

A close-up photograph showing three hands. One hand holds a white coffee cup with latte art, another holds a black coffee grinder, and a third holds another white coffee cup with latte art. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting like a cafe or coffee shop.

Women in Puerto Rican Coffee: Farmers, Leaders, and Visionaries



Women have always been central to Puerto Rican coffee — as harvest workers, as processors, as keepers of farming knowledge, and increasingly as farm owners, roasters, scientists, and industry leaders. For generations, their contributions were largely invisible in the public story of Puerto Rican coffee, which

tended to focus on hacienda owners and male farmers. That is changing. The modern specialty coffee movement in Puerto Rico features prominent women farmers, agronomists, and entrepreneurs whose work is shaping the industry's future. This article documents both the historical and contemporary roles of women in Puerto Rican coffee.

The Historical Invisibility

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, women played essential roles in Puerto Rican coffee that rarely appeared in the public record. Women picked cherries during harvest, often alongside their children and extended families. They sorted and cleaned coffee in processing areas. They cooked meals for seasonal workers during the long harvest season. They managed household finances that kept family farms economically viable. And they carried agricultural knowledge — about variety selection, fermentation timing, weather patterns, and plant health — that shaped decisions on thousands of small farms across the island.

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*Puerto Rican women coffee farmers caficultoras
hacienda mountains harvest*

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Despite this centrality, the formal structures of the coffee industry — hacienda ownership, export business, commodity trading, and regulatory bodies — were dominated by men. Women's contributions were recognized within families and local communities but rarely in the aggregated industry narrative. The women who inherited family farms as widows often continued operations with substantial skill, but they were treated as exceptions rather than representative of the broader female contribution to Puerto Rican coffee.

Vanessa Arroyo Sánchez: Jayuya Coffee Farmer

One of the most prominent women farmers in contemporary Puerto Rican coffee is Vanessa Arroyo Sánchez, who operates a substantial coffee farm in Jayuya with her husband Miguel Ángel Torres Díaz. The couple purchased the farm from Vanessa's family, carrying on a multi-generational coffee-farming tradition. Before Hurricane Maria, they had trained themselves in modern agronomic practices, planted 18 hectares of coffee, and operated their own seedling nursery.

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*Puerto Rico woman coffee farmer caficultora harvest
hands working*

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Hurricane Maria in 2017 wiped out half of their coffee acreage. Rather than giving up, Vanessa and Miguel rebuilt. Their farm became one of the early participants in the Hispanic Federation's Coffee Revitalization Initiative and a featured case study in TechnoServe's farmer training programs. Their story has been told in coverage by NBC News, Global Press Journal, Barista Magazine, and multiple international media outlets. Vanessa's visibility as a woman farmer on a multi-generational family operation has helped shift the public image of Puerto Rican coffee to better reflect the realities of who actually does the work.

Iris Jeannette: Adjuntas Survivor

Another prominent Puerto Rican woman farmer is Iris Jeannette, who operates a coffee farm in Adjuntas. Hurricane Maria destroyed more than 20,000 of her coffee trees, representing over \$100,000 in labor and investment. In interviews with national media, Iris described the emotional experience of watching decades of work disappear in a single afternoon: "To see all of the work, effort and money that you put in, just gone in a couple of hours, it was tough."

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Iris Jeannette on her coffee farm in Adjuntas Puerto Rico inspecting replanted seedlings

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Iris's continued presence in the industry — her decision to replant, her advocacy for increased government support for farmers, and her willingness to share her story publicly — has made her one of the more visible women in Puerto Rican coffee. She has spoken publicly about the gap between government recovery estimates and actual farm needs, arguing that Puerto Rico needed 18 million new trees to fully replace what Maria destroyed, rather than the 9-10 million that official projections called for. This kind of advocacy, rooted in direct farm experience, has influenced policy debates and funding decisions.

Women in Processing and Roasting

Beyond individual farms, women play prominent roles in Puerto Rican coffee processing and roasting. Several of the island's specialty roasters are led by women, who bring both technical expertise and entrepreneurial vision to the business of transforming green coffee into finished product. These operations often emphasize direct relationships with producers, quality-focused roasting profiles, and educational outreach to consumers — orientations that align with the broader specialty coffee movement globally.

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Puerto Rico woman roaster coffee roastery beans drum specialty

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Women-owned cafés and specialty retailers have multiplied across San Juan, Ponce, Mayagüez, and smaller Puerto Rican cities. These businesses serve as important intermediaries between producers and consumers, educating customers about origin, variety, and preparation while providing market channels for small specialty farms. The café owners often build direct relationships with women farmers, creating integrated value chains that support gender parity across the industry's various nodes.

Women Agronomists and Scientists

Women have become a significant presence in Puerto Rico's agricultural research and extension institutions. UPR-Mayagüez's College of Agricultural Sciences graduates increasing numbers of women students, many of whom pursue careers as agronomists, extension workers, researchers, and technical specialists. Some work directly with coffee; others apply their training to related crops or general agricultural development. Their presence in institutional roles shapes how research priorities are set and how technical assistance is delivered to farmers.

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Women agronomists at UPR Mayagüez conducting coffee research in a laboratory setting

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The Hispanic Federation's Coffee Revitalization Initiative intentionally included women in its technical team. TechnoServe's agronomic training programs engaged women farmers directly, recognizing that in many multi-generational farm households, the formal farm owner might be male but the day-to-day farm management might involve female partners significantly. Training programs that reach both men and women farmers have proven more effective than programs targeting only formal owners.

Cooperatives and Industry Leadership

Women hold leadership positions in several Puerto Rican coffee cooperatives, industry associations, and regulatory bodies. The Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture, the various regional coffee cooperatives, the Puerto Rico Coffee Industry Board, and specialty coffee trade organizations all include women among their leadership. This representation is increasing but not yet proportional — Puerto Rican coffee industry governance historically skews male in ways that the demographic reality of the farms does not.

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*Puerto Rico women coffee cooperative meeting farmers
Maricao leadership*

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Progress is visible but uneven. Industry events increasingly feature women speakers. Coffee competitions and quality evaluations include women judges. Coverage of the industry in specialty coffee media reflects women's contributions alongside men's. But structural barriers — particularly around land ownership, capital access, and inheritance patterns — continue to disadvantage women in ways that more visible symbolic representation does not fully address.

Barriers Women Face

Women in Puerto Rican coffee face several persistent barriers. Land ownership has historically passed through male inheritance lines in many families, meaning that formal ownership of farms often rests with men even when women contribute substantially to farm operations. Access to credit has similarly favored male applicants, particularly at banks evaluating lending decisions based on formal ownership and traditional collateral structures.



Safety and logistics present additional challenges. Working alone on remote mountain farms, operating heavy equipment, and traveling to distant markets all present different considerations for women than for men. The aging demographic of Puerto Rican farm owners intersects with gender in complex ways — older widows often find themselves responsible for farms they may or may not want to continue operating, while younger women farmers face questions about whether to continue in an industry their mothers and grandmothers worked in but rarely owned.

Support Networks and Programs

Various programs have emerged to support women specifically in Puerto Rican coffee. The Hispanic Federation's broader gender equity work includes coffee-sector components. Some philanthropic funders have prioritized women-owned farms for seedling distribution, training, and financial assistance. International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) has established a chapter presence in Puerto Rico, providing peer networking, educational programs, and advocacy for women in the industry.

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*Puerto Rico woman caficultora coffee harvest
cherries Maricao Adjuntas*

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These support structures matter because they address both immediate needs and longer-term institutional barriers. Peer networking helps women farmers share strategies for challenges specific to their circumstances. Targeted funding can help women access capital they might not obtain through traditional channels. Policy advocacy can reshape institutional structures around inheritance, land ownership, and credit access. The combination of these approaches is gradually building a more equitable industry.

The Generational Shift

Younger women entering Puerto Rican coffee today face a different landscape than their mothers and grandmothers did. They are more likely to pursue formal agricultural education. They have more access to capital through philanthropic and government programs. They are more visible in media coverage and industry events. They are more networked with global specialty coffee communities through social media, international conferences, and trade organizations.



This generational shift does not solve all the structural barriers that older women farmers faced, but it does create more pathways into the industry for women who choose coffee as a career. Specialty coffee, with its emphasis on quality, origin, and direct relationships, offers particular opportunities for women farmers whose smaller, more carefully managed operations align well with specialty market preferences. The future of Puerto Rican coffee will be shaped substantially by the women currently entering the industry, and their contributions will continue to deserve the visibility they have historically been denied.

Why This Matters

Recognizing women's central role in Puerto Rican coffee is not merely a matter of fairness or representation — it is essential to understanding how the industry actually functions and to planning for its future. Women's contributions to farm management,

processing, marketing, cooperative leadership, research, and policy advocacy are real and essential. The industry cannot succeed without them. Public narratives, institutional structures, and market practices that fail to account for this reality are less accurate and less effective than those that do.

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Diverse group of Puerto Rican women from the coffee industry representing farmers, roasters, scientists and leaders

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For consumers, supporting Puerto Rican coffee includes supporting the women who make it possible. Purchasing from women-owned farms, women-led roasters, and women-owned cafés directs income toward operations that have historically been undercapitalized. Seeking out stories of women in Puerto Rican coffee counters the historical invisibility. Advocating for policies that address structural barriers — particularly around land ownership and credit access — helps create more equitable conditions for the next generation of Puerto Rican coffee workers.

Key Facts — Women in Puerto Rican Coffee

- Women have historically filled harvest, processing, and farm management roles

- Prominent contemporary women farmers include Vanessa Arroyo Sánchez (Jayuya) and Iris Jeannette (Adjuntas)
- Hispanic Federation's Coffee Revitalization Initiative included gender equity components
- International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) has a Puerto Rico chapter
- UPR-Mayagüez graduates increasing numbers of women agronomists
- Women-owned specialty roasters and cafés are multiplying across San Juan and other cities
- Structural barriers remain around land inheritance and credit access
- Targeted programs address some barriers through funding and training
- Younger generation of women entering Puerto Rican coffee face better conditions than predecessors
- Women's contributions are increasingly recognized in specialty coffee media coverage

Frequently Asked Questions

Who are the most prominent women farmers in Puerto Rican coffee? Vanessa Arroyo Sánchez operates a multi-generational coffee farm in Jayuya with her husband. Iris Jeannette runs a coffee farm in Adjuntas. Both have been featured in international media as examples of women farmers rebuilding after Hurricane Maria.

Have women always worked in Puerto Rican coffee? Yes, throughout Puerto Rican coffee history women have been essential as harvest workers, processors, farm managers, and holders of agricultural knowledge. Their formal ownership and industry leadership roles were historically limited by social and legal structures, but their practical contributions have always been central.

What barriers do women face in Puerto Rican coffee? Primary barriers include historical patterns of male inheritance of land, limited access to agricultural credit, underrepresentation in industry governance, and safety and logistical challenges of

remote mountain farm work. Programs addressing these barriers are growing but structural change is slow.

Are there women-specific programs in Puerto Rican coffee? Yes. The International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) has a Puerto Rico chapter. The Hispanic Federation's Coffee Revitalization Initiative included gender equity components. Some philanthropic funders prioritize women-owned farms for support. UPR-Mayagüez supports women students in agricultural sciences.

How can consumers support women in Puerto Rican coffee? Purchasing from women-owned farms and women-led specialty roasters directs income to historically under-capitalized operations. Seeking out coverage of women farmers counters their historical invisibility. Supporting policy changes around land ownership and credit access contributes to structural improvement.

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- [Puerto Rico Coffee Today: The 2026 State of the Industry](#)
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- [Coffee Revitalization: Hispanic Federation, Nespresso, and Puerto Rico's Recovery](#)
- [Jayuya: Taíno Mountain Coffee](#)
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Watch: Krys Rodríguez of Hacienda Doña Patria in Maricao — a Puerto Rican woman caficultora on climate-adapted shade-grown coffee

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