

Interview with Blanca María Castro Gutiérrez of the International Women’s Coffee Alliance

Blanca María Castro Gutiérrez is Chapter Relation Manager for the International Women’s Coffee Alliance. With over 14 years of experience in the coffee sector, she talks about what brought her to the Alliance, its goals and challenges, and its growing membership. She also describes what particular issues women in the coffee industry are facing, and how the Alliance is helping them.

WIPO: Can you present yourself, and talk about the path that led you to coffee?

Blanca María Castro (BMC): My name is Blanca María Castro. I was born and raised in Guatemala City, but I was also very lucky to live abroad. I lived in Geneva for several years, working for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and in El Salvador. When I got back to Guatemala, I joined the Tourism Board of Guatemala before being hired by Guatemala’s National Coffee Association, ANACAFE. I did not know anything about coffee at that time and was wondering what I could do to support coffee growers in my country. ANACAFE turned out to be an amazing trip. They served as my mentors. This is where I learned everything I know about coffee, and where I earned the trust of coffee growers, which is key to developing any project or program. I worked for ANACAFE for five years and those were good years, prices were up, and we could develop wonderful marketing strategies and tools. We raised the awareness and understanding of coffee buyers about the realities of coffee production, the particularities of specialty coffee, and information that coffee consumers need to appreciate coffee even more.

I then started volunteering for the Guatemalan Chapter of the [International Women’s Coffee Alliance](#) (IWCA) and in parallel worked for the International Trade Center to support their “[She Trades](#)” program in eight African countries. I loved Africa but could witness the struggle. You need to be on the ground to understand what people are going through. I helped women coffee growers organize themselves to build a legal structure and get organized so they could participate in commercial and marketing training to gain market access, and to understand the coffee industry.

Six years ago, I started working as the first formal staff member of IWCA. Becoming the IWCA Chapter Relations Manager allowed me to widen my understanding of the human development around coffee both from the producing and commercial perspectives. The position of Executive Director has since been opened, and we are now four staff working for 28 chapters around the world from coffee consuming countries and coffee-producing countries.

WIPO: What are the main challenges met by women in your experience?

BMC: Women are facing the same challenges as men in the coffee industry, such as prices volatility, climate change, and lack of market access. However, beyond those issues, women also face specific issues, such as a lack of education, lack of representation in decision-making bodies, lack of legal access to property or land ownership, and social requirement and pressure to combine work and family responsibilities. The labor distribution between genders is unbalanced, and salaries are not the same. I was talking about women in the field, but the same situation occurs throughout the coffee industry, from baristas to roasters.

The industry is starting to realize that unbalance and some coffee farmers and growers are giving the same salary to all their workers. But those are individual initiatives. There are no legal incentives.

WIPO: What does IWCA and what are chapters?

BMC: IWCA was founded in 2003 by five women in the United States to support women in Central America, as a non-profit organization. The helped women to showcase their coffee and their products. I do not think the founders thought their organization would grow so much. We now have 28 chapters, and more are coming. All those chapters are formed under a Chapter Formation Protocol so they all have common rules and requirements to have a self-organized structure in their country.

Each chapter is either an association, a group of friends in coffee, or a cooperative, whoever meets our Chapter Formation Protocol's requirements. They can sign an MoU with IWCA and become an IWCA chapter.

They are established as a self-governed organization with projects and strategic plans, and IWCA is there to answer their needs. We ask the chapters to have a membership structure and encourage them to establish membership rights and fees. Some large chapters have set up a formal organization with administrative systems, which allows them to participate in coffee decision-making bodies in their country. We encourage chapters to start developing their leadership in their country before going a step further and knocking on the doors of international organizations.

IWCA is funded through donations and partnerships, either direct funding or in-kind donations.

WIPO: What are the most prominent requirements in the Chapter Formation Protocol

BMC: First, they need to socialize, form an organization that gathers women, and they need to prove that they have a community. We ask that they gather a minimum of five persons just to get it started. The second requirement is that they have to establish a legal non-profit organization, recognized by their country's law. In some countries, it proves impossible, such as in Vietnam, because this particular legal status does not exist. In that case, we made an exception and allowed this chapter to form a commercial entity, but demanded that all profits would come back to the organization.

In some countries, chapters feel the need to have a commercial entity and create cooperatives under the umbrella of the non-profit structure.

Also among requirements, the need to have a board of members and a rotating leadership in the group. We watch very closely the implementation of those requirements.

WIPO: Which kind of services those chapters are providing to their members

BMC: Mainly education, training, and workshops, from understanding how to calculate the cost of coffee production, to how to pay taxes, from learning English to the use organic fertilizers, to addressing diseases like coffee rust. With the COVID-19 crisis, those training and workshops had to move to a virtual space and IWCA can help chapters with online platforms. IWCA is currently working on a series of webinars to bring education and information to members, from understanding the coffee market, how it works, to how to decipher its complexity, how to anticipate prices fluctuations, and how to connect with coffee growers, coffee buyers, and traders.

WIPO: After 18 years are you able to measure the progress made in gender equality in the coffee industry in those 28 countries?

BMC: I do not have any metrics, but the unexpected success of the Alliance, becoming stronger by the year, is a sure sign of progress. Some fourteen additional organizations around the world are waiting to join, including from Italy, Panama, Papua New Guinea, and the United Kingdom. The five founders never imagined that chapters would bloom in 28 countries. It is thrilling, exciting, sometimes overwhelming, and for me a huge responsibility. I hope that one day we can have other IWCA Chapter Relations Managers, supporting in a more detailed way other regions in the world.

For women, no matter the differences in culture, races, ethnicities, languages, the challenges are always the same all over the world.

We have women organizations joining that have no link to coffee but want to join nonetheless to feel united with women meeting similar struggles because of their gender. We do not empower women, we support them so they can empower themselves. At the end of the day, empowerment comes from within.

WIPO: What is the importance of branding in the advice you provide to charters?

BMC: We need to create an awareness in these groups about the importance of identifying themselves to be competitive in the coffee market. All coffees have their distinctive value, but chapter members have to understand that they need to invest in this. During harvest season I tell them to get their camera out and take pictures of their coffees, flowers, mountains, cascades, that will differentiate your coffee from others. Then comes the branding, their name, their pride, their legacy. Most of the coffee growers sell their coffees and just want the money but if they want the opportunity to sell to their local market, it will happen through branding. They also need to understand that branding will not only promote but protect their products or services.

WIPO: How do you see the work of the Alliance in the next few years?

BMC: I strongly believe IWCA as a global organization realized its growing importance, and put in place a stronger structure and hiring staff. We are being recognized, and we are being invited to sit at the table of the big coffee organizations. We need to get stronger still, and I am encouraging the IWCA Board of Directors to open up to other directors who come from other regions. My dream Board of Directors would include people from the U.S., from Europe, from Africa, from Latin America, from Asia, from all over the world. So that we could really integrate all the coffee value chain.