



Business management and gender equity and equality practices: the case of the company Agroforestal Cafetalera Tercer Frente

Gestión empresarial y prácticas de equidad e igualdad de género: el caso de la empresa Agroforestal Cafetalera Tercer Frente

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ABSTRACT

Companies are accepting the challenge of incorporating women into the labor market under conditions of greater equity and equality. This requires the definition and implementation of access, training, and communication policies, among others. However, they face resistance from patriarchal practices and traditional gender roles that hinder women's performance. This study aimed to identify the opportunities and barriers for gender equity in the Agroforestry Coffee Company Tercer Frente, in order to propose practices that promote equitable relationships and improve business management. Through a participatory diagnosis of gender equity, gaps were identified and measures were proposed to promote equal treatment and opportunities, building towards gender equity and equality.

Keywords: empowerment, company, gender equity, women and development.

JEL Classification: J16; M12; M54.

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RESUMEN

Las empresas están aceptando el desafío de incorporar mujeres en el mercado laboral en condiciones de mayor equidad e igualdad. Esto requiere la definición y aplicación de políticas de acceso, capacitación y comunicación, entre otras. Sin embargo, se enfrentan a la resistencia de prácticas patriarcales y roles de género tradicionales que obstaculizan el desempeño de las mujeres. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo identificar las oportunidades y barreras para la equidad de género en la empresa Agroforestal Cafetalera Tercer Frente, con el fin de proponer prácticas que fomenten relaciones equitativas y mejoren la gestión empresarial. A través de un diagnóstico participativo de equidad de género, se identificaron brechas y se propusieron medidas para promover igualdad de trato y oportunidades, construyendo hacia la equidad e igualdad de género.

Palabras clave: empoderamiento, empresa, equidad de género, mujer y desarrollo.

Clasificación JEL: J16; M12; M54.

INTRODUCTION

In the business sector, there is a growing appreciation of how to foster equitable relations between men and women (Bekana, 2020; Blanco-González et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2020; Miotto et al., 2019). The processes of change in the economic sphere have demanded adaptation efforts from workers (Alvarez-Torres & Schiuma, 2022; Brammer & Clark, 2020). In this sense, Escandón and Arias (2011) argue that these processes that lead to transformations aimed at the need to include women in the broadest sense of the term in activities under equal conditions should not be forgotten since only in this way will it be possible to obtain competitive derivations.

Gender relations constitute categories of analysis of multiple sciences, from which various analyses have arisen, valuing gender equity as the equality of conformities between both sexes (Echevarría, 2017). Building gender equity brings essential benefits to the management processes of companies that aspire to achieve development and boost the



country's economy (Torres & Echevarría, 2017). This is the case of the company Agroforestal Cafetalera Tercer Frente; however, at the international level, various developments in this field were appreciated (Civera et al., 2019; Lyon et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Studies on women and coffee in Cuba need to be more representative in the Tercer Frente municipality; the Center for Agroforestry Research on Coffee and Cocoa and the Municipal University Center conducted the research. The analyses have been conducted from a descriptive and statistical approach without achieving a comprehensive gender perspective where participatory processes prevail. Therefore, no research has been carried out to provide the coffee company with methodological proposals to work on building gender equity and equality.

From this perspective, the research was carried out to determine the potential and limitations of gender equity. The research was aimed at proposing good practices that would lead to the construction of equitable relations between men and women coffee growers and, with this, improve business management. To this end, a participatory appraisal of gender equity from a business perspective was conducted.

Why a gender approach, from a business conception?

Currently, Women and ECLAC (2020) state that it is related to values linked to ethical components, expectations of social responsibility, and possibilities of access from the relationships that are articulated between men and women in the labor context, which define the space and condition associated with the position of women in the economic and social framework, as well as in the labor market in particular. Hence, gender equity is considered a strategy that generates company wealth (Braunstein et al., 2020; Minasyan et al., 2019). In order to understand this statement, it is helpful to clarify what is gender and what is a gender equity approach.

Gender as a sociocultural construct

When referring to the concept of gender, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women - INSTRAW (2020) states that when referring to the term gender, this is understood as the set of socially constructed roles, psychosocial characteristics, interpersonal relationships, attitudes, behaviors, set of values, relative power and influence, which are assigned to both sexes by society in general. However, biological sex is composed of specific genetic and anatomical characteristics, while gender is associated with acquired and learned identity, which varies significantly intra- and interculturally.

From this concept of gender, it is understood that many of the behaviors that are natural attributes of men or women are characteristics that are constructed in the social process and, additionally, that have no relation to biology; likewise, the relationship established between the sex/gender system is taken into account. These are valued as categories that establish the differences between biological and social facts related to sexuality. Martínez and Baeza (2017) express that sex alludes to the set of physical and biological characteristics that, due to determined circumstances, do not share discrepancies in the cultural or social sphere nor contexts of subordination.

In turn, these authors consider that gender is a social and cultural construction that is structured based on a series of practices, representations, symbols, norms, and values that societies build on sexual differences. On the other hand, Prieto and León (2020) emphasize it as a dimension constructed from the roles that were historically assigned and are assigned in the different spaces of action, defining unequal characteristics and identities in both sexes.

From gender as a process that is constructed and mediated by the sex-gender relationship, throughout history, there have been unequal power relations between men and women with a substantial impact on society, among which are wage differentials, with emphasis on the agricultural sector (Arévalo-Zurita et al., 2022); access to resources and training; inadequate distribution of roles (Naranjo & Echevarría, 2020); unequal distribution of the time burden for the performance of responsibilities (Herrera, 2020); and, above all, the disproportionate relationship established and the place occupied by women within the economic-social fabric in general and the labor market.

Gender equity and business management

Socializing and applying gender equity and equality policies that improve the condition and position of women from the societal level leads to high acceptance agreements. What would be the answer if the analysis is carried out from the business sector? Why incorporate gender equity and equality policies in companies? What is obtained from their application? To find the answers, it is necessary to carry out the analysis from two perspectives (that of

women and that of the company); both create synergies in the search for results.

Women-centered perspective

Women are defined as individuals in society with the capacity to resist, organizers willing to conceive social transformations aimed at resignifying cultural codes, forging opportune practices and discourses, and being actively part of social life (Zabala & Echevarría, 2020). Likewise, their actions are marked by an interest in modifying societal relations and the conduct evidenced in roles and functions, which places them in scenarios of disadvantage and distinction in the social, economic, and labor spheres.

Since the dawn of the twentieth century, the enlistment of women in the paid labor space has been characterized by conditions of inequality concerning men, manifesting itself in conditions of precariousness, little recognition of the professional experiences and contributions of which they are capable (de Andrés et al., 2021; McGrath et al., 2022; Petrongolo & Ronchi, 2020). In correspondence with this, there is an inescapable need to eliminate obstacles and ensure that they are recognized and valued for their abilities and contributions, where patriarchal practices, stereotypes, and prejudices limit their behaviors and impact the development of companies, as well as advances in their economic autonomy, are not taken into account (Kazandjian et al., 2019; Moreno & Cole, 2019; Shannon et al., 2019).

The company-centric perspective

Companies should pay special attention to policies that magnify mutual respect between men and women and, with this, gender equality actions that allow them to take advantage of female talent and creativity (Women and ECLAC, 2020). In this way, they could eliminate discrimination, violence, or sexual harassment in the workplace and establish equitable remuneration, among others. All this benefits the company's economy and society in general. In order to achieve a sustainable business future, it is necessary to invest in women's ability to achieve leadership and equal opportunities. In recent years, women have achieved a more holistic, realistic, and integrated vision of the practical sense of gender equity and equality towards a good business.

From this analysis, companies should go beyond being economic actors and value themselves as social actors that promote fair relations. In this line, international organizations such as the UN, UNDP, and ECLAC have developed practices, guidelines, and strategies that allow companies to promote the reconciliation of family, personal, and work life and equality between men and women as a cross-cutting principle. Thus, Hernández (2021) states that to achieve companies with strong economies, the quality of life of women, their families, and even communities must be improved, and, in turn, it is necessary to empower women, promoting political, cultural, and economic participation.

Opportunities and challenges for business management in the Cuban context, from practices that integrate gender equity and equality.

In Cuba, several legal instruments have been promoted that favor the processes of inclusion of women in paid work, among which is the National Action Plan for the Follow-up to the Beijing Conference (PAN), which includes 90 measures to be fulfilled by the Central State Administration Agencies (OACE) and other entities. Likewise, the National Plan for the Advancement of Women was approved by Presidential Decree No. 198 of March 2021. These are mechanisms that promote the advancement of Cuban women towards paid work, focusing their attention on current challenges based on the transformations without going backward in what has been achieved. However, even though the country has a framework conducive to developing a gender agenda, there are imbalances in the systems of relations between men and women at the enterprise level that affect the status and position of women in the economic business network.

Díaz and Echevarría (2016) state that these manifestations of inequality are often the result of poor managerial training, which manifests itself in management and corporate governance processes. All this is a result of the scarce provision of courses on gender in companies. This lack of systematization of knowledge limits adequate decision-making from a gender perspective. Authors such as Lucero and Torres (2020), Delgado-Fernández and Rodríguez-Hernández (2020), Sosa et al. (2020), Mejía-Franco et al. (2021), Jiménez and Pérez (2020), Rodríguez and Núñez (2021), Romero (2021) and González and Mariño (2022), reveal that there are managers with more operational and practical behaviors than behaviors that promote change. However, they possess qualities that, from enabling environments, could lead to change.

In 2016, the Gender Strategy of the System of Agriculture (EG-SA) was approved, which has been an achievement in favor of gender equity and visibility of rural women. This ministry has convened the execution of various systematization workshops to implement the gender strategy. However, these experiences have not achieved the expected results, evidencing a lack of follow-up and control of their effects to promote equity in business management (Díaz & Echevarría, 2016).

The aforementioned shows the existence of a business autonomy that is still captive, where managers focus their analysis and demands on compliance with the economic plan, with an ever-increasing margin concerning the previous year and leading to the development of a culture of discipline and not of change, where decision making is not collective, and command and order processes prevail, limiting the system of relations between men and women. Under these conditions, it is difficult to modify the manifestations of the existing patriarchal culture in companies. Given all these disjunctures, it is necessary to propose good practices that favor modifying such behaviors.

METHODS

The research was carried out in the Agroforestry Coffee Company of the Tercer Frente municipality; it had a descriptive-analytical character and used a mixed methodological perspective (quantitative and qualitative). This projection allowed the application of a participatory diagnosis of gender equity based on workshops and the combination of different research methods and techniques (in-depth interview, participant observation, questionnaire, and life history) from an analytical framework.

All of this is done with a systemic perspective, focusing on women and men, households and communities, and the chain of actors that deal directly with coffee production, who produce, process, and market to the processing centers and are the owners of the product. Also included at this level were coffee technicians and the highest representatives of the productive forms (presidents of cooperatives and their boards of directors).

The analysis focused on how to identify roles, access, relational manifestations, specific needs, and priorities associated with the coffee context and to what extent cultural (patriarchal) issues could influence each of them, thus discovering potentialities and limitations at this level and in their dynamic interaction at the enterprise level.

RESULTS

Why a gender analysis in the Third Front coffee business sector?

There is constant talk of the growing incorporation of women in the productive sphere, where their direct participation, although invisible or undervalued, is undeniable. In the case of coffee, according to figures, it is estimated that, in Cuba, the participation of women represents 60% in the work of harvesting, drying of the grain in the patios, preparation of nurseries, preparation of food for the workers, receipt, and classification of the grain; the latter is mainly done by hand, among other tasks (Vasallo, 2019). Coffee constitutes the primary source of income and employment in the municipality of Tercer Frente. More than 57.5% of the families are incorporated into the coffee work, reaching 86% of the commercial production of the municipality, generating improvements every year in the quality of life of the highlanders, allowing stop the exodus to the city, and maintaining the status of the largest producer of the item in Cuba (Arévalo-Zurita et al., 2022).

The coffee Agroforestry Enterprise comprises 18 Credit and Service Cooperatives, 12 Agricultural Production Cooperatives, and 18 Basic Cooperative Production Units, with lands extending over 5200 hectares. This cooperative sector constitutes the most significant labor force within the coffee production process, composed of 1670 members, of which 1107 are men, and 563 are women (Arévalo-Zurita et al., 2022). In this context, women represent 33.7% of the labor force. However, in this cooperative sector, women have a higher representation rate than other sectors.

In the coffee cooperative sector, 28 women are middle-level technicians in agronomy; of these, only 7 hold managerial positions, representing 25%, thus showing a scarce inclusion of women in managerial positions. This is due, among other issues, to the fact that men are considered to obtain better results for the entities than women, as well as the insufficient training of women to assume these management positions, which is defined as a participation gap in the main decision-making spaces.

The statistics of the National Office of Municipal Statistics (ONEI) regarding gender indicators related to employment in the coffee sector at the end of 2021 showed that the segment of participation in the labor force was

82.7% of men, while 64.4% corresponded to women. From these data, it was concluded that eight out of every ten men maintained a labor relationship, while six out of every ten women were in the same situation, thus showing how the market, in a certain way, favored the male gender in this aspect. The exploratory study made it possible to confirm, through the in-depth interviews, the difficulties in accessing information because only 25% of the women in the company received it directly from the boards of directors through the assemblies that were held; on the other hand, the remaining percentage of women stated that it was difficult for them to attend the assemblies because of their unpaid workload, in terms of the fundamentals. On the other hand, about the specifics, access to resources for work activities (work clothes and boots) was limited since, in the purchases, priority was given to the acquisition for men, and the sizes for women needed to be differentiated. This showed that for 75% of the women, work clothes and shoes were unsuitable for agricultural work.

The right to credit was another of the gender gaps suffered by women in the coffee enterprise from the analyses carried out from 2018 to 2021, from the Boards of Directors of the Cooperatives, as well as in the branch of the Banks of Cuba (BANDEC) in the municipality, it was exposed that, of a total of 25 credits requested by women, only nine were granted; which represented 36%, alleging the inability of these to be able to comply with the activities of the crop, which led to subsequent inability to repay the bank said credit. In addition to this, the male owners of the land pass it in inheritance to the male who is more involved in production; 32 farms were processed in family inheritance in the period studied, and only eight were inherited by women; of these, in 5 farms the women delegated the administration. When the women were asked why they did not grant the inheritance, 40% of the interviewed women stated that their families claimed they did not have the conditions or time to take care of the crop. This shows a gap in the possession of assets.

The overload of domestic responsibilities and care for dependents (children/elderly adults) constituted another inequality; in the inventory of women's daily work, it was shown that they performed all household chores, which included care for children and the elderly, a factor that negatively affects access to participation, training and transition to positions of higher remuneration and responsibility.

In the review of documents, mainly balance reports at the end of the years (2018 to 2021), as well as reports in figures from the statistics department of the coffee company (from 2018 to 2021), it was found that there were 10% of positions for men over women; in the control of training it was found that, of a total of 52 cooperative members who have attended training provided by the municipal company and in a centralized manner, only 18 women participated.

At the institutional level, there needed to be more linkage between public agencies and the coffee stakeholders intervening in the territory. This result was achieved due to a lack of coordination between the various agencies and entities responsible for carrying out actions in response to gender equity strategies; this explained the reason for the exposed gaps, which were promoted from the top down (top-down) and did not reflect the real needs and concerns of the social dynamics of the territories.

The limitations (gaps) exposed demonstrated the inequities between men and women, located in the distribution of roles, training, salary, distribution of jobs, positioning in management positions, and access to land, which led to notable differences in behaviors and actions in the reproductive, productive, and community roles. They had access to policy-making and decision-making; they needed equal access to training and recognition, and, therefore, they were not empowered. These gender gaps revealed the inequalities in the status and gender position of women coffee growers belonging to the Tercer Frente agroforestry enterprise due to the inadequate process of establishing social relations.

These gaps hindered women's development and quality of life, coffee production in particular, and rural territorial development in general in the municipality. Therefore, it became evident that there was a need to introduce a new analysis that would lead to the construction of equity and equality between genders from a participatory perspective that is capable of analyzing the specificity of the needs, social functions, responsibilities, aspirations, capacities and symbolic systems that society traditionally assigns to women and men in the company.

Good practices to promote gender equity and equality in the coffee company

The first task was to raise **awareness**. The key to achieving gender equality was to sensitize all members of the company through concrete measures that generated accurate equity and equality, which could be developed through workshops, information campaigns, and the prevention of sexual harassment and other forms of violence.

Recruitment and selection. This process required using inclusive or neutral language in job descriptions; reference had to be made to objective criteria of job requirements, e.g., technical knowledge, responsibilities, functions, and natural capabilities, avoiding specific categories such as gender, age, or family situation. In this way, impartiality was promoted in the selection process.

Education and training. This made it possible to generate equal opportunities in training and education so that the company could increase its efficiency and, with it, the favorable evaluations made of women. The equal participation of men and women in the training resulted from the adequate planning that was carried out based on the learning needs, motivational interests, and availability of schedules. In this training process, the leadership and management skills courses were a source of motivation for the coffee growers and for occupying new jobs and management positions.

Promotion to management positions. Inequalities were much more accentuated in this indicator; the figures showed that the percentage of women in management positions was lower than that of men, even when the level of training and experience was equal or higher, accentuated by prejudices about the inability to reconcile work and family life. From this perspective, the coffee company was aware of the gender diversity and equal opportunities that should prevail, to the extent that they reflect the values and the contribution it makes to society.

The coordination of social service networks for the care of minors, the elderly, and dependents; the establishment of working conditions that ensure the effectiveness of the principle of equity and equality between men and women and facilitate the reconciliation of personal, family, and work life, are practices of great value. Other practices to be used include the implementation of more horizontal and representative work and management models aimed at contemplating the diversity existing within the company; the use of non-sexist language and images, as well as the use of figures disaggregated by sex, which collect information on the access and use of resources, spaces, and activities by both men and women.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender equity and equality is a perspective guided by the principle of justice and non-discrimination-subordination of women. In a coffee business context, it enables women's individual and collective empowerment, thus overcoming the difficulties that hinder gender equity. It is incorporated through policies that facilitate and generate tools for social transformation, which are fundamental for men and women to prosper together, towards gender environments that consolidate equality of goals in access to work, employment circumstances, and the improvement of professional business careers.

The path towards equity and equality in the coffee company Tercer Frente requires the incorporation of cultural and strategic changes centered on the commitment of the management to generate new styles of leadership, as well as the conduction of diagnoses adjusted to reality, which take into account the needs, possibilities, and impact of the transformations in the system of relations between women and men. The joint work of the entire business network will allow the practices contributed from different perspectives to be generalized, promoting complementarity between them and considering that it is a joint effort towards achieving the objective of equity and equality between male and female coffee growers.

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- Business management and gender equity and equality practices: the case of the company Agroforestal Cafetalera Tercer Frente
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