



**TPSA** | CANADA-INDONESIA TRADE AND PRIVATE SECTOR ASSISTANCE PROJECT



**SUCCESS STORY**

# Gayo Coffee Women's Forum: A Space to Build Community and Confidence

In Gayo, Aceh, smallholder women and men farmers are equally involved in coffee cultivation. They form cooperatives to participate in and benefit from exporting. Cultural norms dictate that legal land ownership be under the name of the head of household, a position traditionally held by men. However, cooperative membership is open only to farmers who own their land, a requirement that automatically disqualifies many women farmers from becoming members. In most cases, only women who inherited land or are widows can join co-ops. Sometimes, women farmers can successfully negotiate with their husbands for a certificate indicating that a portion of the family farm is considered to be owned by the woman, allowing them to become co-op members.

Some women in the forum explained that it is difficult for them to express their opinions in the presence of men. This means that even when women do become co-op members, it is difficult for them to participate fully in the co-op's activities when their husbands or other men from their household or extended family are also present as members.



First meeting of the Gayo Coffee Women's Forum on November 29, 2018, in Takengon.

**Canada**

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Women are also under-represented in key decision-making positions in cooperatives. A June 2018 Fairtrade survey of certified coffee cooperatives in Gayo revealed that women held only 18 per cent of board chairperson roles and 29 per cent of secretary roles (in charge of general operations). The position of treasurer, however, was held mainly by women, at 56 per cent, because women are commonly perceived to be more trustworthy than men in managing co-op funds.

## THE CHALLENGE: WOMEN COFFEE FARMERS WANT A ROOM OF THEIR OWN

Women coffee farmers ardently want to become members of cooperatives where they can sell their coffee and benefit from Fairtrade premiums. For women who are already co-op members, they want their voices to be heard, especially regarding the use of Fairtrade premium funds. Women members want these funds to be used for services that support them in such areas as childcare, early childhood education, and reproductive health.

Women co-op members want to have “a room of their own” where they can share their stories and experiences as coffee farmers, wives, and mothers; express their views on co-op matters; and gather support from their peers.

## THE STRATEGY: ESTABLISH AND SUPPORT A WOMEN IN COFFEE COOPERATIVES FORUM

The TPSA gender team interacted with women co-op members during the gender and trade study, and provided them with capacity-building through export training and gender-related training, including a gender-awareness workshop, a training-of-trainers on women's leadership, and a workshop on gender-responsive co-op governance. These experiences gave some of those women the confidence to pursue the idea of setting up a forum for women in cooperatives. The Gayo Coffee Women's Forum was officially launched on November 29, 2018, in Takengon, Aceh, and TPSA and Fairtrade–NAPP were there to lend their support.

The forum launch was facilitated by TPSA's gender advisor and Fairtrade–NAPP's program officer. It was attended by 18 women co-op members and leaders from nine women-led<sup>1</sup> co-ops: Ara Cahayani Gayo, Arinagata, Bahtera, Kokowagayo, Kopepi Ketiara, Koperasi Kopi Gayo Organik, Ratu Ketiara, Sara Ate, and Utamagro. The women expressed their hope that the forum will serve as a space for discussions and training to help them develop their potential, increase their knowledge of various aspects of coffee farming and other topics of interest, encourage their economic independence, and allow them to continue learning about gender equality and women's empowerment in co-ops. They selected Rizkani (chairperson and founder of Kokowagayo), Mahyana Sari (secretary and assistant to the general manager of Arinagata), and Hasanah (board member of Koperasi Pedagang dan Petani Ketiara) as forum coordinators. TPSA's technical assistance and support for the forum and other coffee co-ops on gender-responsive governance and women's leadership continued until the end of May 2019.



Left to right: Rizkani, Hasanah, and Mahyana Sari.



## THE OUTCOME: THE FORUM IS A KEY RESOURCE AND ADVOCATE FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Since its establishment, the forum has taken action on several important fronts. It facilitated the supply of trainers to help other trainers conduct workshops on women's leadership in their respective co-ops. For example, training-of-trainers graduates from Kokowagayo assisted with pilot leadership training for Utamagro and Ara Cahayani Gayo co-ops. The forum also helped identify trainers who ably handled the session on gender and trade during a digital marketing workshop for coffee SMEs and co-ops held in Takengon on April 29, 2019. That workshop was attended by 61 participants (27 men and 34 women) from 12 SMEs and 22 co-ops, and was conducted in partnership with the Angel Investment Network (ANGIN) and Fairtrade-NAPP. This training has contributed to building the reputation of the forum as a key resource and advocate for gender equality and women's leadership in Aceh's coffee co-ops. News of the women's leadership training has spread to other co-ops, who are now approaching the forum with requests for similar training.

The forum has also been tapped by Fairtrade-NAPP to be the driver behind its newly created Gender Leadership School. The school does not have a physical structure; rather, it consists of a set of training and mentoring programs to help women smallholder farmers become leaders of co-ops and women co-op staff become managers.

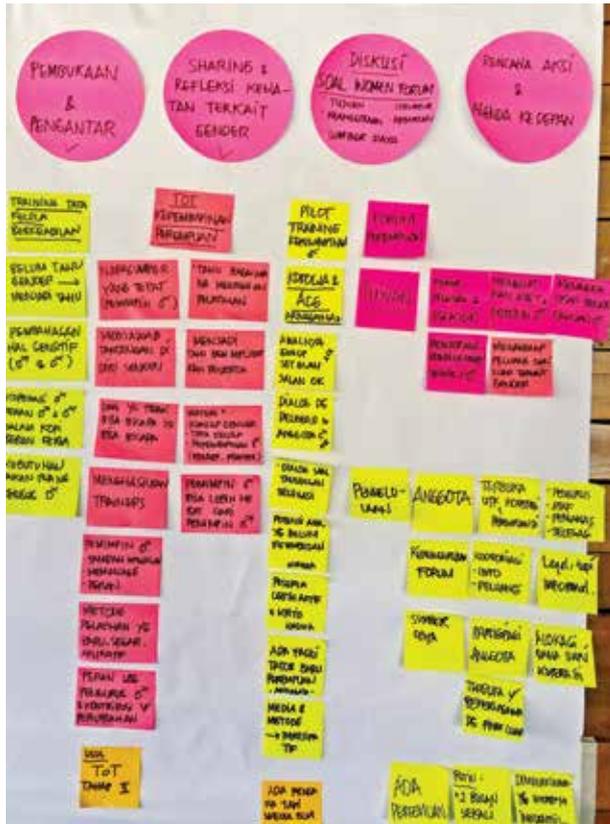
## SUSTAINABILITY: CONCRETE SUPPORT FROM MANY CO-OPS AND FAIRTRADE

Both mixed-membership and women-exclusive coffee co-ops in Gayo have openly supported the forum's establishment and are matching that support with funding commitments. Currently, forum membership is by individual, rather than by co-op. However, the co-ops represented in the forum have committed to paying membership dues and covering members' cost of participating in forum activities. Fairtrade-NAPP has also committed to providing both financial and technical support toward the forum's sustainability for at least one year. Its support will focus on strengthening internal processes, expanding membership, and developing a concrete plan of activities.

“ I was very nervous when I had to convey the message about the women's forum at the Association of Fairtrade Producers of Indonesia meeting last February [2019]. Most of those who attended were men. I thought that many would oppose us and think that gender equality and women's leadership in co-ops are not important, or even contrary to Islamic law. But the results were positive. ”

Rizkani, Chairperson and founder of Kokowagayo

As the lead forum coordinator, Rizkani was tasked with raising the awareness of other Fairtrade-certified co-ops about the existence and objectives of the forum. She was also expected to seek their support by lobbying the *Asosiasi Produser Fairtrade Indonesia* (Association of Fairtrade Producers in Indonesia, or APFI), which she found challenging.



List of what the women hope the forum will achieve.

“ The forum plays an important role in building the capacity of women co-op members, which is not only an act of fairness but is also good for business. The important thing is to make the forum an effective venue for communication, where members can learn from each other's experiences. However, they should also appreciate the fact that the conditions and needs of each cooperative are different. ”

—Ara Siberani, Chairperson of Arinagata Cooperative

During the meeting with APFI, Rizkani explained the importance and purpose of the forum, emphasizing the need to develop women's capacity so that they can become more confident leaders and take on roles of greater responsibility in cooperatives. Her lobbying yielded positive results: The association committed to contributing Rp300,000 every two months to the forum's operating costs. Representatives from mixed-membership cooperatives also expressed interest in having their women members join the forum, in order to ensure that they do not miss out on activities intended for women in co-ops.

Rafiyandi, chairperson of Utamagro, recognizes the importance of the forum, as he has seen many women co-op members who have the potential to become delegates or lead activities. He thinks women have been denied the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence.

### THE FUTURE: A NEED TO BROADEN SUPPORT

While many co-ops support the forum, some remain unconvinced. They question the need for such a forum, because they do not understand the issues that motivated the women to establish it. They also do not see the business benefits that a strong forum can bring to the co-ops. They argue that the time women spend on the forum takes away from the time they can spend on regular co-op business. This leads to women forum members sometimes feeling conflicted.



The forum still has some work to do to raise awareness of the rationale behind its establishment, its objectives, and its programs. It will take time to amass solid evidence that can convince the broader cooperative community that the forum will bring economic benefits to them. But the women involved in the forum are optimistic that its positive impact will soon be recognized.

## ENDNOTE

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<sup>1</sup> Fairtrade–NAPP's definition of a women-led cooperative is used here.