

## Guatemalan Coffee and Fair Trade

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Coffee. It's a drink that 54% of adult Americans sip out of a mug every morning, or bring in a thermos to work, or stand in long lines to buy during lunch break. Billion dollar businesses have been built on coffee; others have dedicated their lives to perfecting coffee blends. The largest food import in the US is coffee.<sup>1</sup> Coffee, or the coffee bean, has become a fundamental part of American life-but where does something so popular, so important even come from? How many Americans really know how it is made?

If I were a foreign news correspondent I would like to be assigned in Guatemala, one of the US's primary coffee suppliers. The country with the most child labor in coffee production, 9.1% of Guatemalan children aged 7-14 work in the industry, compared to only 1.9% and 2.4% in Brazil and Columbia respectively.<sup>2</sup> The amount of money Guatemalan producers are paid are also some of the most unfair: the Guatemalan coffee pickers have to pick 100 pounds of coffee in order to earn the minimum wage of \$3/day. This happens because the small-scale producers often have no other choice to sell their coffee, or they do not know how much money their goods are really worth. The only international protection against this? The Fair Trade stamp.

The Fair Trade stamp ensures consumers around the world that the coffee they buy was not the product of child or forced labor, and that the producers were paid according to a reasonable minimum amount by the buyers. It also ensures that the producer's workers are paid a reasonable wage. In order to do this, unreliable middlemen are often eliminated, thus further safeguarding the producer's business.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "US Coffee Market," statista.com, <<http://www.statista.com/topics/1248/coffee-market/>>

<sup>2</sup> "2013 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, USD of Labor, <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/guatemala.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> "Coffee," Fair Trade USA, <<http://www.fairtradeusa.org/products-partners/coffee>>

The problem is, the Fair Trade stamp isn't targeting the right producers. Mexico is the largest producer of Fair Trade certified coffee with about 23% market share- for good reason, as 8 out of 10 Mexicans begin working under 14 years of age, and that has to end, but child labor is just as big of a problem in Guatemala, a much less publicized coffee producer. The Guatemalan coffee industry is not much smaller than Mexico's either, exporting to the US only 15 million USD worth less of coffee than Mexico in 2013. However, Guatemala only has 7 Fair Trade producers, while Mexico has 48.<sup>5</sup>

Guatemala is not receiving enough attention in the coffee industry and is overlooked by the fair trade organization, despite the amount of Guatemalan coffee imported into the US each year. I would like to be assigned in Guatemala to spread awareness to coffee consumers and Fair Trade stamp scouts about both Guatemalan coffee and the need for more Fair Trade certified producers there. This way, consumers of Guatemalan coffee will know to purchase only Fair Trade coffee, and avoid supporting the child labor business. Being able to write about Guatemalan fair trade coffee would show everyone how beneficial fair trade has been for the current fair trade producers in Guatemala, but at the same time, how brutal the conditions are for the small producers without the Fair Trade stamp.<sup>6</sup> To communicate these two different sides of Guatemalan coffee production, I would collect interviews from the precious few Fair Trade certified producers in Guatemala. asking them how their businesses have changed after fair trade, and interviews from producers without the fair trade stamp to see their working conditions and how much they are paid. However, I may have to keep the latter anonymous, in order to avoid

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<sup>5</sup> "2013 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor" (articles on Guatemala, Mexico, and Columbia), United States Department of Labor, <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/guatemala.htm>>

<sup>6</sup> "Effects of Fair Trade in Coffee," Fair Trade USA, <<http://fairtradeusa.org/products-partners/coffee>>

their middlemen coming after me- they would never want anyone putting an end their under-the-radar deceiving of the producers. But that is what I mean to do, show how terrible a majority of the Guatemalan coffee industry is, and how the fair trade stamp can change that. Then, I would be able to show how beneficial fair trade is.

Online, there are precious few articles that actually discuss the extent of Guatemalan child labor rather than passively mentioning it and moving on to more publicized countries with child labor in the coffee industry. There are dozens of despairing stories about young children buried in poverty in the Ivory Coast, picking coffee for up to 18 hours a day, their backs hunched from the heavy, grimy reed-woven baskets they must carry. They work under much of the same conditions as the children in Guatemala- but there are only a couple stories about Guatemalan children online- after almost an hour of searching, I was only able to find 2.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> Before I did any legitimate research on this topic, I never dreamed that the extent of Guatemala being overlooked could be this large, and I want to change that through writing a story on this issue.

The coffee industry doesn't pay enough attention to Guatemala; no one does. I want to spread awareness about Guatemala, because the children in Guatemala are just as important as the children in Brazil, or the children in the Ivory Coast, or anywhere else. And although the amount of awareness I can spread may not be large, a little bit more publicity about the child labor issues and lack of fair trade in Guatemala is one step closer to less child labor, and more fair trade.

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<sup>7</sup> "Children of Guatemala," Humanium.org, <<http://www.humanium.org/en/guatemala/>>

<sup>8</sup> "Guatemala: Cultural Paradise... or Child Slave Labor Haven?" IHS, <[http://ihscslnews.org/view\\_article.php?id=302](http://ihscslnews.org/view_article.php?id=302)>