

## A typology of rural femininity and identity among women coffee producers – A qualitative case study from Costa Rica

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### ABSTRACT

Gender programming is now a major pillar in combating gender inequality and promoting female empowerment. However, interfering with local gender systems and altering gender norms may be ineffective, perhaps triggering severe consequences for women if it neglects female realities and needs. Nascent research on agricultural femininities is still underdeveloped regarding rural women in the Global South. Investigating coffee cultivation, this study contributes to fill this gap by asking 1) which traits compose the agricultural femininity embodied by female coffee producers, and 2) in how far these entail traditional and/or alternative elements with the potential to transform prevailing gender norms and relations. We apply a qualitative case study, with a participatory community-based approach, in the Zona de Los Santos, Costa Rica. Data comprises semi-structured interviews with women coffee producers participating in the women-supporting program of Bean Voyage, four sequential community workshops, and a reflective Photo Voice project. Data analysis follows a twofold deductive-inductive approach for 1) type-building content analysis and 2) evaluative content analysis. We identify the *Cafetalera* as the main agricultural femininity embodied by female coffee farmers and three traits of it: *Social Caregiver*, *Female Survivor*, and *Female Innovator and Entrepreneur*. Beyond this, findings show that survivorship (of oppression and crisis) plays a major role in female identity construction, that care is an overarching element of all femininity traits, and that femininities always comprise a mixture of alternative and traditional characteristics.

### 1. Introduction

Gender inequalities prevail around the world (UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). For regions across the Global South, research links achievements in gender equality, such as better access to productive resources, income autonomy, or bargaining and decision-making power for women, to issues as diverse as increased agricultural productivity, biodiversity conservation, primary school enrollment, nutrition, and health (i.e., Avila-Santamaria and Useche, 2016; Blare and Useche, 2015; Doss, 2018; Maertens and Verhofstadt, 2013; Hassen Abate and Belachew, 2017). These findings suggest gender equality is an instrumental value foundational to achieving a wide range of development goals. In this context, and not least due to its stipulation in SDG 5, gender programming, which

comprises interventions, programs and policies that tackle gender relations and promote gender equality, represents a key pillar for rural and economic development, particularly throughout the Global South (e.g. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and World Food Programme, 2020).

In the fields of rural sociology and geography, the concepts of *gendered rurality* and rural femininities and masculinities are widely discussed (e.g. Forsberg, 2019; Wright and Annes, 2016; Little, 2002). The latter shape a fundamental societal understanding of who is eligible to take on specific roles and identities as well as who engages in decision-making, thus influencing overall perspectives of rural development (Shisler and Sbicca, 2019; Keller, 2014). As agriculture is highly interlinked with rurality, gender-related aspects are also increasingly

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coming to the fore in agricultural research. Intertwined with feminist economics, it focuses on the gendered distribution of labor and resources (Darity, 1995; Doss, 2021). In the context of smallholder family farming, visibility is given to household economics and intra-household decision-making and bargaining power (Lecoutere and Jassogne, 2019). Women contribute significantly to agricultural production around the globe (cf. Doss et al., 2018). However, they remain invisible, particularly in the context of smallholder family farming (cf. Wright and Annes, 2016), in which the gendered distribution of labor frames the domestic spheres as the domain of female activity while markets and public spheres are domains of male activity (Darity, 1995; Contzen and Forney, 2017). Not only do women engage in house and care work (Shisler and Sbicca, 2019), but they also provide unpaid, flexible agricultural labor (e.g. Beck et al., 2018). Compared to their male counterparts, women hold fewer land titles (e.g. Deere, 2017) and engage less in producer organizations or cooperatives (e.g. Kaaria et al., 2016; Lyon et al., 2017). They have less access to productive resources and markets (Hill and Vigneri, 2014) and are less involved in higher value chain activities (e.g. Oduol et al., 2017). These findings are especially true for coffee cultivation. As a traditional cash and export crop, coffee is culturally thought to be “men’s business” (Eves and Titus, 2017).

To close these gender gaps, gender programs provide goods and services, network building, as well as capacity building opportunities. Only a few explicitly target gender norms (Johnson et al., 2018). All of these activities intervene in socio-cultural systems based on gender norms, values, identities, and practices. Meanwhile, research has expanded beyond the “notion of masculine agriculture” (Shisler and Sbicca, 2019, 875), investigating not only rural, but agricultural femininities in particular, to understand self-identification, perceptions and motivations, values and norms standing behind female roles and practices in agricultural landscapes (Shisler et al., 2019; Keller, 2014; Ambjörnsson, 2021; Gustavsson, 2020). However, while there is a solid basis of literature on agricultural femininities located in the Global North, studies on agricultural femininities in the Global South are scarce (e.g. Bonatti et al., 2019; Badstue et al., 2021). Consequently, Western epistemologies and approaches to gender and feminism have, for a long time, dominated the discourse on women of the Global South (Mohanty, 2003). To capture the complexity of women’s (and other people’s) lives intersectional approaches are relevant because they account for multiple forms and interrelations of discrimination and oppression beyond just gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019; Winker and Degele, 2011). In this sense, Guimaraes Reynaldo et al. (2023) take an intersectional lens in presenting the case of a feminist movement in Southern Brazil. The authors specifically focus on a politics of care that conceptualizes care in a field of tension between oppression and empowerment: For one thing, women’s responsibility for care may be a result of their subordination. At the same time care would represent an important value for women and be integral to a socio-economic and environmental system’s functionality. The authors conclude that approaches to a resolution of female subordination need to preserve and value the notion of care.

Particularly, in the context of gender programs and policies, this may entail unintended consequences when gender norms and identities are misunderstood or unknown. For example, Bonatti et al. (2019) refer to a nutritional program targeting and training women in their traditional role as family food providers to improve household nutrition. In the course of this intervention, their male counterparts perceived a need to correct their wives’ “over-empowerment,” since the role as family food providers does not authorize women to make decisions on household income allocation (ibid.). These consequences for women resulted from a misconception of traditional femininities and a neglect of care responsibilities as an element of female subordination by external actors. The example illustrates the necessity to understand women of the Global South’s specific realities and their contexts in order to better target gender policies and programs. Regarding the gap in research on agricultural femininities in the Global South, this study aims to contribute to this understanding by identifying agricultural femininities in coffee

landscapes. It addresses the following research questions.

1. What traits compose the agricultural femininity embodied by female coffee producers and what are their characteristics?
2. To what extent do these traits embrace traditional and/or alternative elements to compose a fluid, changing, and transformative form of femininity?

To address these questions, in 2023 a qualitative case study was conducted with women coffee producers in the Zona de Los Santos, Costa Rica. The study comprises women who participate in the program of the nonprofit organization Bean Voyage, which supports women to build thriving coffee businesses. The study provides insights into a typology of femininities, shedding light on how they evolve in terms of motivations, experiences, and necessities. Further, it reveals the diverse social dynamics in response to the performance of femininities as well as the interlinkages between different femininity types.

## 2. Traditional and alternative femininities: conceptual considerations

Since 2000, rural sociology and feminist geography have produced a considerable number of empirical and theoretical work on the intersection of place and gender, referring to gender relations, respective gender identities, and habitual practices governing everyday life in local settings (Forsberg, 2019). Within these considerations, gender is conceptualized as socially constructed, produced, reproduced and transformed through social interaction (Butler, 1990; Forsberg, 2019). Femininities and masculinities describe gender identities and represent sets of values, norms, roles, practices, behaviors, and characteristics that are associated as typically female or male. Shaped by socio-cultural processes, these identities are dynamic and pluralistic. What is depicted as male or female differs across cultures and individuals; it is also independent of biological gender (cf. Ambjörnsson, 2021). What is generally read as female or male is defined on societal level. This influences which identities, roles, and practices are adopted and performed by individuals fostering dominant female and male archetypes (cf. e.g. Dery and Ganle, 2020).

In a long tradition, rural landscapes are strongly connected to masculinity and its component of “mastering of nature” (Forsberg, 2019, 2), resulting in a dominance of research on rural masculinities (Keller et al., 2015). A strand of literature theorizes the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, referring to masculine dominance of rural areas. Subordinated to, and oriented at, this masculine ideal are *emphasized femininities* (Connell, 1987; cf. Paechter, 2018; Ambjörnsson, 2021). This relation is best illustrated by the “symbolic categories of *farmer* and *farm wife*” (Keller, 2014, 75), in which *emphasized femininities* of care work and motherhood are subordinated to *hegemonic masculinities* of agricultural production (Shisler and Sbicca, 2019; Forsberg, 2019).

This concept of gender hegemony is criticized as it conceptualizes gender as singular factor of domination, in which *emphasized femininities* are “passively compliant” (Hamilton et al., 2019, 315). However, instead of being merely subjected to male domination, Hamilton et al. (2019) find that women may benefit considerably from actively performing these femininities when they engage in intersectional domination of other women and men. Similarly, in their intersectional approach to the politics of care, Guimaraes Reynaldo et al. (2023) point out that the division of labor is not only gendered, but classed and racialized. Care work is frequently outsourced to racialized women of the working class (ibid.).

Therefore, taking account of intersectionality is important to capture the complexity of femininity, which is not only diverse but relational and positioned. The concept does not just point out different categories of discrimination but highlights their interrelation (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept can be used as a tool to reflect on social inequalities on different levels and with a focus on different categories of discrimination

(Winker and Degele, 2011). In accordance with Winker and Degele, whose approach to intersectionality is based on Harding (1986), we understand “intersectionality as a system of interactions between inequality-creating social structures (e.g. of power relations), symbolic representations and identity constructions that are context-specific, topic-oriented and inextricably linked to social practice” (Winker and Degele, 2011, 54).

In this sense, femininities (and masculinities) are positioned and relational in diverse ways. They are not merely a display of subordination to *hegemonic masculinities*. They also relate to other forms of femininity and masculinity. Paechter (2018) argues that *hegemonic masculinities* and *femininities* do not just represent a pair of dominance and subordination but are also complements striving to sustain gender binaries and a male-dominated gender order. Both represent dominant types with most socio-cultural support in a hierarchy of a multitude of femininities and masculinities (Schippers, 2007; Ambjörnsson, 2021; Connell, 1987). This domination of traditional rural *hegemonic masculinities*, and therewith *hegemonic femininities*, is challenged by alternative femininities indicating societal change and, with it, new demands regarding the distribution of roles and responsibilities (e.g. Annes et al., 2020; Keller, 2014; Shisler and Sbicca, 2019; Ambjörnsson, 2021). For one thing, these alternative femininities include performances typically depicted as male. When women engage in Swedish forestry, claiming space and ownership, Ambjörnsson (2021) call it a performance of female masculinities. Keller (2014) find that U.S. farm women increasingly perceive themselves as self-identified farmers in their own right. Thus, women do not necessarily embody completely different types of femininity but add new traits that, in turn, influence a predominant embodied femininity.

However, alternative femininities do not just take on the form of female masculinities but rely on new entrepreneurial skills and an expansion of traditional femininities into agricultural spheres. Related to the debate on the politics of care, Shisler and Sbicca (2019) show, for U.S. farm women, how they make agriculture not only a space of farming but a space of care by performing traditional femininities, such as education and customer support. Annes et al. (2020) identify value-added agriculture as a space to embody these femininities for French farm women, who engage in agritourism, community-supported agriculture, and/or farmers’ markets, thereby activating skills in farm management, strategic commercialization, and marketing. Moreover, they find that alternative femininities differ in their deviation from, or compliance with, *hegemonic femininities* depending on socio-economic factors, such as age, marital status, or farm background. Alternative femininities need not be radically opposed to hegemonic traditional femininities to unfold transformative potential. They can affect incremental changes.

### 3. Research design and methods

We apply a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine the diverse traits of the agricultural femininity embodied by female coffee producers in Costa Rica. Our study builds on a participatory community-based approach that combines semi-structured interviews with 13 women coffee producers participating in the women-supporting program of Bean Voyage, four sequential community workshops, and a reflective Photo Voice project. Interviews and focus group discussions with non-program-participating local female producers, scoping interviews with local cooperative representatives and program facilitators, as well as managing representatives of Bean Voyage were conducted for contextualization. Data analysis follows the twofold deductive-inductive qualitative content analysis of Kuckartz (2018) to 1) identify different traits of female coffee producers’ femininity (type-building content analysis); and 2) to evaluate these traits along characteristics of alternative and traditional femininities (evaluative content analysis). In the following, we present our methodological approach in detail.

#### 3.1. Case study: the Costa Rican Coffee sector

The Zona de Los Santos is a geographical region in the mountainous, rural central south of Costa Rica (Fig. 1). It consists of the Cantons of Tarrazú, Dota, and León Cortes, as well as the districts of Frailes and San Cristóbal of the Canton Desamparados. It is one of the least populated regions in Costa Rica. Its economy is majorly based on coffee, which is why it is also known as *Eje Cafetero* – the axis of coffee. Biophysical conditions contribute to the fact that traditional coffee cultivation prevails in the Zona de Los Santos instead of industrial agriculture (cf. Quesada-Román et al., 2022). The original denomination of *Café Tarrazú* incorporates all coffees produced in the Zona de Los Santos. It is protected by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and recognized in 180 countries, including all EU members.

As a traditional producer of coffee, Costa Rica was (and is) exposed to the general crises and transformations occurring across the Central American coffee sector: The collapse of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989 and the following liberalization throughout the 1990s lead to the overproduction of coffee alongside increasing price volatility. In the early 2000s, overproduction was reinforced by the rise of new mass producers, such as Vietnam (McCook and Montero-Mora, 2024; Babin, 2020). Coffee cultivation became ever less profitable for many smallholders given global price shocks, with the COVID-19 pandemic related increase in production costs exacerbating this trend (Fromm, 2022; Babin, 2020). Additionally, farmers are threatened by climate change and those diseases related to it, including a severe outbreak of Coffee Leaf Rust across Central America between 2013 and 2016 (McCook and Montero-Mora, 2024; Hugøy and Ødegaard, 2021). Smallholders in Costa Rica are adapting to this multi-dimensional crisis by expanding their coffee activities from merely growing coffee to higher value chain activities, such as processing coffee in micro-mills (Milagro Nuñez-Solis et al., 2021).

Costa Rica’s domestic market for coffee produce is well developed, covering the entire value chain, from coffee cherry harvests, processing, roasting, trading, and consuming (ibid.). The coffee industry includes a diverse range of actors from growers, processors, roasters, Q-graders, and traders. Regularly, coffee growers a) sell coffee cherry harvests to cooperatives or operators of mills (*beneficio*); b) export self-processed parts of coffee cherry harvests to international clients; and/or c) sell roasted coffee in the national market. Export regularly needs the support of export intermediaries, while the sale of roasted coffee in domestic markets requires the official registration of a coffee brand.

#### 3.2. Data Collection

The present analysis is embedded into a broader study on the dynamics of a women-only program offered by the nonprofit organization Bean Voyage, which supports women in building thriving coffee businesses. Since 2016, the organization has worked in Costa Rica. Each year, it recruits about 150 smallholder women coffee growers who are struggling to sustain their coffee businesses. Participants are offered a variety of activities, ranging from initiatives, e.g. on food security, climate change, soil health, and financial literacy, to coffee processing, grading and preparation, training curricula, micro-credit opportunities, and mentorships. Local facilitators serve as trainers and local contact persons for program participants. Since 2022, the annual *Womxn-Powered Coffee Summit* brings together smallholder women producers and actors of the international specialty coffee sector. In addition to these activities, Bean Voyage co-authored Costa Rica’s first gender policy for the coffee sector in collaboration with ICAFE and Triptico Consultants, which was approved in April 2022.

We address the research questions within the frame of a qualitative case study conducted in May and June 2023, engaging 13 female coffee producers participating in the Bean Voyage program. The research project has been registered and approved by SINAC, the competent national authority in Costa Rica. All study participants, including

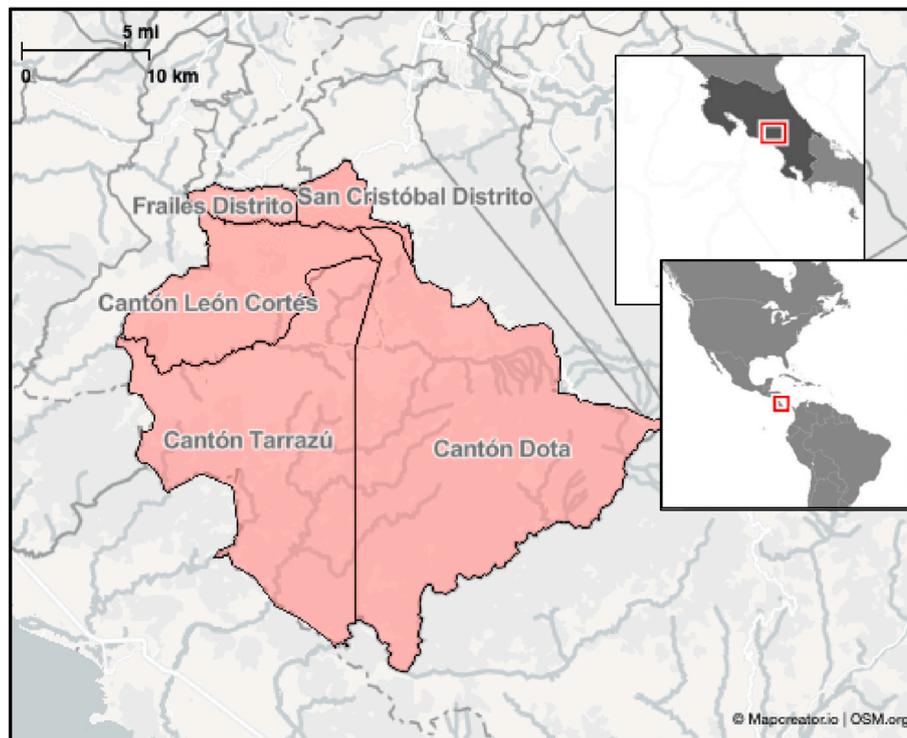


Fig. 1. Location of the Zona de Los Santos in Costa Rica (generated with mapcreator.io).

interview partners for scoping, were informed about the research project, its objectives, and methods as well as on their right to withdraw at any time. All signed a consent letter. Fig. 2 provides an overview of our data collection process.

Main study participants were recruited ahead of field work via Bean Voyage's communication channels. The group is heterogenous in terms of age, education, family, and marital status, as well as business development stage. Main data collection with these study participants followed a community-based participatory approach involving semi-structured interviews and an optional Photo Voice project, which included four sequential community workshops. Four interviews and one focus group discussions with another four non-program-participating local female producers, four scoping interviews with local cooperative representatives and program facilitators, as well as two focus group discussions with managing representatives of Bean Voyage were conducted for contextualization. All research activities were conducted in cooperation with a local research assistant and in the Spanish language. All activities were recorded and fully transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews with the main study participants and female producers who are not aligned to Bean Voyage were conducted during individual household visits that lasted between 30 and 90 min. Questions addressed topics concerning 1) motivations and significance of growing coffee aiming at interviewees' current farming identity construction; 2) the structure of respondents' coffee businesses including coffee business activities, daily routines and schedules, and support in coffee business activities aiming at roles and responsibilities; 3) perceived opportunities and limitations for female coffee growers aiming at a reflection on specific gender differentials; and 4) an envisioning of respondents' coffee business futures aiming at future prospects and ideas of identity construction.

Four weekly workshops accompanied the research process and provided opportunities 1) for questions, feedback, and comments on the research process; 2) for community-building and reflection; and 3) for joint gender-specific and problem-centered discussions on research topics. Both the kick-off and final workshops were held as presential day-long workshops, each lasting 6 h. Transport and food was provided

free of charge. Workshops 2 and 3 were conducted online via Zoom upon joint decision-making of study participants, with each lasting 2 h. From the group of main study participants, seven women attended the first and second workshops, nine the third, and eight the final workshop. Problem-centered discussions served to focus the study's problem framing and contextual understanding. Topics included: 1) the significance of coffee for female livelihoods; 2) female access to resources; 3) female labor and time burdens; and 4) female networks and cooperation. All interview and workshop topics evolved from prevalent concepts and discussions in the literature on gender equality and female empowerment in agriculture.

The Photo Voice project allowed for personal reflection and served as a facilitating method during workshops. Eleven of the thirteen main study participants engaged therein. Reflection assignments on workshop topics were provided in advance. Study participants were asked to capture their reflections with a photograph and to bring the photos to the upcoming workshop as a basis for an experience-based group discussion. Study participants decided to publish a curated selection of these photos both in a photo booklet and an audio-visual presentation titled *Panoramas Cafetaleros Femeninos. Female Coffee Landscapes*, which has been published via several social media platforms and presented at several events of the coffee trading communities in Germany and Costa Rica.

### 3.3. Analysis

Our analysis is rooted in Winker and Degele (2011) intersectional multi-level analysis, which comprises a two stage method with eight steps. The first stage focuses on interview data material of individual cases. It includes (1) a description of interviewees individual identity construction, (2) an identification of symbolic representations referenced in the interviews at the cultural level, such as norms, values, or roles, (3) an identification of references to social structures, and (4) a description of how central structural categories of discrimination across all levels interact. The second stage adds contextual and structural data for an in-depth analysis. For this, (5) individual identity constructions

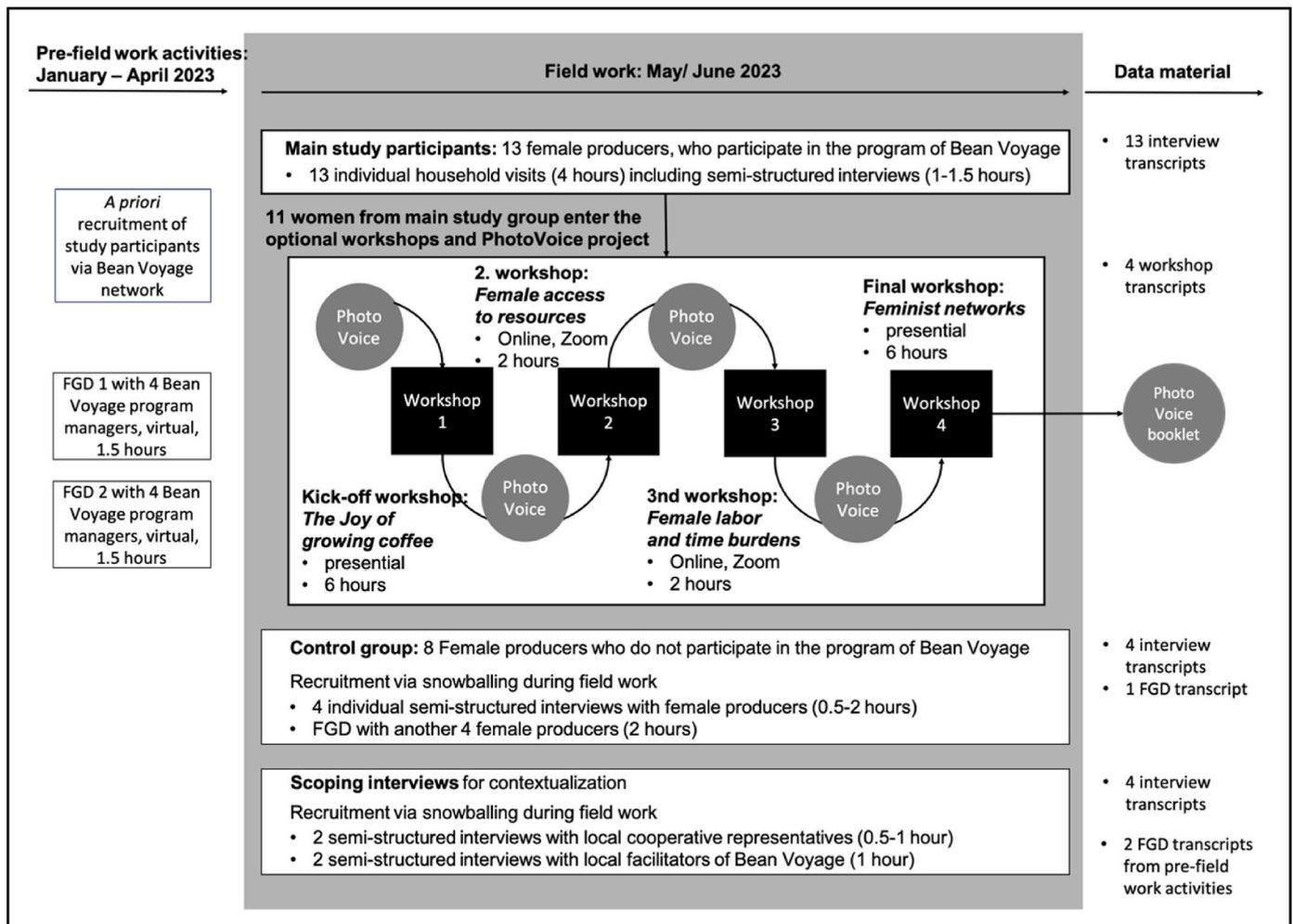


Fig. 2. Data collection process.

are clustered and compared, then (6) supplemented with structural data to analyze power relations and (7) denominated representations in depth. This enables (8) an sophisticated elaboration on interrelations across all three levels. With this paper, we loosely follow the first five steps as we seek to understand how women themselves perceive their individual realities.

Interview and workshop transcripts of the 13 interviews with program participants, the 4 workshops, the 4 interviews with non-program participants, and the FGD with non-program participants underwent a twofold qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) using deductive and inductive coding to 1) identify different traits of female coffee producers' femininity (type-building content analysis) and 2) to evaluate these traits along characteristics of alternative and traditional femininities (evaluative content analysis). An *a priori* deductive coding system comprising key topics (see Fig. 3, green codes) derived from literature on gender equality and female empowerment in agriculture served to pre-structure data material and to identify relevant text segments for further analysis. In a second step inductive coding specified and complemented *a priori* codes (see *ibid.*, yellow codes).

For femininity traits (type-building analysis), the identification of roles and responsibilities formed the main basis. They were matched with aligned norms and values as well as respective narratives from socio-cultural and socio-economic categories. Femininity traits were extracted and further differentiated until each individual trait showed internal coherence, while significant differentiation, including contradictions, emerged between different traits. The manifestation of each trait was evaluated for each interviewee using a scale from 0 to 4, with

0 referring to low, 1 rather low, 2 medium, 3 rather high, and 4 high manifestation.

To evaluate these traits, we investigated characteristics of alternative and traditional femininities (evaluative content analysis) deductively identified from literature (see Table 1). These are related to 1) women's identity construction as individuals or subordinated members of a collective – the family in this case; 2) spheres of female and male action; 3) gendered power positions in terms of female subordination and female leadership; 4) tradition and innovation referring to the degree of institutionalization; and 5) norm conformity and conflict potential referring to norm compliance.

For evaluation, we use the same scale we used to evaluate the manifestation of femininity traits. Subsequently, we present our findings.

#### 4. Results: The *Cafetalera* and its three subaltern femininity traits

Our analysis reveals four agricultural femininity traits for female coffee producers: 1) the culture-based trait of *The Cafetalera*; 2) a family-based and care-centered trait of *Social Caregiver*, including the subtraits of *Caring Motherhood* and *Matrimony*; 3) an experience-based trait of *Female Survivorship*; and 4) an emerging trait of *the Female Innovator and Entrepreneur*. These traits are not mutually exclusive. Rather they represent facets of women's individual identities. The *Cafetalera* represents the main agricultural femininity to which all interviewees assign themselves. However, how this femininity comes into

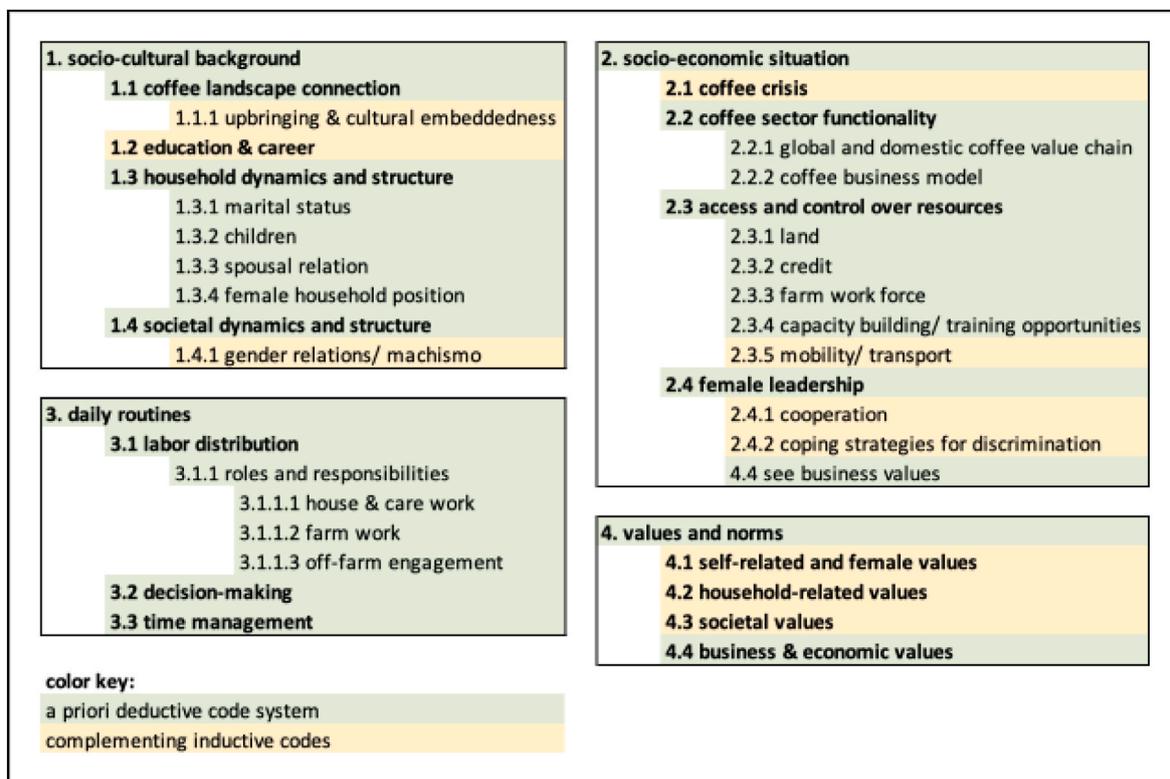


Fig. 3. Basic deductive-inductive code system.

**Table 1**  
Dimensions of traditional and alternative femininity types.

	Traditional femininity	Alternative femininity
<b>Female identity construction</b> (e.g. Laney et al., 2015)	collective	individual
<b>Spheres of female action</b> (e.g. Darity, 1995; Contzen and Forney, 2017)	domestic spheres	public/market spheres
<b>female power position</b> (e.g. Ambjörnsson, 2021; Annes et al., 2020)	female subordination	female leadership
<b>Institutionalization</b> (e.g. Gustavsson, 2020; Keller, 2014)	traditional	innovative
<b>Norm compliance</b> (e.g. Badstue et al., 2021; Bonatti et al., 2019)	norm conformity	conflict potential

effect is shaped by the influence of the other three traits, which arise as sub traits of the *Cafetalera*. Subsequently, we present these femininities in more detail.

**4.1. Femininity of the Cafetalera - “Coffee identifies us and makes us authentic.” (II-PV)**

The *Cafetalera* refers to rural women and their specific embedding in coffee landscapes, typically by upbringing, but also by marriage. It incorporates many elements of traditional femininity, particularly a strict orientation toward tradition and norm conformity (see Fig. 5). Women show pride and a sense of belonging in the context of rurality and tradition as opposed to an urban life style. Being raised and living in the very essence of Costa Rica’s cultural coffee heritage, the *Cafetaleras* perceive themselves as contributors to the maintenance of national heritage and family legacy.

“Coffee has united and identified us; for us Costa Ricans it is a national symbol that represents us inside and outside of Costa Rica.” (II-PV)

The *Cafetalera* generally manifests with high relevance in all interviews (see Fig. 4). However, a contradictory development is observable regarding a generational gap. Given the context of a general agrarian decline and, specifically, the coffee crisis, the reputation of those engaged in coffee cultivation and rural livelihoods is damaged. A young, female returnee elaborates on the exit from coffee of potential farm successors:

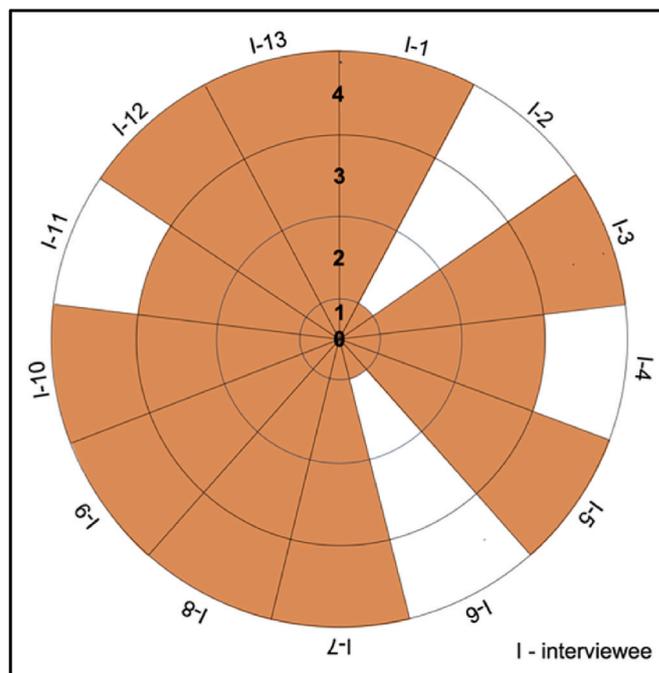


Fig. 4. Manifestation of the *Cafetalera* femininity over all interviewees (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

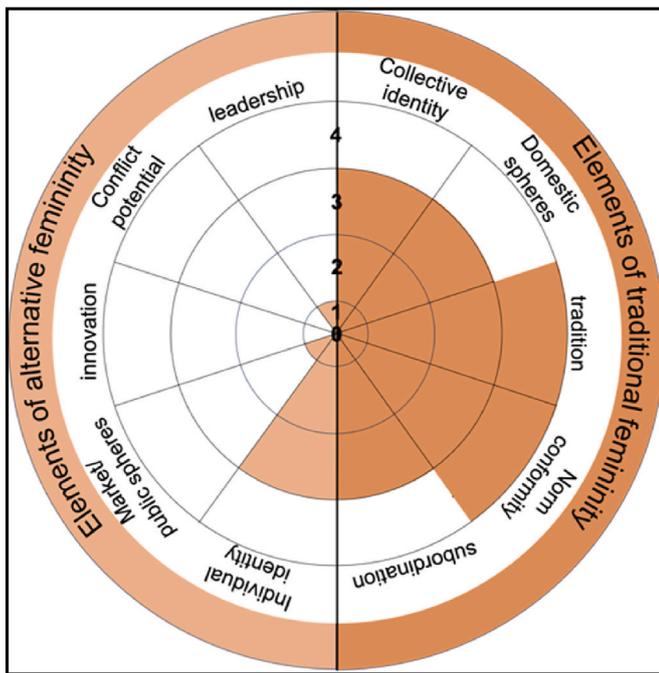


Fig. 5. Manifestation of alternative and traditional femininity elements for the *Cafetalera* (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

“Our parents felt that it was a punishment to work in the coffee fields. Therefore, they send you to study and after studying to find work in the city.” (I1-2a)

Regarding women’s role in agriculture, interviews suggest that women, despite a strong identification as *Cafetalera*, traditionally do not develop a farmer identity, which is directly linked to agricultural field work. As only few women conduct this type of farm work and do not have specific agricultural or coffee knowledge, they do not perceive themselves as farmers. Typically, it is their male counterpart – the masculinity type of the *Cafetalero* – who works and manages the fields as farm head:

“My papa always had coffee fields.... I married a guy who also had coffee fields. But, you know, there was a time when I was not involved in this activity because I was working. So, you know, the coffee was around me, but it was not mine. I don’t know if you understand me on this point.” (I1-8)

The *Cafetalera*’s contribution to the farming family traditionally consists of providing care and house work in domestic spheres. When women do conduct agricultural field work, they are providing flexible labor during high peak agricultural seasons, assisting their husbands in their role as farm heads:

“This is a region where many women also dedicate themselves to coffee cultivation. They help their husbands because it is the source of income for many households.” (I1-1b)

Overall, most *Cafetaleras* first take on the role of *Social Caregivers* within agricultural households.

4.2. *Femininity trait of Social Caregivers* - “I want my house to be fine. I want my husband to be fine, too. And now, I also want my baby to be fine.” (I1-4)

The femininity trait of the *Social Caregivers* is mainly linked to elements of traditional femininities (see Figs. 7 and 9). *Social Caregivers* act as caring mothers, caring wives, caring community members, and caring farm assistants. In these roles, they provide unpaid care alongside

unpaid house, agricultural, and community work. Tradition and social norm conformity are key to this femininity trait. Family-centricity and a commitment to domestic spheres is ever-present. Interviewees refer to the stereotype of the “stay-at-home rural woman” (I1-11) who is responsible for care and housework:

“When I got married, my husband said: ‘We got married and you will not got to work anymore’.... Ever since I stayed in the house and until this moment I have never gone out to work. There I kept staying with [the children], raising them.” (I1-1a)

*Social Caregivers* reveal a collective rather than individual identity. Few women speak of themselves as “I” or formulate individual wishes or visions (e.g. I-13). Instead, they speak as “we,” referring to the farming family. References to their husbands as the main decision-makers are frequent. An interviewee expresses her frustration about women who often become invisible as individuals through the authority they grant their husbands even when they are not nearby: “I would hear women mentioning their husbands in every tenth word they speak” (I1-13). Altruism and selflessness is a key norm for most interviewees, particularly in family contexts. To uphold intra-household stability, women stress the importance of family cohesion and unity, for which they subordinate to their male spouses as farm and household heads.

To fill this position and perform its related tasks, interviewees refer to socially desirable female characteristics, particularly the combination of diligence and love: Women are to put in high efforts “to do things good and with love” (I1-8; I1-10), showing dedication, commitment, and accuracy in their industriousness as a proof of loyalty, while they are expected to demonstrate cordiality and warmth, gentleness and politeness, as well as gratitude; in a nutshell, good manners and modesty. Sufficiency is their goal, while far reaching ambitiousness and boldness is equally connotated negatively as lacking industriousness or even laziness. Women are framed to be optimistic. They neither complain nor burden others, while denying themselves self-pity or anger. Female resilience takes effect in the context of patience and perseverance alongside their skill of “good suffering” (I1-13) by enduring injustices in silence.

Although the femininity trait of the *Social Caregivers* manifests strongly over all interviewees, specific dynamics of change are observed by looking at sub-types, particularly at the sub-types of *Caring Motherhood* and *Matrimony*. *Caring Motherhood* is generally of high relevance (see Fig. 6). Deviations result from cases of young women who are not yet mothers or from cases of women whose children are almost or already grown up. In contrast, the importance of being a caring wife in the sub-type of *Matrimony* is significantly lower than *Caring Motherhood* (see Fig. 8). For one thing, this deviation results from the fact that minor children must be taken care of. Apart from this, several interviewees are widowed and/or single women.

Both sub-traits are deeply rooted in traditional femininities but show significant shifts toward alternative manifestations (see Figs. 7 and 9). While *Caring Motherhood* serves as source for female self-assertion, *Matrimony* shows that intra-spousal hierarchy is increasingly superseded by spousal cooperation. As mothers, interviewees strive to shape thriving future perspectives for their children, of which the idea of advancement through education is an important point:

“For us one of the most important and necessary things was that the children would study. We need that they are well educated.... not only to make money, but to serve society. So you need to have knowledge, right? ... And clearly this will help us to grow as persons, right? Economically, socially, all this.” (I1-7)

While this perfectly relates to the mentioned youth’s exit from coffee, this aspect also makes the women fierce, stepping up for their children’s rights and opportunities, particularly for their daughters, although it may trigger intra-household conflicts:

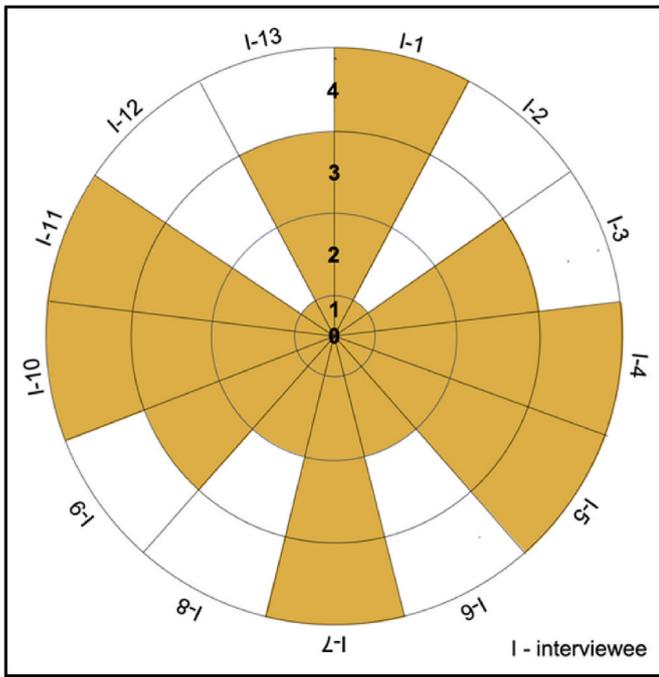


Fig. 6. Manifestation of the *Caring Motherhood* femininity trait over all interviewees (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

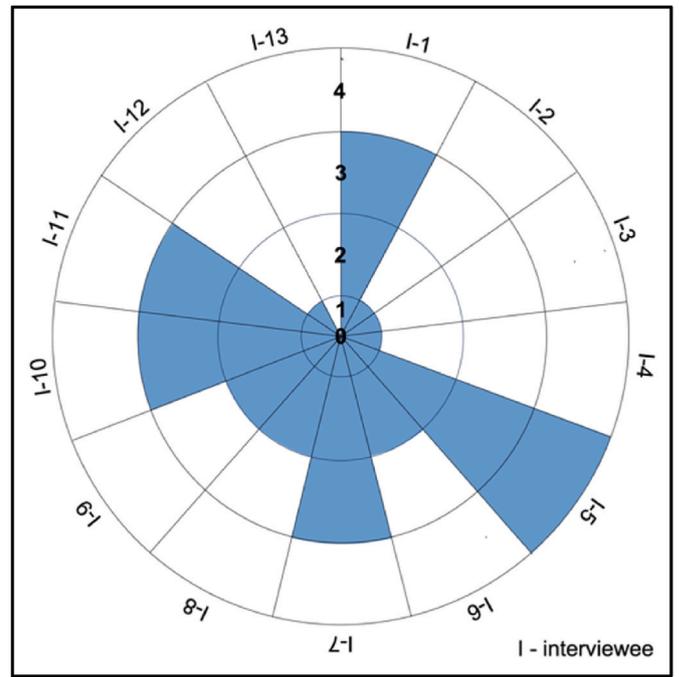


Fig. 8. Manifestation of the *Matrimony* femininity trait over all interviewees (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

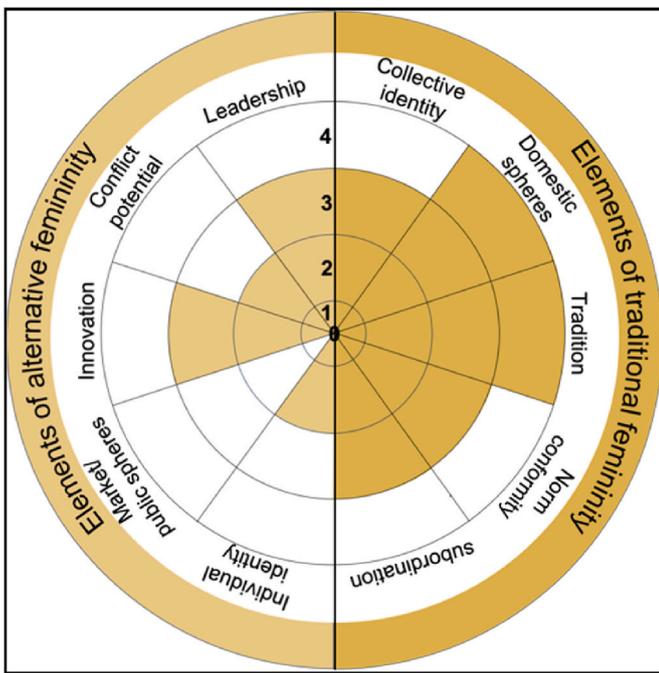


Fig. 7. Manifestation of alternative and traditional femininity elements for *Caring Motherhood* (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

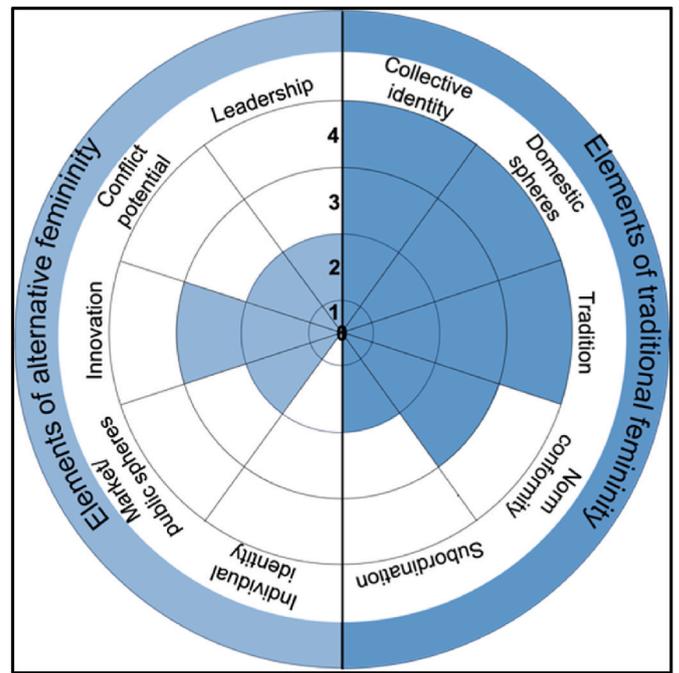


Fig. 9. Manifestation of alternative and traditional femininities for *Matrimony* (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

“I have four children. When they left school, [my husband] said: ‘I lose time by sending a woman to study to benefit and come home and kick your butt in front of the whole family.’ I said: ‘You say this, but I have the confidence that my children are not bad ....’ Well, they left school.... I went and found them scholarships and they went to study.” (I1-1a)

This particular interviewee gained female empowerment through her responsibility for her children.

“When I went out to earn some money during coffee harvest, well, that was the time I stood up for [the children]. And I say this is the moment I became a woman.” (I1.1a)

While *Caring Motherhood* remains important to interviewees, representing a driving force of women’s engagement, traditional gender relations change within the femininity trait of *Matrimony*. Women are less willing to subordinate to men and this becomes most visible in their relations to their husbands and their role as wives. Some grew up when women lacked voice and were always subordinated to their fathers,

husbands, uncles, or brothers. Intra-household conflicts remained in private while separations and divorce were socially determined. Yet, many interviewees identify progressing advancements in gender equality. This development relates to new masculinities as well as to a new understanding of intra-household cooperation and joint decision-making. Many interviewees report balanced marriages and speak affectionately of their husbands:

“I am very close to my husband and I always thought this was better, right? ... I grew up in an environment where women are women and men are the ones who decide, right? We are, so to say, the assistants. A woman who decides, right, who has the say ... Telling the man we are going to do it like this or this ... that was something that, right, in my upbringing, that I wasn't given. Because my papa would do something like ... He punished us, right? We could not express an opinion. But my husband was a little different. He was already much more open.” (I1-7)

Family unity and cohesion, as traditional norms, include a sharing of household responsibilities in this context. Particularly during agricultural peak seasons, women assist their husbands in the fields and men assist their wives in the house. An interviewee comments on how generally higher labor burdens lead to an increased equal sharing of household responsibilities:

“The whole family would do the housework, because sometimes it gets difficult and we all arrive equally tired. So everyone collaborates. Look, it's very nice because it's during [harvesting season] that there is more, let's say, more family unity to help each other with the chores.” (I1-6)

Other interviewees report that housework is being slightly deprioritized in times of accumulated labor burdens or that they pay for domestic help. Nonetheless, meal preparation remains the major and most time-consuming female responsibility:

“There are days at which I do more house work. There are other days at which I do less. What I do most of the time is cooking.” (I1-8)

Only a few interviewees receive support from their husbands in this regard. If they do, this is a rather remarkable aspect, which is accompanied by some emphasis in interviews:

“My husband is always the one who makes breakfast. I will not claim this to be my merit, but I also get up to prepare lunch.” (I1-5)

Only one interviewee refers to cooking as necessity, which is naturally shared between spouses:

“Sometimes my husband makes lunch. Sometimes I do it, depending on who has a better chance with respect to work. He likes me to do it and I like him to do it. So, that's where we sort of split up.” (I1-4)

Generally, interviews reveal an innovative spirit of “moving forward together” (I1-9), particularly for younger interviewees. This spirit of gender cooperation entails an expansion of female activity and leadership to farm sites beyond strictly domestic spheres. However, outside the family nucleus, this concept is still strictly combated and conflictual. For one thing, equitable decision-making over farm matters is neither understood nor accepted by many male actors external to the household. Interviewees frequently experienced disputes with farm workers:

“Some laborers who came to me would say: ‘Well, who is in charge here? You or [your husband]?’ So I tell him: ‘Well, the both of us. But he is not here. The one who is here, is me.’ It was really hard at first and also the fact that I was for sure one of the first women in this area to come to deliver coffee, all that. People here were not used to this.” (I1-7)

Overall, data shows that traditional gendered roles and practices largely prevail within households. However, gendered household power relations change toward cooperation and equitable partnerships. An

interviewee perfectly summarizes this with the following picture of *Matrimony*:

“Don't tell me that behind a great man an excellent woman stands. That's not a compliment. Not to me, no. Because you are putting me in the back. And I think nobody has to step behind anybody else. (I1-13)

4.3. *Femininity trait of Female Survivorship* - “the first thing is to love the story one has ... so as to not spend a whole life time being bitterly angry.” (I1-8)

Traditional femininity, such as the *Cafetalera* and its subaltern femininity trait of the *Social Caregivers*, is not only fostered in individual interviewees' identity construction but also strictly consolidated in gender norms and values at the societal level. In combination, they represent a female archetype to which interviewees refer to in order to position themselves along its archetypical values, norms, responsibilities, and characteristics. Significant deviations from this archetype are frequently driven by exogenous existential necessity rather than by intrinsic motivation and autonomous decisions:

“Once I got divorced, it was up to me to take the course and take control of the farm along with my children.... It was out of necessity, really.” (I1-10)

These exogenous life events often act as disruptive game changers bringing about the need for alternative paths of development. The latter entails a phase of radical change in interviewees' lives. Most interviewees report having experienced at least one such an event and respective period of adaptation (see Fig. 10). These women reveal an emerging subaltern femininity trait of *Female Survivorship* referring to a successful adaptation upon an existentially threatening event. How strong the notion of *Female Survivorship* manifests depends on whether specific events also occur to other people. It is rather low for economic insecurities, for example in the context of the coffee crisis and climate change. Although both are existential threats, they do not manifest in a single event, rather these appear recurrently and increasingly frequently, for one thing. Moreover, it is a collective experience.

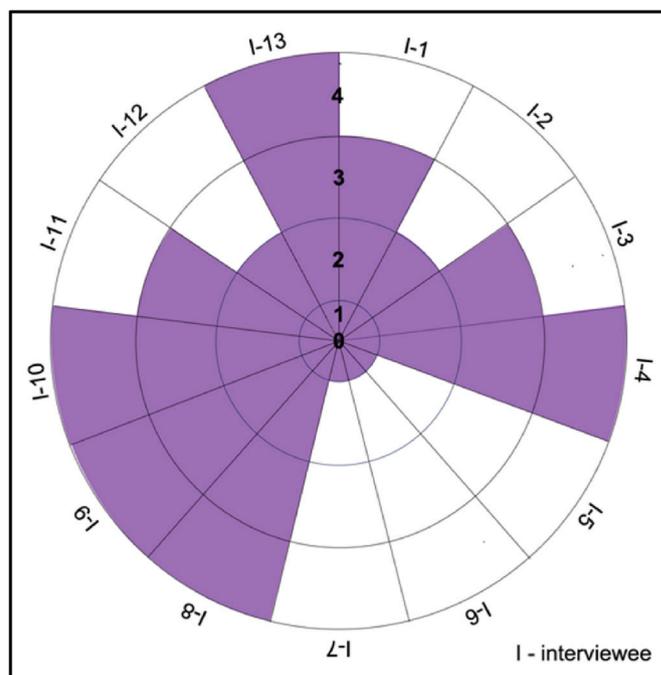


Fig. 10. Manifestation of the *Female Survivorship* femininity trait over all interviewees (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

The very essence of *Female Survivorship* lies in the fact that women express a purely individual identity in these contexts (see Fig. 11). In contrast to other femininity traits, *Female Survivors* speak of themselves and their individual experiences as “I” instead of “we.” Things happened exclusively to them, affecting them directly and making it necessary to cope with it alone. Women step out of subordination, expand their action beyond domestic spheres, take on leadership responsibilities, and implement innovative solutions, e.g. in cases of separation and sudden fallacies:

“It happens to [women] that their husbands die. So, they are left with the coffee only. And now what? Is it their turn, then? They have to learn and bring the family forward through the means of coffee.” (I1-2a)

Often, interviewees are strengthened in their *Caring Motherhood*. They need to sustain their families and secure a future for their children. At the same time, they gravely clash with other traditional femininities, particularly those that proclaim a strict gender differentiation in terms of labor distribution and spheres of male and female action. Conflicts that might be absorbed on household levels, fully erupt in working environments and market spheres. Interviewees report having experienced gender-based discrimination on farms, in cooperatives, as well as by certification and financial agencies:

“In my community, women have no support. A woman is not worth to be invested in. A woman is not worth the work she is doing. So, now, I have to sign up at the Agricultural Center, I have to register to let them know that I am already the owner of a company. When they will see me there, they will jump from their seats because they will say: ‘No, not a woman. She will wear everything out. A woman has no strength. A woman has no wits.’” (I1-1a)

Although, gender equality is granted *de jure* in Costa Rica, on a daily basis women are denied as having sufficient cognitive and physical capabilities. Therefore, women are in constant need to assert and prove themselves as equal to men. An interviewee illustrates this with an example:

“Opportunities, we have. We have them all. If they are given to us, is another question... I have literally been discriminated. Well, one time a guy said to me: ‘You can’t get certified.’ ... A year later, I was certified and I told him: ‘What a pity. You see, I said, yes, I was going to be certified.... You are not the one who is going to tell me that I cannot.’ That’s for one example here.” (I1-3)

They are denied help and being watched by their male counterparts. They feel as if they are “freaks” (I1-13), isolated in the world of coffee. Their failure serves as amusement to men:

“To me and my sister it happened that in the first year we had to deliver parts of the coffee harvest to the coffee cooperative.... But we were struggling with the sacks of coffee and the only thing they did – the majority of the people there are men – they were making fun of us instead of helping us. No, we were the show in the delivery department.” (W1)

Apart from individual identity construction, acknowledgement of the existence of gender-based discrimination is a key element for *Female Survivorship*. All respondents are affected by gender discrimination and report episodes of it. However, some do not perceive these episodes as discrimination. Rather, they explain it with their own perceived insufficiencies and reveal empathy with men regarding their confrontation with new circumstances:

“Most of the people who go to trainings and coffee meetings are usually men. So, arriving and facing this kind of situation is difficult until they get used to seeing you there. Nowadays, I don’t feel that kind of rivalry that I felt at the beginning.” (I1-9)

The quote highlights the deeply rooted norm that women should not complain. Rather than directly addressing discomfort, they count on change over time. Gender transformative change is perceived as a society-wide, long-term task of unlearning old habits:

“All these things won’t just go away, they need to be killed bit by bit. But, yes, at the beginning it is neither easy for you nor for them.” (I1-7)

Overall, women create a new narrative on their self-understanding and their course of life within the frame of *Female Survivorship*. This entails breaking with traditions and norms, particularly in terms of stepping out of subordination through active involvement. Reflections on past experiences and current livelihood conditions build the basis for this. Acknowledging and accepting the diverse limitations they face is a source of interviewees’ resilience. They display a strict realism while preserving their optimism, anticipating and embracing worst case scenarios:

“The first thing is to love the story one has ... to not spend a whole life time being bitterly angry. I think that life is fragile but that we must go through a long journey to give the best of each one of us.” (I1-8)

These reflections indicate a development process in which interviewees gain the empowerment to become designers of their own lives and make conscious self-determined decisions not merely out of necessity – as indicated in the beginning of this sub-section – but on the basis of alternative options:

“When I became a widow I got in charge of the patrimony, which was coffee. So, it has been by fate and also by choice ... I had a career. I tried to complement it with coffee. Coffee demands a lot of time. So, I couldn’t do it. You had to decide between coffee or the career. And I decided for the better. Yes, I am going to give my strength to someone better. I dedicate it to me.” (I1-3)

This development directly brings us to the next femininity trait.

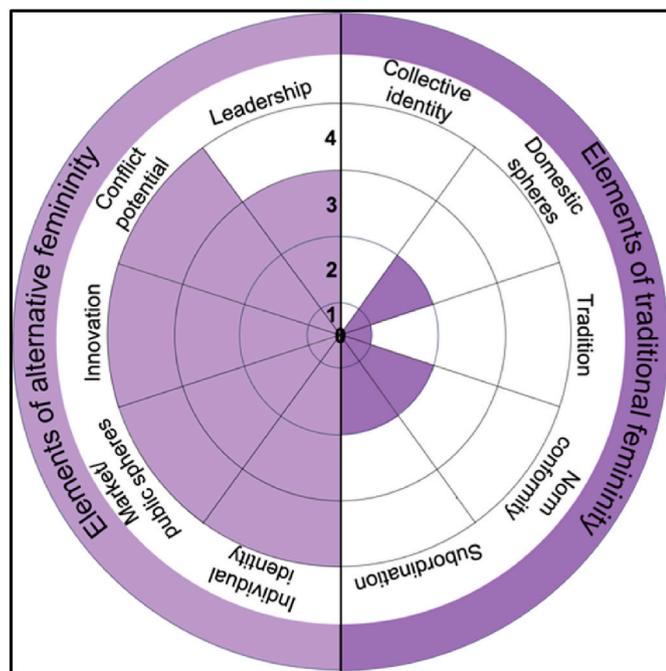


Fig. 11. Manifestation of alternative and traditional femininities for *Female Survivorship* (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

4.4. Femininity trait of Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs – “Sí, se puede!— yes, you can!” (I1-1-13)

The femininity trait of *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* often, but not necessarily, evolves on the basis of *Female Survivorship* (see Fig. 12). Most interviewees stress the role of experiences of Survivorship as trigger for their becoming Entrepreneurs and Innovators. In many cases, *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* refer to their identity as pioneers, innovators, and entrepreneurial leaders, who pursue new paths of development and implement new practices with implications for the understanding of all preceding femininity traits (see Fig. 13). These contemporary elements ultimately influence a reconfiguration of the traditional interpretation of the *Cafetalera*. *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* perceive a specific female tendency in how they innovate, which differs from innovation pursued by men.

Not only as leading women in the coffee business, but also as emerging equal partners of their husbands, they are newcomers to a male dominated sphere and need to catch up with their male counterparts. In the context of perceived female insufficiencies, particularly in terms of physical capabilities, interviewees refer to a specific female creativity and inventiveness to overcome these limitations:

“I have always thought that women have a sense that allows us to find a way out of situations in which our abilities don’t fit.” (I1-PV)

In terms of entrepreneurial and agricultural knowledge, interviewees claim to be more prone to (life-long) learning and new practices. They take advantage of training and professionalization opportunities, which offer them access to evidence-based, up-to-date, and unconventional practices alongside knowledge, such as on agroecology, soil health, biodiversity conservation, and climate change including respective implementation and adaptation strategies. To some degree, this even leads to a knowledge head start of these women compared to their male counterparts, as the latter would rather act on the basis of experience and routinized practices. For men new training curricula clash with their internalized knowledge and routines, leading to conflict and making implementation harder, while women soak up this new knowledge:

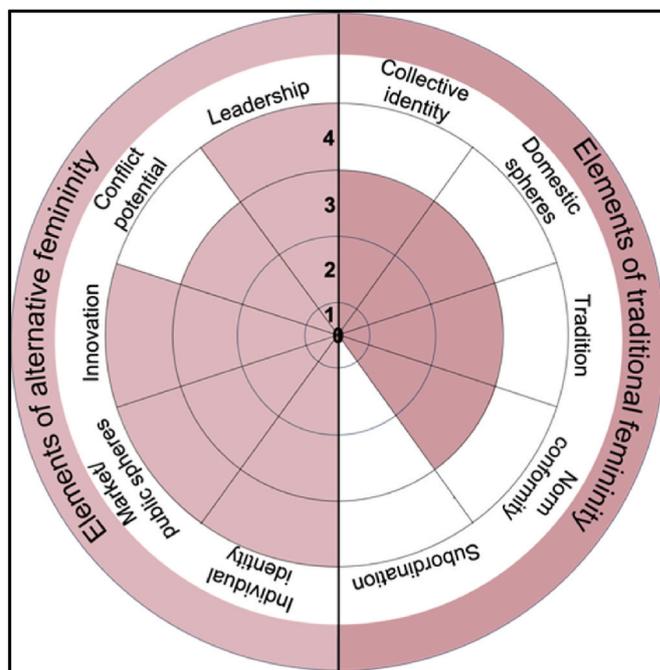


Fig. 13. Manifestation of alternative and traditional femininities for *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

“I think as women we are more interested in learning.... There are, in fact, very good practices that I know of and I recommend.... But people don’t apply them, or men don’t apply them because they are not in accord with their experience.” (I1-2a)

At the same time, innovative training curricula, particularly women-only initiatives, put women in the position of gate-keepers of new knowledge, potentially creating intra-spousal conflicts:

“When I started taking courses at HELINA the first times, my husband got angry ... because I started to tell him: ‘Don’t put so much of that [pesticide].... It is no good. Stop using it. I mean, it doesn’t only kill the insects. It just kills you.’” (I1-12)

On the other side, interviewees execute their understanding of intra-household and gender cooperation by implementing systems of resource pooling and knowledge sharing:

“The interesting thing is that [the topics of the women-only trainings] are not only for women.... To replicate, to transmit, and share that information is also part of our task.” (I1-1b)

This way, interviewees strive to put to work the diversity of capabilities available on a farm:

“Although each one of us has specific tasks, when help is needed, we are like a beehive or like an anthill where we all contribute when help is needed.... Everybody participates ... according to their abilities, developing their part in the project.” (I1-10)

In the traditional understanding of the *Cafetalera* who does not claim a farmer identity, they were impacted by the coffee crisis but without being able to influence the underlying agricultural practices and dynamics that led to this crisis because they were not in control of agricultural work. As *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs*, they actively engage with, and shape, coffee landscapes within the frame of coffee production. Thus, *the Cafetalera* femininity approaches *the Cafetalero* masculinity within the trait of *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs*. Yet, interviewees want to conduct their coffee businesses differently. They strive to serve as “role models for production and sustainability” (I1-13). Leadership and entrepreneurial understanding are based on

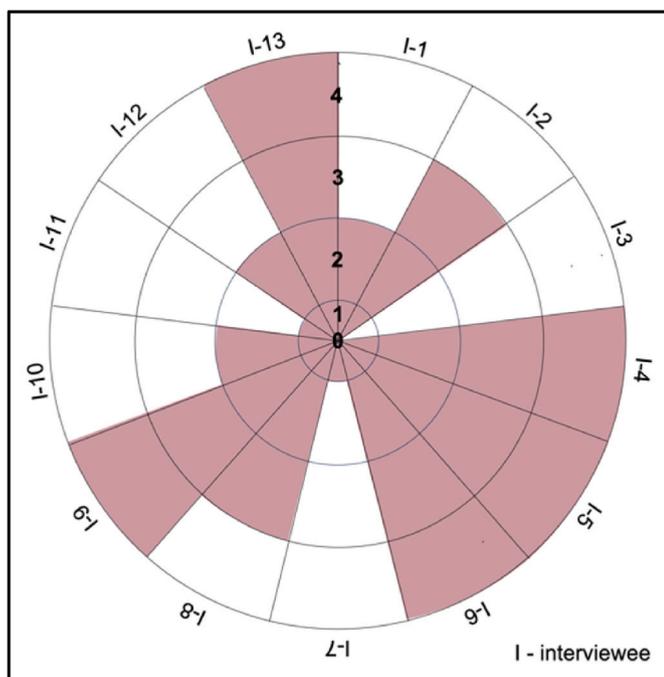


Fig. 12. Manifestation of the *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* femininity trait over all interviewees (Scale: 0 = low until 4 = high).

cooperation, a value based-economy, local value chains, and socio-environmental benefits:

“I would wish for many women producers to be able to process their own coffee and sell it at better prices, because that guarantees greater economic and social wellbeing for their families. I would like to see women being trained, to be recognized as an important pillar of the economic strength of this country.... It seems to me that this is an ideal for people to reacquire values that have been lost and also the protection of the environment. I would like all people to be committed to take care of the planet and that we help each other.” (I1-10)

Respective business values include authenticity, transparency, integrity, equity and fairness, honesty, reliability, social responsibility, and “working in harmony with nature” (I1-8). Economic advancement is targeted in terms of organic and gradual growth for the sake of securing autonomy and independence:

“We don’t know if we favor the idea of growing. Years back, we started with something very small. What we earned, we put back in the project.... The idea is to maintain what we have and to be able to enjoy the project.” (I1-8)

A solidarity-based economy is preferred over competitive markets and businesses. Interviewees formulate a specific understanding of humanitarianism by stressing the importance of upholding everyone’s dignity. This attitude values the worthiness of all persons and all types of work, gratitude, and mutual respect. Generational integration and gender cooperation are key aspects thereof.

In contrast, appropriating male framed characteristics in market and public spheres, such as boldness, combat readiness, assertiveness, severity, and a demonstration of hardness and rigor are important coping strategies for interviewees as women struggle to exert authority among male actors. At the same time, female characteristics, such as emotionality, fear, and weakness, are being hidden and oppressed in these contexts.

“As a woman you have to be very careful when it comes to doing business, right? Because I can’t be too much of a nice person because otherwise you get caught, right?”

Overall, the femininity trait of *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* spurs social, agricultural and economic innovation and grants women self-efficacy, autonomy, and agency, while simultaneously relying on deeply rooted social norms, values, and traditions. Entrepreneurial values very much relate to traditional femininities, incorporating a collective identity and a sense of caring and community, social cohesion and environmental stewardship, as well as cultural traditions and heritage maintenance. However, they are expanded and applied beyond domestic spheres, dripping in to market and public spheres, thereby innovating the coffee sector. Conflicts are mitigated and navigated by a diverse set of coping strategies, from cooperation and empathy to the stepwise creation of independence, for example from certification and financial agencies, cooperatives and intermediaries.

## 5. Discussion

Our study contains three major results. First, next to the agricultural femininity traits of the *social caregiver* and the *female innovator and entrepreneur*, which are discussed broadly in the literature (e.g. Annes et al., 2020; Keller, 2014; Shisler and Sbicca, 2019; Ambjörnsson, 2021), *survivorship* plays a major role in female identity construction. Secondly, care is an overarching element of all femininity traits and, thirdly, femininities always comprise a mixture of alternative and traditional characteristics. Results 1 and 2 address research question 1, while result 3 is integral to research question 2. Last, but not least, we stress the relevance of intersectional approaches to female empowerment. Before presenting some implications, we want to stress that this analysis is

based on an explorative study that includes a small number of study participants. Conclusions drawn from our results are based in analytical representativeness. They address aspects of the agricultural femininity embodied by female coffee producers in their real-life context as observed in this study, representing the still underrepresented topic of rural femininities.

### 5.1. Female Survivorship as facilitator of female values and practices

Survivorship is integral to the lives of rural women of the Global South. It refers to structural female experiences of gender-based discrimination, violence, and oppression that ultimately restrict the opportunities of women and making them more vulnerable in times of crisis (e.g. Cameron et al., 2021; cf. Klasen et al., 2015). *Female Survivorship* indicates that gender equality and female empowerment is not only a question of closing diverse gender gaps, it is an existential question of female safety and dignity, on both household and societal levels. However, *Female Survivorship* does not only incorporate the notion of women’s specific structural vulnerability in the context of poverty, climate change, discrimination, and armed conflicts, but also women’s resilience and capacity to cope with and overcome these vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is not surprising that *Female Innovator- and Entrepreneurship* in our study often evolves out of experiences of *Female Survivorship*. This makes it worthwhile to investigate how these experiences shape women’s concept of innovation and entrepreneurship, including business models and values. We want to highlight two potential implications:

First, stereotyping and idealizing specific femininities in the context of agriculture and entrepreneurship falls short in acknowledging their underlying meaning. Lyon et al. (2019) refer to the exploitative mechanism of a marketing-effective construction of the female coffee farmer in the context of smart-economic initiatives, which frame women as altruistic caregivers while they “do not embrace feminist concerns but instead advance a ‘strategic simplification’ in which the woman coffee farmer is typically depicted as a hardworking mother, often widowed or living on her own, who takes care of her coffee and is an admirable environmental steward” (Yarrow, 2011 cited from Lyon et al., 2019, 35). *Women-produced* constitutes a marketable quality equivalent to *organic* or *fairtrade*, fit to sell products, such as coffee, in which the “neoliberal instantiation of women” (ibid.) makes them a legible target of policy interventions of states, transnational organizations, as well as public or corporate actors. Doss et al. (2018) equally point at a simplification of women’s relation to nature. The authors claim that women’s intrinsic environmental motivation is a myth with a kernel of truth: While they are not naturally more prone to nature conservation, their traditional social roles in food provision, housework, and care work has made them more dependent on ecosystem’s functionality and natural resources, such as firewood, non-timber forest products, or fresh water. In this sense, Imron and Satrya (2019) fall short in ascribing women a collective consciousness toward social entrepreneurship in the context of their perception of coffee as source of farming livelihoods and sustainability ideal. While these findings are in line with our results, we argue that cooperation and sustainability are important coping strategies for women who are excluded from conventional coffee sector structures. Values, such as solidarity, integrity, equity, and fairness largely evolve from their own experience and dependence on these systems.

Secondly, the focus on closing gender resource gaps strives to create equal opportunities and increase female involvement in conventional settings. This strategy is of limited, if not adverse, effect if it does not take into account sociocultural structures discriminating against women: Women might be granted access to resources, while men still have decision-making power and, thus, control over resources (Deere et al., 2013; Ganle et al., 2015). Moreover, it is blind to the potential of alternative settings shaped by the limitations rural women face in agriculture. Shibata et al. (2020, 1102) stress that “women and men

introduce innovations and benefit from them differently.” They find that the higher the access to resources, the more farmers benefit from agricultural opportunities. As women have generally less access to resources, the authors argue that cooperative intra-household decision-making has the potential to equalize this benefit. In the same logic, Hill and Vigneri (2014) find that women are equally productive and receive equal prices as men when they farm with equal resources and sell their produce in equal markets; thus, it is the gap in resources and market access that negatively influences women’s outcomes. Both findings may be valid. However, it focuses on economics only and suggests that women farm and innovate to their disadvantage in this regard. It neglects the resilience and transformative potential of alternative farm and business understandings, alongside socio-cultural, economic, and environmental values, which are all rooted in women’s experience of discrimination and oppression as well as their traditional roles.

### 5.2. Care as integral aspect of femininities

Care is one of the key female values addressed across all our data materials. Rather than just representing the core of the *Social Caregiver*, our results show that care is evident in all femininity traits, taking various forms from physical and emotional care for family members to community engagement, environmental care, as well as maintenance of family and cultural heritage; care is also a core element of their businesses, e.g. in terms of hospitality and customer service. Care increasingly takes center stage in economic and agricultural development within the frame of discussions on the politics of care and in research on femininities (e.g. Guimarães Reynaldo et al., 2023; Shisler and Sbicca, 2019). In our study, we observe an intrinsic shift in coffee-related femininities and women’s increasing sovereignty over the interpretation of what being a woman in coffee entails. Boundaries between entrepreneurial, agricultural, and domestic spheres are blurry, depending upon each other in commercial smallholder family farming systems. Women take on new entrepreneurial roles and practices in marketing and strategic management, increasingly claiming farmer status for themselves – even if they are not personally conducting agricultural field work. In the context of changing female identities in a fishery, Gustavsson (2020) stresses that a feminization approach to agriculture must acknowledge and value female practices. Rather than merely responding to diverse gender gaps and differentials, gender transformative programming aims to institutionalize the visibility and relevance of female, often marginalized practices within the frame of an integrated smallholder farming system. Instead of defining traditional rural masculinities as a characterizing element of agriculture, they not only acknowledge that women may represent other identities or values and may perform similar roles and identities differently. Further, they take it as a chance for system wide innovation and transformation.

### 5.3. Femininities in the nexus of alternative and tradition

Related to this, our study shows that femininities are flexible in the field of tension between tradition and innovation. Traditional femininities, such as the *Cafetalera* or its trait of the *Social Caregiver*, are not superseded by alternative traits of femininity, such as the *Female Innovator and Entrepreneur*. Rather, all traits complement and influence each other. We find alternative and traditional elements in each trait. Further, interaction between tradition and alternative seems to be relevant for stability. Within the *Cafetalera* femininity, the *Social Caregiver* is deeply rooted in tradition, representing continuity and stability. *Female Survivorship* radically disrupts traditional elements and spurs alternative elements. This catapults women into situations of conflict, insecurity, and trial and error. *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs*, who often emerged from experiences of *Female Survivorship*, perform highly alternative femininities, but deeply tie upon traditional elements. They keep being *mothers* and *wives*, but they embody an alternate understanding of these femininity traits and, thus, generally push the traditional femininity of

the *Cafetalera* toward innovation. Still, interviewees with highly alternative traits of femininity show a deep connection to some elements of tradition, while they opt out of others.

In the context of coffee production, this has an interesting notion: Is coffee cultivation, despite the global coffee crisis, a tradition that smallholders in the Global South are keen to uphold? Several studies located in Sub-Saharan Africa indicate a female exit from coffee (Howland et al., 2020; Heyer, 2006). Howland et al. (2020), pointing at fundamental coffee sector transformations, find that household coping strategies in response to price shocks and climate change depend on gender relations: As coffee production – in Tanzania in this case – “depended on the subjugation of women by men[,] the collapse of coffee has created new opportunities for women” (Howland et al., 2020). A similar dynamic is expressed in our study with regards to youth’s exit from coffee. Lacking local opportunities in highly globalized inequitable coffee markets play a crucial role therein. Many inequalities of coffee production are rooted in coffee’s history as colonial crop – from gender relations and labor distribution to exploitative production systems and a long lasting strict separation of producers in the Global South from their consumers in the Global North (cf. Combrink, 2021; Wanzala et al., 2022; Delle, 2002). Costa Rica, in contrast, has experienced a rapid development of domestic coffee markets, incorporating the entire value chain during the last years (cf. Quesada-Román et al., 2022). This offers a multitude of local business development opportunities and additionally fosters the national coffee culture with regards to both production and consumption. In this context, it is notable that interviewees link coffee cultivation to poverty and express a perceived superiority of entrepreneurship over farming (cf. I1-2a) because it is linked to economic wellbeing and wealth. When opportunities are given, the argument that integration into agricultural commercialization, higher value chains, high value agricultural commodities, and value-added agriculture, including agritourism and community-supported agriculture, would facilitate female empowerment might be valid for coffee production (Oduo et al., 2017; Wright and Annes, 2016), particularly if it enables female business values of care, solidarity, local embeddedness, and integrity.

### 5.4. The scope of intersectionality

Our study takes an explorative approach to how women construct their identities. It is based on considerations of intersectionality, particularly on the intersectional multi-level analysis of Winker and Degele (2011). However, it focuses on identity construction at individual level and on gender as structural factor for female coffee producers’ livelihoods and identities. In the frame of this article, we cannot pay full account of all structural categories of oppression and their interrelations at all level relevant to illuminate the full scope of female coffee producers’ realities. In this context, interviewees named other structural factors, such as age, body, health, class, and economics, as affecting their lives. Subsequently, we stress three notions from our study: First, that acknowledging gender as structural factor and source of discrimination may already make a difference regarding female identity construction, self-understanding, and self-efficacy. In the frame of *Female Survivorship*, some interviewees either did not identify gender as the source of discrimination or even did not recognize the existence of discrimination at all. Rather, they questioned their own capabilities. Interviewees who stressed the existence and effect of structural gender-based discrimination showed higher confidence in their own capabilities. However, beyond increased self-confidence on the individual level, some felt overwhelmed and helpless in acknowledging the structural dimension of gender-based discrimination.

In this context, Martin and Phillips (2017) find that gender blindness – the ignorance or downplaying of gender differences – could be used by women as an adaptive strategy, ultimately it positively affects their confidence in working environments, particularly in male-dominated arenas. Related to this, it is notable that female coffee producing

interviewees who are not aligned to Bean Voyage refer to gender significantly less frequently as a factor affecting female experiences, values, norms, roles, and practices than program participants do. Although stating that *machismo* was ever present in their lives, non-participants stressed a natural gender equality and drew self-confidence from disposing over the same capabilities and opportunities as men and taking advantage of them. However, a lack of consciousness of subordination structures does not make women less subject to these structures. In this sense, Bean Voyage advocates gender awareness amongst its participants.

Secondly, structural factors other than gender to which interviewees referred comprise age, socio-economic situation, particularly marital status, and physical condition. These factors were strictly interlinked with the notion of gender. Age, for example, was aligned to the manifestation of *Caring Motherhood*. Being responsible for minor children exacerbates existential threats in the context of *Female Survivorship*. *Motherhood* also affects the range of adaptation strategies for women not only due to decreased flexibility and additional responsibility for children's wellbeing but due to the influence on women's identity development by becoming a mother (Laney et al., 2015).

Thirdly, it is evident that Bean Voyage has managed to engage women with disabilities, as well as women differing in age, marital status, and socio-economic situations. However, it has so far – at least in Costa Rica – failed to engage indigenous communities and coffee farming women. Townsend-Bell (2016) points at Costa Rica, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina as the Latin American countries that most closely self-identify with whiteness and place themselves superior and more advanced to their neighbors. Thereby, race is highly interrelated with class. While our study involves female coffee producers who farm their own family land, many agricultural workers migrate from Nicaragua or Panama (e.g. Lee, 2015). Indigenous seasonal workers often migrate in larger family units, whereby women with children often find particularly precarious employment as caretakers of seasonal workers on coffee farms during harvest (i.a., Hakizimana et al., 2017). Their perspective is missing, not just in this study but in scientific literature in general (Oya and Pontara, 2015).

## 6. Conclusion

This article asks which agricultural femininities are embodied by female coffee producers and in what ways these entail traditional and/or alternative elements with the potential to transform prevailing gender norms and relations. Upon conducting a qualitative case study with female coffee producers in the Zona de Los Santos, Costa Rica, we identify the *Cafetalera* as the main agricultural femininity embodied by female coffee producers and three traits of it, namely the *Social Caregiver*, *Female Survivor*, and *Female Innovator and Entrepreneur*. While the *Cafetalera* is deeply rooted in traditional gender norms and values, which are particularly related to the subaltern femininity of the *Social Caregiver*, *Female Survivors* and *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs* represent emerging alternative traits to this femininity. The traditional *Cafetalera* as well as the *Social Caregiver* are characterized by a female subordination to men, female attachment to domestic spheres, and weak manifestations of women's identity construction as individuals. The latter two entail new roles, new responsibilities, and new action arenas for women. We observe a shift from female subordination to female leadership and individual identity constructions. While alternative traits of femininity emerge, traditional elements are not completely superseded but remain prevalent and important. However, we observe significant shifts of traditional elements, particularly in terms of changed gender relations: Intra-household cooperation and joint decision-making is increasingly relevant. Female subordination is less evident, while female leadership increases. Female action expands beyond domestic spheres.

However, innovation and breaking with traditions and norms is highly conflictual and contested. In particular, *Female Survivorship* clashes drastically with traditions and norms not only on the societal

level but also within intrinsic motivation and identity construction of women themselves. This is because this femininity type is often caused by strokes of fate, such as sudden widowhood, forcing women to take on male roles and responsibilities. *Female Innovators and Entrepreneurs*, in contrast, are alternative traits of femininity based on self-conceptualization. Despite their innovative character, they reconnect to traditional female norms and values – however, this time based on female autonomy.

In order to transform agricultural systems toward equity, first, we must protect women against gender-based discrimination and violence, thus, mitigating the consequences of conflicts for women as innovation and transformation often evoke resistance. On this basis, gender programs and policies should consider female farming and business practices as viable alternative blueprints to conventional agricultural systems based on alternative values, perceptions, motivations, identities, and roles. We identify care to be a central element over all femininity traits, as it integrates private and public spheres, individual and societal levels, as well as the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Last, but not least, intersectional approaches must be strengthened to take account of other structural dimensions beyond gender, such as age, body, class, and race. In order to establish inclusive gender-equitable systems, we call for additional research on agricultural identities and practices of (seasonal) farm workers as well as queer farming communities.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Annelie M. Gütte:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jana Zscheischler:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Stefan Sieber:** Supervision, Resources, Funding acquisition. **Michelle Chevelev-Bonatti:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Funding acquisition.

## Further declarations and statements

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this publication or available upon request.

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## Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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