accompaniment and counseling for efficiency in the commercialization of their products. Feminine cooperativism in Colombia is posed as the access that women have to promoting empowerment and thus improving the quality of life and achieving economic and social growth, as well as personal and entrepreneurial growth of women farmers.

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