

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT (WEE) IN MESOAMERICA

Enhancing women's leadership and economic growth within nature-based value chains in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras

Women provide immense contributions to productive value chains globally. Throughout Mesoamerica, women work in the production of coffee, cocoa, cardamom, potato, and so many other crops that global markets demand.

Deep-seated social norms in countries like Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras have led to barriers that prevent women from jump-starting and maintaining productive enterprises or entering well-paying jobs within agricultural value chains. Women often have limited access to training opportunities and less autonomy to travel outside their communities for trainings. They also often do not receive adequate pay for their labor, have access to land, or ownership and control over productive resources.

The Rainforest Alliance and partners are working alongside women, including Indigenous women and youth, in ways that recognize their self-determination and their immense knowledge of natural resource management. As part of our [Women's Economic Empowerment in Mesoamerica Initiative \(WEE\)](#) (2020–2025), funded by USAID, we are creating new opportunities for women to:

- enter higher paying jobs in coffee, cocoa, and other value chains
- build technical and business skills
- strengthen their leadership skills and capacity to negotiate with market actors
- foster alliances between women so they can help each other reach their business and personal goals

The program vision is for women in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico to enter the workforce and thrive economically through their participation and leadership in local, natural resource-based value chains. Program activities are organized under three pillars of work, based on the White House's [Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative \(W-GDP\)](#), launched in 2019, and include cross-cutting interventions to support women's access to resources to prevent, assess, and address gender-based violence and training on legal literacy, to ensure economic growth opportunities are safe and accessible to women.



PILLAR 1 | Women Prospering in the Workforce

Through tailored technical assistance and training, WEE enables women to participate in and increase earnings from sustainable productive value chains including coffee, cocoa, and diverse local value chains such as honey, xate palm, ramon nut, turmeric, chickens (including egg production), and vegetable gardens. The types of jobs, depending on the product, include farming, harvesting, value-added processing, enterprise administration and finance, market outreach, sales, and other roles based on interest expressed by women. For example, 103 women have been trained as baristas, most of whom are working in coffee shops or cafés established locally or owned by other women in their communities.

PILLAR 2 | Women Succeeding as Entrepreneurs

The program delivers business development training, coupled with access to finance, productive inputs, and equipment to strengthen women-led enterprises. Through its Women's Entrepreneurship Fund, the program has provided 108 groups of women with US\$373,620 worth of business investments that have included critical materials, equipment, and inputs needed to establish and expand enterprises. Support from the fund is provided following a rigorous process that supports women to assess their investment and business needs, documenting these in a business plan.

PILLAR 3 | Women Enabled in the Economy

Women's groups are supported to organize and assert their new capacities, improving the social, political, and financial enabling conditions for participation and leadership in local economies. The program delivers services including legal advice, negotiation, and policy strengthening. For instance, the program has worked with four municipal governments in Guatemala to develop municipal-level policies in support of women's economic and social well-being. These are defined based on an assessment of the situation and needs of women in the municipality and are bolstered by a formal action plan and budget assigned from the municipality to enact the policy.

IMPACTS TO DATE:

- Women’s groups in the Western Highlands of Guatemala have established agreements to **supply local schools with eggs for school meals**. This has meant a stable business opportunity for women that also ensures more nutritional, and locally sourced, options for meals in a region where chronic malnutrition in children is one of the most significant development challenges.
- WEE has supported the creation of more than **1,400 jobs** for women in key value chains, including coffee, cocoa, cardamom, honey, ecotourism, poultry, and others.
- More than **3,400 people enjoy improved economic benefits** resulting from the sustainable management of natural resources or biodiversity conservation.
- Since the start of the initiative, women entrepreneurs working in these value chains have sold more than **US\$2.3 million worth of sustainably produced products** in local, regional, and international markets. This work has galvanized local rural economies and supported women’s leadership in local value chain development.
- More than **3,300 women have established new or developed existing businesses**, many of them producing business plans that outline goals for business growth, actions to improve administrative and sales capacity, and identify specific investment needs.
- WEE has also supported women entrepreneurs to **strengthen their brand identity, develop new business logos and marketing products, and to improve their processing, manufacturing, and packaging of products**. This has included developing sales strategies, improving presence on digital platforms, and developing brands that will stand out in specialty and niche markets.
- **1,500 women have benefitted to date from financial services** provided through financial intermediaries. This is bolstered by training and technical assistance from the program on business and financial management.

PLEASE SUPPORT THIS CRITICAL WORK

In the wake of the U.S. Government’s pause on foreign aid and subsequent suspension of this program, the Rainforest Alliance is seeking immediate funding to provide planned investments to women entrepreneurs to start up or scale their business, as well as the field-based technical assistance and training needed to improve productivity; enhance product transformation; improve product presentation and packaging; and engage in market development for sustainably produced products. In some cases, women had taken out loans to complement these anticipated investments and are now at risk of defaulting if they cannot achieve their planned business growth goals.

IMPACT STORY

One participant in Honduras, Vanessa Barahona, learned through WEE trainings about different cocoa transformation processes and use of equipment. With support from the program, she developed a new product, “sugared cocoa,” used to make hot chocolate or in baking recipes. Vanessa was able to market her product, which was sought after locally because of its quality and flavor.

As a result, her monthly income from sales jumped from about US\$120/month to more than US\$700/month, and her story has been an inspiration to her family and other members of her community.



VALUE OF SALES FOR WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESSES UNDER PRIORITY VALUE CHAINS

Coffee	US\$469,000
Cocoa	US\$115,000
Honey, cardamom, and other non-timber forest products	US\$179,000
Community tourism	US\$549,000
Poultry	US\$620,000

“WEE has helped us see each other as support, in order to organize better and have confidence in our processes.”

EVELYN TÁBORA
Producer, taster, and barista