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Farmworkers' voices: what it means to work in a specialty coffee farm in Honduras and El Salvador

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Abstract

Most coffee exports in Honduras and El Salvador now correspond to specialty coffees, suggesting that coffee producers have gained considerable experience producing specialty coffee, which positively impacts producers and the country's economies. However, other economic and social challenges persist as coffee production involves not only coffee farmers but also workers. Moreover, coffee farmworkers outnumber producers, but their working and living conditions are not thoroughly comprehended. The purpose of this study was to examine specialty coffee workers' perceptions of their labor on the farm in Honduras and El Salvador. Specific objectives were to 1) assess workers' perceptions of production and labor activities in specialty coffee, and 2) describe perceived labor conditions on specialty coffee farms and compare them to working conditions on conventional farms. This study used qualitative methods. Using an instrumental, multi-site case study design, we employed focus groups for data collection. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify issues within and across cases to uncover the meaning of working on a specialty coffee farm. Six major themes emerged, ranging from the lack of understanding of specialty coffee production, the perception that wages are not higher in specialty coffee farms than in non-specialty coffee farms, and that working conditions are similar but provide more stability. This study offers a glimpse into the viewpoints of coffee farmworkers, focusing on their perceptions of their experiences and working environments within specialty coffee cultivation in Honduras and El Salvador. Thus, underscoring the need for comprehensive public and private initiatives dedicated to improving decent work conditions among coffee farmworkers aspects as are relevant to broader socioeconomic issues

Keywords

specialty coffee, coffee workers, living conditions, El Salvador, Honduras

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Most coffee exports in Honduras and El Salvador now correspond to specialty coffees, suggesting that coffee producers have gained considerable experience producing specialty coffee, which positively impacts producers and the country's economies. However, other economic and social challenges persist as coffee production involves not only coffee farmers but also workers. Moreover, coffee farmworkers outnumber producers, but their working and living conditions are not thoroughly comprehended. The purpose of this study was to examine specialty coffee workers' perceptions of their labor on the farm in Honduras and El Salvador. Specific objectives were to 1) assess workers' perceptions of production and labor activities in specialty coffee, and 2) describe perceived labor conditions on specialty coffee farms and compare them to working conditions on conventional farms. This study used qualitative methods. Using an instrumental, multi-site case study design, we employed focus groups for data collection. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify issues within and across cases to uncover the meaning of working on a specialty coffee farm. Six major themes emerged, ranging from the lack of understanding of specialty coffee production, the perception that wages are not higher in specialty coffee farms than in non-specialty coffee farms, and that working conditions are similar but provide more stability. This study offers a glimpse into the viewpoints of coffee farmworkers, focusing on their perceptions of their experiences and working environments within specialty coffee cultivation in Honduras and El Salvador. Thus, underscoring the need for comprehensive public and private initiatives dedicated to improving decent work conditions among coffee farmworkers aspects as are relevant to broader socioeconomic issues.

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Introduction

With approximately two billion cups consumed daily, coffee is the most popular beverage worldwide (British Coffee Association, 2022). Sustaining this demand depends on a complex agricultural system that serves as a major driver of rural economies. It is estimated that coffee production is the main livelihood of roughly 125 million people, grows in more than 12.5 million farms, mostly smallholder farmers in developing countries, and is one of the most traded agricultural products in the world (Voora et al., 2019).

In Latin America, coffee is a significant source of income in several countries, including Honduras and El Salvador. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2025a, 2025b), coffee exports in the 2024/2025 cycle were projected at approximately 5.36 million 60-kg bags in Honduras, which is equivalent to an estimated US\$ 1.85 billion in export revenue; and 525,000 60-kg bags in El Salvador, which corresponds to an estimated US\$ 181 million. Beyond the economic significance, coffee is the main livelihood of approximately 120,000 families in Honduras, generating jobs for more than 1 million people across the supply chain (Instituto Hondureño del Café [IHCAFE], 2022). In El Salvador, it is estimated to be a source of employment for more than 42 thousand people (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2025b). Together, these figures highlight not only the economic importance in both countries but its vital role in sustaining rural livelihoods, particularly in a context where a significant portion of the population lives in poverty and in rural areas (World Bank, 2023).

Despite its prominence in the region's economies, and also because of it, the sector faces many challenges, including low levels of profitability due to economic (e.g., extended periods of low prices and high input costs), social (e.g., difficulties finding labor due to migration), and environmental conditions (e.g., hurricanes and weather fluctuations, and pest outbreaks) (Avelino et al., 2015; Rhiney et al., 2021). Specialty coffee production has become a strategy advocated to improve coffee farming's sustainability (economic, social, and environmental). Specialty coffee can be defined as any coffee that earns a significant premium in the market (Specialty Coffee Association [SCA], 2019). This means that any trait that allows coffee producers and sellers to differentiate their coffee has the potential to earn a premium price in the market. Therefore, specialty coffees include certified coffees with "low" or "high" organoleptic attributes and coffees that are not certified but are recognized as having "high" organoleptic characteristics (Vellema et al., 2015).

The strategy of producing specialty coffees to increase farmers' income was advocated by the International Coffee Organization [ICO], which was established to improve the global supply/demand balance following the coffee price crisis that occurred in the early 1990s (ICO, 2009; Morales et al., 2017; Osorio, 2002; Wollni & Zeller, 2007). Since the early 2000s, the specialty coffee market has experienced significant growth. For example, in 2015, approximately 55% of total coffee sales in the United States (\$48 billion) were specialty coffees (SCA, 2015). The increase in the demand for specialty coffees and the possibility of earning a premium price for it has generated significant interest among coffee farmers in producing countries. In the case of Honduras, the registration of specialty coffees began in the 2009-2010 harvest. By the 2019-2020 harvest season, specialty coffees accounted for 54% of total exports (USDA, 2020). Furthermore, the country has also obtained two geographic indications of origin (USDA,

2021). Similarly, approximately 80% of coffee exports in El Salvador are classified as differentiated/specialty coffees (Consejo Salvadoreño del Café [CSC], 2021).

The expansion of specialty coffee in Honduras and El Salvador suggests that coffee farmers are gaining considerable experience producing high-quality coffees, which may contribute positively to the long-term sustainability of coffee production and the livelihoods of coffee farmers over time. Producing specialty coffee requires additional time, expertise, and intensive labor, including practices such as handpicking coffee cherries, removing defective/imperfect cherries, and using differentiated post-harvest processing methods, among others. Historically, coffee production has been a collaborative effort between owners and farmworkers. Specialty coffee production builds on this tradition, further strengthening this collaboration (Carpio & Von Der Lieth, 2021).

Although there is an extensive body of research within the social sciences that examines the coffee sector, limited attention has been given to the perspectives of farmworkers. Most of the scholarship has focused on markets, certifications, and farmers' livelihood dynamics/strategies (Avelino et al., 2015; Bacon et al., 2008; Barham & Weber, 2012; Läderach et al., 2017; Mendez et al., 2010; Meemken, 2020; Ruben, 2023; Silvert et al., 2021; Valkila, 2009). By contrast, farmworkers' experiences, particularly living conditions, occupational dynamics and risks, and their roles as partners in coffee production have received little scholarly attention (Carpio & Von Der Lieth, 2021; Estrella et al., 2022; Navarrete-Cruz et al., 2020; Navichoc et al., 2024; Oya et al., 2018). This gap is striking as farmworkers outnumber coffee producers by an average of six to one in the Central American region (Varangis et al., 2003).

Addressing this imbalance in research is essential to advancing a more complete understanding of coffee as a system and to inform international development strategies that promote rural development through extension and education programs. In many regions, coffee is not only a crop of high commercial importance but also serves as a catalyst for advancing sustainable livelihoods, strengthening local governance, and contributing to the achievement of broader development goals (FAO, 2025). The need to close this research gap is further underscored by increasing reports of labor shortages in coffee-producing countries such as Honduras and El Salvador, which have been linked to migration dynamics, demographic changes, and the precarious living conditions experienced by farmworkers (Verité, 2024).

Specialty coffee and its relation to workers' living conditions

Despite the increasing emphasis on quality differentiation in coffee, which generally requires more labor and often claims improved working conditions as part of certification and sustainability initiatives, very few studies have examined the relation between specialty coffee production and the working conditions of farmworkers. Ruben and Zúñiga (2011) studied the comparative performance of Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and Starbucks C.A.F.E. certifications on the welfare of coffee farmers and workers' conditions. The study, conducted using a sample of 315 farmers in Northern Nicaragua, found that the certifications did not affect workers' wages. Another study conducted in Nicaragua explored the effect of the Fairtrade USA certification on workers' labor conditions at a coffee plantation using interviews and focus groups of farm managers and workers (Raynolds & Rosty, 2019). The study found that the certification improved working conditions but did not strengthen labor process rights.

Giuliani et al. (2017) investigated the effect of in-house certifications by large corporate buyers (e.g., Starbucks and Nestle) on social and environmental conduct using a survey of 575 farmers in five Latin American countries. Social conduct included aspects related to workers' safety and socioeconomic rights. The study concluded that farms with in-house certifications did not show better social conduct than non-certified farms. Finally, a study by Dietz et al. (Dietz et al., 2019) utilized a dataset of 650 Honduran farmers to investigate differences in the implementation of labor standards across various certifications (4C, Fairtrade, Fairtrade Organic, UTZ, and Rainforest Alliance). Results indicate that only Rainforest Alliance farmers paid higher wages than non-certified farmers. Except for UTZ-certified farmers, all other certified farmers' groups reported a higher percentage of use of a first-aid kit on-farm than non-certified farmers. In addition, only Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance certified farmers had a larger percentage of adoption of personal protection equipment when spraying agrochemicals than non-certified farmers.

Overall, the literature suggests that in some cases, but not always, workers on specialty coffee farms experience better labor conditions and wages compared to those on conventional coffee farms. However, the literature is scant, focuses on the effect of certifications only, and mainly uses information collected from farmers. In contrast, the literature on the effect of specialty coffee production on coffee farmers' earnings and other outcomes is extensive. For example, a recent systematic literature review identified 63 evaluations of the impact of Fair Trade certification (Valetto et al., 2021). Thus, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by assessing the working conditions of farmworkers on specialty coffee farms in Honduras and El Salvador, using information collected directly from farmworkers through focus groups. Qualitative methods enabled us to gain a more nuanced understanding of farmworkers' perspectives on their working conditions on specialty coffee farms.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a social constructivist worldview theoretical framework, which aims to explore how coffee farmworkers construct their knowledge, identity, and reality through their shared social interactions and cultural context while working in coffee farms, particularly in specialty coffee farms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Social constructivism originates in the seminal work of Vygotsky, first proposed in the early 1930s. This work informed other frameworks used to study knowledge construction. Later, Berger and Luckmann postulated that knowledge is created by the interaction of individuals (Boyland, 2019). Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985) further propose that knowledge constructions are inherently contingent on the local reality of the participants and their experiences.

Studies examining the construction of reality through social interactions include research on youth international agricultural experiences (Hainline et al., 2018); the development of Technical, Vocational, Education and Training (TVET) schools within a country context and reality (Calixte et al., 2020); barriers faced by small scale farmers and their receptivity to training (Albert et al., 2017); community stakeholders' perspectives on farmer field schools (Riepma, 2017); and extension assessment from the perspective of extension actors (Lamm et al., 2022).

To situate the voices of farmworkers within the broader international development context, this study draws on the Decent Work Agenda developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Agenda emphasizes that work should be productive and provide fair income, security, social protection, and opportunities for workers to have both a voice and

dignity. Framing the analysis through the Decent Work Agenda enables researchers to interpret findings in relation to internationally recognized elements that align with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (ILO, 2025).

Purpose and Objectives

This study aimed to examine specialty coffee workers' perceptions of their labor activities and conditions on farms in Honduras and El Salvador. Specific objectives were to 1) assess workers' perceptions of production and labor activities in specialty coffee, and 2) describe perceived labor conditions on specialty coffee farms and compare them to working conditions on conventional farms.

Methods

The perspectives of specialty coffee workers were explored and analyzed using qualitative methods. The authors sought to explore the nature of reality from the participants' perspective, using an ontological philosophical assumption and a social constructivist interpretative framework. This framework was employed to shape the understanding of being a worker on specialty coffee farms in Honduras and El Salvador (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A semi-structured interview protocol with twelve questions was designed to explore workers' perceptions of the primary activities on a specialty coffee farm and the practices that may differentiate them from those on a non-specialty farm (see Appendix 1). The interview protocol was constructed following Creswell's guidelines, focusing on understanding the phenomenon, the intended interviewees, and the type of interview process; thus, guiding questions in the protocol focused on exploring workers' perceptions of the labor needed and its intensity during all production activities (e.g., weed and shade management, pest management, and harvest and post-harvest) (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Additional guiding questions were included to gain a deeper understanding of labor conditions. After the third question, which inquired about farmworkers' understanding of specialty coffee, they were provided with a working definition of the concept to inform their responses to the subsequent questions. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Texas Tech University (IRB2019-1211). Oral informed consent was obtained from the participants before the activity. Data collection was conducted from February to March 2021.

The study was conducted in communities with proximity to specialty coffee farms in traditional coffee production regions in Honduras (Santa Barbara, Copan, and Ocotepeque) and El Salvador (Sonsonate, La Libertad, and San Salvador). This multi-site data collection enriched the findings. An invitation to participate was disseminated via an open call to local cooperatives or farmers' associations in the regions that have previously been engaged in extension projects conducted by members of the research team. Those who expressed interest were given the option to participate in the focus groups (convenience sample).

A total of six face-to-face focus groups were conducted: three in each country with three participants per group (i.e., a total of nine participants per country). Focus groups were organized by site or community to minimize participant travel between towns and comply with

government-imposed mobility restrictions in both countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each group was also kept small to minimize social interactions.

Before all focus group sessions were conducted, safety guidelines were provided to all participants, following recommended governmental preventive measures and recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO). Focus groups were held in outdoor spaces, and participants were asked to maintain a social distance of 1.5 meters. Focus group leaders provided masks and hand sanitizer upon arriving at the site, and the participants' temperature was checked and recorded. Participants were asked to answer general questions regarding potential COVID-19 symptoms. All participants were provided with an informational sheet outlining COVID-19 symptoms and preventive measures, based on recommendations from each country. A take-home snack was provided at the end of the session.

Five women and thirteen males participated in the focus groups: three women and six men in El Salvador and two women and seven men in Honduras. Seven workers indicated they worked only on specialty coffee farms, and seven indicated they worked on several farms (specialty and non-specialty). Four were workers who also owned small coffee farms. All focus groups were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, shared with the manuscript authors, and then transcribed by another team member for analysis within and between participants. The focus group leaders assessed the accuracy of the transcriptions using their field notes.

Before data analysis, workers were assigned pseudonyms based on gender and culturally aligned names to ensure anonymity and privacy during the data analysis and reporting. Table 1 shows the participants' pseudonymous and a small biography to understand their experience. To protect confidentiality, participants' group affiliation is not reported.

Table 1

Participants' biographies

Participant (pseudonym)	Biography	Country
Maria	Worker and owner of a small coffee farm	El Salvador
Jose	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	El Salvador
Mario	Worker on several farms	El Salvador
Ana	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	El Salvador
Pedro	Worker, owner of a small coffee farm, technician	El Salvador
Juan	Worker on several farms	El Salvador
Lucas	Worker and owner of a small coffee farm	El Salvador

Table 1 – continued

Participant (pseudonym)	Biography	Country
Marcos	Worker and owner of a small coffee farm	El Salvador
Rosa	Worker on several farms	El Salvador
Carlos	Worker on several farms	Honduras
Samuel	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	Honduras
Roberto	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	Honduras
Carolina	Worker on several farms	Honduras
Fernando	Worker on several farms	Honduras
Felipe	Worker on several farms	Honduras
Juana	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	Honduras
Luis	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	Honduras
Jorge	Worker only on specialty coffee farm	Honduras

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify issues within and across cases, enabling the interpretation of the meaning of working on a specialty coffee farm (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2009). The trustworthiness of this study was established using focus group transcripts, field technicians' notes (including observations), research teams' discussions, and triangulation of findings with those obtained from a concurrent quantitative analysis of the cost structure of coffee (Carpio et al., 2023, Carpio et al., 2022; Carpio & Von Der Lieth, 2021). Rich, thick descriptions were used to facilitate the thematic analysis and ensure data transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Preliminary findings were also shared with relevant stakeholders (e.g., focus group leaders, producer groups, extension personnel, and coffee experts in Central America and the United States) to enhance the quality of the analysis and ensure the contextual appropriateness of the findings, serving as a form of validation and contextual grounding. This process aligns with established strategies in qualitative inquiry, where member checking enhances credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

Researchers who use qualitative procedures must acknowledge their biases and recognize their potential influence on the data collection process and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research team has previous experience working in and studying specialty coffee farms in El Salvador and Honduras. These past experiences may have influenced the perspective of the data analysis and interpretation of the findings. The field technicians who collected the data are

experienced in coffee systems in each country. Their prior experiences may have influenced the rapport built with participants, prompting them to open up and discuss the interview protocol's open-ended questions during data collection.

Results

Six major themes emerged from the focus group discussions of workers' experiences on specialty coffee farms in Honduras and El Salvador: 1) Conventional and specialty coffee production depends on the variety, use of inputs, and productivity; 2) working on a specialty coffee farm does not necessarily mean more and harder work; 3) harvesting may be the most complex task on a specialty coffee farm; 4) daily wages are not higher in specialty coffee farms but more stability can result in higher income; 5) working conditions are perceived to be similar; and 6) workers are proud to work on a specialty coffee farm.

Conventional and specialty coffee production depends upon the variety, use of inputs, and productivity (1).

In connection with the study's objective of exploring farmworkers' perceptions of specialty coffee production, a meaningful discussion was evoked to ascertain what workers understand by conventional and specialty coffee under the premise that producing specialty coffee requires everyone involved to understand the value of each step in the production process. This exploration provided insight into farmworkers' perspectives and established common ground before examining the more detailed distinctions between specialty and conventional production. Through this conversation, it was found that most workers have minimal knowledge of the main differences between production systems and associate them with variety, inputs, and productivity rather than coffee quality.

With respect to variety, Juan mentioned that:

Before, we used to have an *Arabic* variety, which was the old coffee, and it disappeared. That variety was vulnerable to rust, anthracnosis, and all types of diseases. To me, conventional coffee was when we had the *bourbon* and *pacas* varieties.

Carlos also mentioned the following regarding the variety: "The owner once told me that *bourbon* was the best coffee ever ... the quality will always be better with the *bourbon* variety." However, he also added, "The *bourbon* variety was very good, but it was also a lazy variety. One year had good production, and the next did not."

Luis elaborated on this topic by saying: "Specialty coffee not only has to do with the variety but also with the height of the farm. That is the combination for specialty." According to Lucas, "Those were the most known varieties; those were the varieties that gave you the excellence cup, and that is why losing the *bourbon* variety has been hard because a lot of the new varieties do not qualify." However, workers do see a difference. For example, Felipe mentioned, "Those new varieties used for what they call specialty coffee are used because those varieties are more resistant. Using the *Costa Rica 65* variety has been good because the production is rising, and we are returning to business."

Concerning the use of inputs, Mario mentioned,

The Arabic coffee was much easier. The maintenance was minimal. It barely needed fertilizer. But now, if you do not feed the plants, they will not produce anything. That is why the old coffee was the coffee of the poor.

Others, like Roberto, said that the main difference lies in the lack of innovation: "Conventional coffee is when you keep doing the same agricultural practices as always, without innovating, without using extraordinary products. It is a coffee produced without technology, only with the farmer's knowledge." However, regarding productivity, Marcos also mentioned, "Now, we have coffee plants that produce less because they have less vegetation because of pests and diseases."

After the focus group leader defined specialty coffee in terms of quality, participants discussed the concept among themselves, reached a shared understanding, and agreed on the standard definition. Further, they related specialty coffee more to quality and harvesting related activities.

Working on a specialty coffee farm does not necessarily mean more and harder work (2).

Pertaining to the objective of examining farmworkers' perceptions of labor and production in specialty coffee, some workers initially mentioned how difficult it is to execute activities such as fertilization, shadow pruning, and pest and disease control on the farms. For example, Samuel said "it is harder because you have to be very careful in each task." Jose added to this explanation by mentioning, "When we had the *pacas* and *bourbon* varieties, we did not have to do much; you did not have to fertilize them, but these new varieties demand much work. Otherwise, they do not make it." Moreover, when Carlos reflected on his experience, he said the following: "I have worked on this farm for about ten years, and everything was done using the *Cuma* [type of machete] and herbicides; everything was manual, but about five years ago things changed, and now we follow a strict control." He added that he understands very little about why the change was made but presumed it is cost-related.

As the discussions progressed, the participants reflected on why it appears more challenging, but it is not. Pedro explained this by saying:

Yes, it is more complex work, but it is easier at the same time. At specialty coffee farms, the maintenance work we do makes everything easier. Other farms do not do that, and it ultimately proves more complicated for them.

Carlos explained this further by noting that activities are not that different. However, it is a matter of how frequently the maintenance is performed: "Management is similar. The difference is that you do some activities less frequently, and when you get back to them, it is harder to do them, and it takes longer." Therefore, preventive work makes things easier. Luis said "we do more preventive work now. It is more work, but we have pumps and other materials, so it is faster." Then he added to his explanation by giving a fertilization example:

You need to go tree by tree; you cannot throw fertilizer into the air. You need to make sure you feed each plant. That makes it harder ... if you fertilize a field that has not been weeded, the weeds will take more advantage of the fertilizer than the coffee plant, and the fertilizer will be wasted. The plant will not be fed, and the production will be poor.

Fernando mentioned that on specialty coffee farms, "We do things step by step. We control the problems one by one and slowly work more and more. In the end, we make it in even less time." For instance, he added:

We have someone who monitors pests and diseases. He tells us when we need to do an application and where. It is very specific, and it takes time, but if the owner has money, we have the number of people needed and all the equipment needed to do proper maintenance.

Others mentioned the organization system used to plan maintenance activities that make things easier for them. Lucas shared this example:

We have a calendar, and we know when we must apply the product in each area of the farm and when we need to return to check or reapply ... at the end, this makes it easier because we know what is happening and do not wonder what it may be. People at other farms [don't] realize they have a problem until a tree is dead.

While the initial perception was that some activities were more challenging, in the end, workers' perception of the level of effort fell into the long-term benefit and effort needed. Ana summed it up: "It is not harder; [it] is about having the goodwill to do it right. Good things take more time."

Harvesting may be the most complex task on a specialty coffee farm (3).

Concerning the objective of understanding farmworkers' perceptions of labor and production in specialty coffee, all workers mentioned that several activities on the farm are difficult and complex. However, the harvest was mentioned as the most complicated task because it involves working directly with the coffee cherries. Carolina said about harvesting at a specialty coffee farm: "The first time was really hard." She explained this further: "The harvest is very strict because that is when the coffee quality is made. I have seen someone classify what we harvest and say which cherries go in and which do not." Jose explained that:

Before, you would just pull everything from the branch ... now it is more difficult and takes more time because you must be careful. We used to harvest every cherry, the yellow and red ones, together. Now, we do not.

Jose explained further why it takes more time and is harder:

You need to do it very carefully to avoid hurting the plant. We need to do several hauls because we only harvest the ripest cherries. But we do move faster than before because the plants are shorter now. We no longer need to harvest big plants with big branches, as was the case when we worked with the *bourbon* variety. But now, you must be more careful with the plant and harvest only the ripest cherries. That is what is more challenging.

Even with the challenge of a more difficult harvesting process, Juan added that: "It is better to harvest here. Look, we work in a clean area, we harvest at eye level instead of having to climb big trees. We harvest in pretty areas."

A foreman or the plantation owner primarily teaches the workers how to harvest on a specialty farm. Mario mentioned that this instruction is often: "Go out and harvest only the red

cherries, nothing else, and no leaves." Workers see these operational guidelines as dealbreakers. For example, Pedro mentioned:

They [foreman] ask you to harvest only the ripe cherries and just the cherries. For this reason, not everybody will be able to work here. Other people are not used to working in this manner. They may come one day and not the next; they get themselves fired.

While harvesting may be complex, workers understand the reasoning behind the quality related to it. Roberto said in this respect: "Other farms are not like this one; they do not care about what we harvest. But here, they do. That is when you see the specialty of the cherries and how they process them. There is a difference." He elaborated then on why the process is different: "It is not that modern. That is why the cherries need to be very clean. Otherwise, I am hurting myself because I am not following the owners' orders."

Daily wages are not higher in specialty coffee farms, but more stability can result in higher income (4)

In relation to the objective of examining farmworkers' perceived labor conditions on specialty farms and how these relate to conditions in conventional farms, several workers mentioned that their daily wages, especially during the harvesting season, can be even lower in specialty farms. However, they value the stability of working in specialty coffee farms because this can result in a larger overall income. For example, Felipe acknowledges that they earn a lower wage compared to when they work on other farms, but have to work for a longer period:

We earn less than at other farms, but we negotiated with the owner, and we get to keep our job all year long doing several things. We are 60 people, and I appreciate this deal because it gives us stability. On other farms, work is always temporary. Here we are, permanent employees. Some people say we earn too little, but I tell them I do not care because we have stability and know what we will make. I think that if we earn what people earn on other farms, I will only have a job for a few weeks or months a year. So, we are okay here because we get to work all year long.

At some farms, a special payment agreement has been reached between workers and owners under the premise that harvesting is more complex and the amount harvested per day can vary significantly from other farms. Juan explained:

At the beginning of the season, we get paid as a regular workday because we harvest a small quantity, as not all cherries are ready. Once the season settles in, our payment changes from a regular workday to a payment based on the amount harvested. If we were to be paid per amount harvested, we would earn so little. But we have a good boss who really helps us out.

Similarly, Maria stated: "At other farms, you go to harvest maybe two times, and the work is done. But here, you need to do several hauls. In the end, we have a job for a longer time, and we earn more money." In this respect, Lucas mentioned: "When you see that there are still cherries to be harvested, even if we have already harvested one or two times, you can see people getting excited about their job because they can continue to earn money." When discussing the value of stability during the harvest season, Pedro added:

I have harvested on other farms, and it has been good. You can harvest a lot in one day because you just go and pull from the branches, not caring about what you are collecting.

Of course, I earned more money that day, but it was just one time. It takes a longer time here, but we ultimately make more money.

Fernando explained the perception of doing a good job as essential to keeping the employment and ensuring stability over time:

I must take good care of the plants because they will help me keep my job. If I do a careless job and harm the plants, I will not only hurt my boss but also harm myself. If I come to the farm again next season, I will not get a job because I did a poor job the last time, but I will keep my job if I do a good job.

The women express special appreciation for the stability offered at specialty coffee farms. Juana said the following:

Above all, we women have more opportunities to work throughout the year. In other places, once the harvest season passes, we women are left behind with our arms crossed, wishing for a *lempirita* [Honduran currency], particularly those who do not have a husband to support us. Almost all of us are single mothers, so we are happy to clean the farms once the season is over.

Nonetheless, several participants expressed concerns about their wages, pointing out that while owners receive a higher income due to specialty coffee quality premiums, workers do not share the gains. For example, Rosa said: "They [coffee plantation owners] pay the same amount as others, but they receive a bonus, and they do not pay more because of that bonus. That is not okay."

Working conditions are perceived to be similar (5).

With regard to the study objective of examining farmworkers' perceived labor conditions on specialty farms and how these compare to conditions in conventional farms, focus group discussions suggest that workers do not perceive conditions on specialty farms significantly better, with a few exceptions. They specifically mentioned that access to transportation, restrooms, and meal breaks was similar. Formal contracts are not commonly used, but verbal agreements are. Samuel stated:

We agreed with the owner. We discussed the working hours, permits, and how much we will earn. We negotiated with him to work a little longer on the weekdays to have Saturdays off to go to the market. Before that, we never made it to the market on time, had to purchase expensive food items, and had very little variety.

Two aspects related to better communication with employers and supervisors must be highlighted. First, some women mentioned the considerations the coffee plantation owners give to pregnant women, so they are not required to perform a task that endangers their pregnancy and health. In this regard, Maria mentioned:

No one is asking for a pregnancy test or an HIV test. We need to be honest with our employers. They understand. It is very dangerous to do some activities, like pest control, while pregnant or breastfeeding, so we must be very honest.

The second aspect is related to training. While formal training was not regularly reported, workers mentioned how they were taught to perform the necessary tasks. Carlos said "we have never sat down to talk like this. The farm foreman always gathers us and explains how he wants

us to do things. That is how I have learned my job.” Marcos added: “He [foreman] is always checking that we are doing things right and explaining when we are doing it wrong.” However, all participants mentioned that they are trained to handle chemicals properly and are provided with safety equipment when they use them. Jorge said “the people who work with the pumps always receive training. It is not anybody who can do that. They must be trained.”

Workers feel proud to work on a specialty coffee farm (6)

Pertaining to the objective of examining farmworkers’ perceptions of production and labor in specialty coffee, all participants expressed pride in their work. This, despite indicating that working conditions were perceived to be similar to those when working on conventional farms. In this regard, Jorge said “I feel happy to work on many different assignments and do it as the owner needs it to be done. I want him [boss] to feel proud of my work.” Furthermore, this sense of pride was closely tied to workers’ closeness with their supervisors. This was noted by how they perceived they could talk to him/her. In this regard, Mario said “we have the advantage that we can talk to the owner and tell him what the farm needs, and he will listen.” Juan added “the owner always comes and asks us what we see. If we see a pest or disease in the plantation, he trusts us to report that so we can make decisions.”

In comparison to the previous theme, the women were more communicative. For example, Ana said, “It feels better to work here, at a specialty coffee farm.” Rosa added: “We feel very proud because we always have a good harvest, and we care for the environment.”

Discussion

The literature on the experiences and conditions of specialty coffee farmworkers is very limited; therefore, this study’s findings provide a basis for future research. Farmworkers appear to have limited knowledge of *specialty coffee* as a concept. However, they understand differences in production activities that focus on quality differentiation. Once the concept is explained, they were able to recognize the significance of coffee quality in their daily work. This suggests that workers are aware of the differences between working on conventional farms and specialty coffee farms but are unfamiliar with the terminology of specialty coffee. Moreover, this points to the need for more effort in training workers in the specialty coffee production’s conceptual and practical aspects. Some workers participating in the study own smaller coffee plantations and must work on neighboring farms to sustain their families. Learning more about specialty coffees may motivate them to incorporate certain agricultural practices that can potentially allow them to sell their coffee as a specialty.

Workers recognize that more effort is needed to produce specialty coffee. Nonetheless, after consideration, they realized that it is not necessarily harder work. However, harvesting does entail more challenging work. According to workers, it is a more detail-oriented task that requires practice and patience. Several workers offered an interesting observation. People who are inexperienced in harvesting the right kind of cherries do not become regular workers because of their unfamiliarity with the requirements. One worker referred to this as “getting themselves fired.”

Despite the additional challenges of working on specialty coffee farms, most labor conditions and daily wages appeared to be similar to those on non-specialty coffee farms. This finding is consistent with several previous studies that have compared farms with certifications and those without (Dietz et al., 2019; Giuliani et al., 2017; Ruben & Zuniga, 2011). Regarding

wages, data collected from specialty coffee farms around the same period showed that wages paid in these farms align with daily legal minimum wages for the agricultural sector established in both countries (Carpio et al., 2022). Standards required by some specialty coffee certifications may have influenced non-specialty coffee farms, which compete for workers, to pay them wages as required by country regulations, which may explain the similarities. Workers also expressed some discontent that higher prices farmers receive for specialty coffees do not translate into higher wages. There is, however, less evidence that other labor conditions in specialty and non-specialty coffee farms comply with government regulations. For example, Dietz et al. (2019) found in their study of certified farms in Honduras that only about 21% of farms adopted protection equipment for spraying chemicals, and that most farms with certifications did not differ from non-certified farms.

Overall, there seems to be ample room for improvement in the working conditions of specialty coffee farms. More generally, these findings suggest the need for broader efforts at the government level to improve working conditions in the agricultural sector, rather than relying solely on private sector initiatives, such as those promoted by specialty coffee certifications. Moreover, the path toward certification is not straightforward, and fulfilling the requirements may take a significant amount of time and resources. Some authors have suggested that certification costs outweigh their benefits, especially for small farmers (Giuliani et al., 2017; Kangile et al., 2021). Consequently, it is unlikely that all farms in Honduras and El Salvador will achieve certifications.

Two positive aspects of working on specialty coffee farms mentioned by farmworkers are related to their pride in working on these farms and the stability offered. Workers indicated they feel pride in their work on specialty coffee farms. This feeling of pride may be associated with improved psychological conditions in these farms due to adequate communication channels with employers and supervisors, and a healthier physical environment. This positive aspect contrasts with the perceived lack of differences between specialty and non-specialty coffee farms when referring to overall “working conditions.” Future work should investigate farm workers’ understanding of the concept of working conditions as related to physical, environmental, legal, and psychological factors.

Workers also mentioned they highly value the possibility of negotiating and working for a longer contractual period in many specialty coffee farms. This additional stability is valued because even if daily wages are lower, more days of work available result in higher annual income. This aspect has not been previously discussed in the existing literature, which has focused mainly on daily wages.

Much of the current work and discussion in the coffee industry focuses on living income benchmarks (e.g., Carpio et al., 2022), which aligns with the Decent Work agenda conceptual framework in the broader international development context (ILO, 2025), and the methodological approach proposed by Anker (2011) for defining living wages based on normative, decent standards (Anker, 2011). From a farmer’s perspective, the discussion and study of living income benchmarks provide for a broader and more systematic view of all the aspects related to coffee profitability (e.g., prices received, productivity, input costs) and farmers’ livelihood (e.g., costs of living, off-farm work opportunities). Thus, a discussion about coffee farmworkers’ living income benchmarks is also necessary, considering aspects related to wages, contractual periods, working conditions, and farmworkers’ livelihoods (e.g., costs of living, working opportunities on other farms, and off-farm employment). This is especially

important as the number of farmworkers outweighs the number of coffee farmers (Varangis et al., 2003). Moreover, the living conditions of the population in rural areas, and particularly in coffee production regions in Central America, are closely related to other social and economic problems, such as internal migration, illegal emigration, and the cultivation of illicit drugs (International Coffee Organization [ICO], 2009; Nevins, 2007).

Conclusions

This study offers a glimpse into the viewpoints of coffee farmworkers, focusing on their perceptions of their experiences and working environments within specialty coffee cultivation in Honduras and El Salvador. The study draws on insights from focused group discussions, uncovering six prominent themes. These themes encompass diverse aspects, including the limited comprehension of farmworkers regarding specialty coffee production and the perception that daily wages within specialty coffee farms do not necessarily surpass those within non-specialty counterparts but can offer more stability and higher annual income. Furthermore, the research reveals that working conditions are similar in both contexts.

The study findings underscore the need for comprehensive public and private initiatives dedicated to improving the working conditions and financial prospects of coffee farmworkers in specialty and non-specialty coffee farms. Previous research has shown that labor conditions in coffee farms often fail to meet government regulations (Dietz et al., 2019; Giuliani et al., 2017; Ruben & Zuniga, 2011). These aspects are relevant to broader socioeconomic issues, notably internal migration and illegal emigration.

The study also highlights the need for further research to evaluate the working and living conditions of coffee farmworkers. More generally, a key aspect of the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda is ensuring that workers have opportunities to express their concerns and contribute to discussions about their working conditions (ILO, 2025). Addressing these issues is essential for promoting a more sustainable coffee sector.

Extension services and development agencies working in agricultural development, particularly in coffee-producing areas like Honduras and El Salvador, should integrate farm labor conditions as a cross-cutting theme in their outreach and training efforts. While some initiatives have been addressing these issues in the region (Carpio & Von Der Lieth, 2021), these findings signal that a more intentional and systematic effort is required to address potential gaps in knowledge and awareness among producers, cooperatives, and farmers' associations regarding decent work principles. Training programs that address fair wages, contracts, and workplace safety can act as a catalyst for development for the most vulnerable rural populations.

Given the qualitative nature of this research, the results are not intended to be statistically generalizable; rather, they provide nuanced, context-specific insights that may illuminate broader patterns within the Central American coffee sector. While preliminary findings were shared with relevant stakeholders to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study was limited by the authors' inability to return to the field and validate stakeholders' perspectives with focus group members.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions

1. We know we are here today in a place well-known for producing coffee. We would like to know who here produces coffee on his/her own?
 - a. Follow up: In what other activities are you involve regarding coffee?
2. What is conventional coffee for you?
3. Today we will focus the discussion on specialty coffee, and the labor needs to produce it in (LOCATION). To start, can you please tell me what your understanding of specialty coffee and is?
4. After hearing what specialty coffee is, can you tell what it means to you and how it is different from conventional coffee?
 - a. For those who produce coffee, have you ever tried to produce specialty coffee?
 - b. What about does who works in other farms?
 - c. What type of training did/do you receive to work on specialty coffee farms?

Let's talk about how you produce specialty coffee or work on a farm that produces specialty coffee.

5. **Let's start with weed management.** Can you please describe what a typical day looks like when you have to do weed management on a coffee farm to produce specialty coffee is?
 - a. Follow up: How do you feel when you have to do weed management is specialty coffee farms vs. conventional farms?
6. **Let's talk now about pest and disease control.** Can you please describe how a typical day looks like when you have to do pest and disease control in a coffee farm to produce specialty coffee is?
 - a. Follow up: How do you feel when you have to do pest and disease control is specialty coffee farms vs. conventional farms?
7. **Let's talk now about harvest.** Can you please describe how a typical day looks like when you are harvesting in a specialty coffee farm?
 - a. Follow up: How do you feel when you have to harvest in a specialty coffee farm vs. conventional farms?
 - b. Follow up: If you had the option to choose, would you prefer to only harvest in conventional farms or specialty coffee farms?
8. **Let's talk about other activities on the farm.** Is there any other activity in a specialty coffee farm where you work differently than on a conventional farm?

9. We have talked in-depth about the different activities you do on a specialty coffee farm. What are the most challenging things to do for you?
10. Now that we have talked about the work that requires a specialty coffee farm let's talk about the working conditions of these farms. How are the working conditions on these farms?
11. Finally, I would like to ask if there is a difference in the payment you receive when working on a specialty coffee farm than on a conventional farm?
12. Is there anything that we didn't talk about specialty coffee farms?