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Healthy Women are Key to Healthy Harvests

SCAE is supporting Grounds for Health in its mission to reduce cervical cancer among women in developing countries and will announce a significant new partnership agreement with the NGO at the Nordic World of Coffee in Gothenburg this June. PAM KAHL discusses the importance of supporting women in origin countries, who together account for approximately 70% of the labour associated with coffee production.

In the coffee industry, more often than not, sustainability means investing in efforts to maximise yield, improve quality and protect against disease. Rough estimates suggest major roasters have collectively invested sums of €23m-€28m for multi-year projects in the coffee lands.

Capacity-building programmes educate farmers on new techniques and products so they can grow robust coffee trees. Richer soil... Stronger plants... More and better coffee. It's all about the health and fitness of the coffee tree.

But a coffee plant is only as productive as the farmer behind it and in order for that farmer to nurture healthy coffee trees, he or she must be healthy and have access to services that make it possible to live a long and productive life.

The human dimension is particularly poignant as the coffee industry takes a more deliberate look at gender equity issues at origin.

Gender equity was an important topic at this year's coffee conferences in America, hosted by the National Coffee Association and the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

The Coffee Quality Institute (CQI) recently launched a research initiative, Partnership for Gender Equity, to explore how the link between gender and coffee can encourage innovation in the coffee industry. UK-based Falcon Coffees is a founding project partner. Konrad Brits, Falcon CEO, was a key participant in the panel discussion at NCA and spoke movingly of the importance of women at origin as critical to the future of coffee.

Root Capital, the innovative social investment fund that provides financial support to smallholder farmers in Latin America and Africa, recently published a report advocating for a collaborative

approach to 'unlocking the economic potential of women by expanding the focus beyond the women leaders to include women from across the economic spectrum'. Both CQI and Root Capital emphasise women's economic empowerment as a catalyst for greater supply chain resiliency.

Women are responsible for approximately 70% of the labour associated with coffee production. Those in the best position to influence the future of the supply chain are in their prime, between 25 and 50 years old. These women are not just farmers, accountants, managers or pickers. They are also mothers, wives, aunts and daughters who play a critical role in the social and economic fabric of the community.

They also face a range of health problems. Multi-billion dollar efforts to improve health in low-income rural settings tend to focus on children and the main infectious diseases such as HIV and malaria. For women, while substantial investments over many years have helped to halve the rate of maternal mortality, other health issues are typically neglected. For example, cervical cancer now kills more women than maternal conditions,

and yet few women in coffee-producing countries have access to simple screening and prevention services. In the next 15 years, six million women are expected to die from cervical cancer, an easily preventable disease. Nearly 90% of these deaths will occur in low- and middle-income countries.

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How can coffee companies prioritise amongst so many worthy causes? Many of these social problems may seem daunting, and the better-known issues attract billions of dollars of national and international resources. It is difficult to see how one company, or even an entire industry, can make a strategic difference. Clarifying opportunities for strategic impact can start with a short checklist. Consider issues that meet the following criteria:

- a serious and growing problem affecting communities at origin;
- relatively neglected by others;
- availability of simple solutions;
- even better emerging solutions;
- results are clear and measurable; and
- public and non-profit partners are available.

Influential, productive, and economically empowered women are healthy women. Cervical cancer meets the criteria for strategic, catalytic philanthropy: investments to support cervical cancer screening and treatment services have the potential to transform this issue for women living in coffee-growing regions, their families and entire communities. ♦

PAM KAHL is VP of Development & Communications at Grounds for Health. Since 1996, Grounds for Health has partnered with coffee producers and companies to screen more than 53,000 women for cervical cancer. More than 3,000 were treated for cancer or pre-cancer. For more information about Grounds for Health, go to groundsforhealth.org or stop by booth L4 at the Nordic World of Coffee in Gothenburg.