

Emilse

Emilse is a sugar cane grower and seamstress from Costa Rica.

She is 65 years old, and married, with six children.



Her daily life

Emilse came to the sugar-cane farm when she married at the age of 19, after her youth spent as a seamstress in San José. It was difficult to adjust. 'There was no water, no road, no light. I was used to houses packed side by side. Here there was no one around me. It was too sudden a change. I felt all alone.' Her appetite for hard work helped her find her feet. Villagers now bring her cloth for her to make into men's trousers. Apart from sewing, housework and working in the processing plant, she also works in the fields carrying the long canes to the cart.

In the evening, she goes to bed early. 'I don't like television. So I go to bed. I've never liked television.' However, if she has 'a few moments' she reads anything that her children bring back to the house - usually before they do. Recently she's been reading people management textbooks, because her son is an assistant manager in San José. At weekends, some of the 300 members of her family come and visit from San José. 'It used to be like a hotel, I was always cooking. They liked tortillas - a mountain of tortillas! But if I didn't like it, I wouldn't do it.'

Her passion

Emilse's passion is hard work. She sews men's trousers for part of the day, but her real pleasure comes from manual labour in the hot, steaming environment of the family's sugar-processing plant. She can't explain why - she just likes tough jobs. 'There are lots of men who don't like it but I do. I help in all the jobs - feeding cane into the shredder, stoking the furnace, ladling the syrup. I come from a family where we're all like this. I've got a sister who helps her husband on a building site.' Recently, Emilse was in hospital, lying in an oxygen tent with a lung condition. Now she's convalescing, peppering herself up with bursts of sewing. Her daughter sighs: 'It's hard work, but she likes it. What can you do?'

A better deal

All small farmers who supply to the Fairtrade market belong to democratically organised groups. In this case, Emilse's husband was one of the fifteen founders of local farmer's association, Asoprodulce, which now sells 60 per cent of its crop to the organic Fairtrade sugar market. She describes the change to supplying to the Fairtrade market as a '100 per cent improvement'. 'Before this, we didn't have any security. There had been a period when sales were very bad.'

With regular sales, the family could make further improvements to their processing plant, beyond those that were needed to get organic certification. Asoprodulce also provides farmers with loans and expert advice. 'No-one else offers these facilities,' says Emilse, 'You can borrow money very easily.' And if she had more money? She would buy a bigger processing plant. 'So we could process more. That's all we need. We wouldn't need to ask for more.'

His aspiration, he says, is only 'a slightly better future'. He'd like to buy his own land; currently, most of his farm belongs to his father. 'I'd like my sons to be able to carry on cultivating cane, so they don't have to go and find other work. They all help me already. This one' - he points to eight year old Juan José - 'when he's not at school, he comes and helps carry cane to the cart.'