

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF VOLUNTARY SUSTAINABILITY SYSTEMS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING

A STRATEGIC EVIDENCE REVIEW

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### Suggested citation

Morgan, M & Zaremba, H. (2023). The Contribution of Voluntary Sustainability Systems to Women's Participation and Leadership in Decision-Making: A Strategic Evidence Review. Working Paper. Bioversity International: Rome, Italy.

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September 2023

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Marlène Elias for her substantive inputs in shaping the ideas and content of this paper and to our ISEAL colleagues Vidya Rangan and Eleanor Radford for their comments on the first draft. Thanks also to Leisa Perch for her wonderful graphic. This work is part of the [CGIAR Research Initiative on Gender Equality](#). We would like to thank all the funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund: <https://www.cgiar.org/funders/trust-fund/>.

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## Executive Summary

As more Voluntary Sustainability Standards/Systems (VSS) increase their efforts to address gender inequality in agri-food value chains, the timing is ripe to reflect on progress to inform future strategies and research. This paper revisits the body of evidence on VSS and gender equality through the lens of SDG5.5 specifically, to identify if and especially *how* VSS may support women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in decision-making in rural communities. The objectives of this strategic evidence review were two-fold: first, to review what the existing research on VSS and gender equality reveals on the contributions made specifically to women's participation and leadership in decision-making; and secondly, to identify knowledge gaps to inform the direction of future research on this topic.

### Key Findings

Overall, the body of evidence shows that women producers are rarely able to achieve full and effective participation in decision-making or have equal opportunities for leadership, either within producer organizations or in the rural communities where VSS operate. Though VSS have led to some measurable benefits on *certain aspects* of women's empowerment for *some* women, it has rarely translated to meaningful participation or equal opportunities for leadership. This is unsurprising given that achieving SDG5.5 requires transforming deeply rooted barriers to change, including: discriminatory social norms and practices; unequal access to productive assets and resources; fear of harassment and violence; and a range of personal and relational constraints. These barriers are not unique to achieving the desired outcomes of VSS, but to all initiatives that target gender equality.

Certain facets of VSS engagement have been shown to present particular obstacles but VSS can and have taken proactive approaches to addressing some of these barriers to enhance participation in decision-making. The paper identifies a variety of targeted approaches employed by VSS with evidence of contributions to enhancing women's active participation and leadership in decision-making. These can be categorized into 3 overarching approaches:

- Changes in organizational structure, policies, and/or activities;
- Targeted training to build leadership and consciousness; and
- Increases in women's assets.

The evidence shows that VSS can play a role in changing some of the attitudes, behaviours, skills and practices that undermine women's effective participation and opportunities for leadership in decision-making – but their impact ultimately depends on several factors, including the bundle of strategies used to achieve those changes and the context. The documented increases in women's leadership are small and women almost always remain in the minority. Even the best cases do not come close to achieving the lofty goal of SDG5.5 to ensure *equal* opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. This seems to be a particularly challenging and difficult aspect of women's empowerment to achieve, as compared to other aspects of women's empowerment that VSS tend to support (such as economic inclusion and higher incomes).

## Takeaways

Based on the evidence, the review identified several suggestions for VSS and related stakeholders seeking to contribute to SDG5.5 and gender equality in general. This includes:

### **1. Strategies should be tailored to increase the participation and leadership of women in all their diversity**

There is a need to acknowledge heterogeneity among women which results in certain groups of women being over- or under-represented in VSS-related interventions. It is critical that VSS develop strategies that recognize differences among women, identify the needs and realities of different groups of women and tailor interventions that support the participation and leadership of a diversity of women. Women-targeted interventions like trainings or women-only spaces are recommended to encourage women's participation, but also risk elite capture.

### **2. Strategies should be targeted towards multiple and reinforcing aspects of women's empowerment and gender equality**

VSS interventions targeting one aspect of women's empowerment (especially economic empowerment) should not be assumed to automatically 'spill over' to other dimensions of empowerment or to different levels of decision-making. Complementary approaches are required that encompass different and reinforcing aspects of women's empowerment in a holistic way. If the goal is to increase women's effective participation in decision-making then discriminatory perceptions and dominant gender relations have to be targeted directly.

### **3. Strategies should seek to address the structural barriers that limit *all* women**

If VSS want to extend their reach beyond more than a few exceptional individual women and support changes that go wider, deeper and are sustained, they will need to work more on addressing the structural barriers limiting women's participation in decision-making at different levels through the use of 'Gender Transformative Approaches'. This means interventions that look beyond individual-level change to target the discriminatory informal and formal institutions, systems and structures that limit *all* women. This could involve advocating for formal laws that secure women's land rights or for policies that support the redistribution of unpaid care responsibilities; it could also involve working with partners to facilitate group reflections on the impact of discriminatory sociocultural norms for both men and women and engaging male allies to advocate against gender-based violence in their communities.

### **4. Strategies will need to involve partnerships and engagement with key stakeholders**

A holistic approach is essential to achieving gender equality but no one VSS can directly implement interventions at all levels and regarding all aspects of gender equality. Instead, VSS will need to reflect on their unique strengths and potential contributions to gender equality vis-à-vis potential partners and the larger system that they are embedded in. VSS can not expect to address all the structural causes of gender inequality but are well-placed to influence the debate and draw public attention to social injustices along agrifood supply chains.

## **5. Strategies should respond to what women want**

The assumption that women want to be leaders needs to be challenged and examined. Women leaders may have to (or perceive they will have to) make significant sacrifices to take on such roles, including increased tension in their households or communities, less time on food crops, fear of harassment, increased labour burdens and associated time poverty. Any women's leadership initiative needs to understand and strive to reduce the costs and trade-offs of leadership and an enabling environment created that allows leadership to be perceived as a safe, beneficial and empowering option. It is critical to speak to women being targeted by leadership initiatives to understand whether – and more importantly, under what conditions – they want to assume leadership roles. Centring local women's voices (individual and collective) and responding to their needs, wishes and priorities is not just important for shaping VSS strategies related to women's leadership, but for the design of VSS in general. Rural women's representation and leadership in decision-making should be embodied in VSS themselves.

## **6. Strategies require more evidence and different research methods to understand women's participation and leadership in decision-making**

Existing evidence on VSS contributions to women's decision-making is sparse, lacking depth and makes it difficult to generalize across value chains and contexts. There are multiple suggestions for how to improve the evidence base. First, more evidence is needed, especially dedicated studies that explore the impact of VSS on women's full and effective participation and leadership and how change occurs. Secondly, different types of measurement approaches will be required to adequately capture women's full, equal and effective participation and leadership in decision-making in different spheres, as well as aspects of individual and collective women's leadership. Whatever the chosen approach, research methods and monitoring tools will need to detect small, slow and potentially negative changes, changes at different levels and for different groups of women. They should also centre women's voices and perspectives so that VSS strategies are led by targeted women's needs and priorities. Responding to the research gaps will be critical to supporting VSS to develop and refine evidence-based strategies in future.

## Introduction

An array of global environmental and social issues including the climate crisis, conflicts, poverty and inequality present key challenges to global food security and call for concerted effort to support more sustainable and resilient agri-food systems (CGIAR System Organization 2021). Resilience is not achieved, however, unless it is resilience for all; development pathways towards resilient agri-food systems must therefore be inclusive, equitable and just (Schipper et al. 2022, Allan 2022, Karlsson 2018). When climate adaptation projects are not explicitly linked to gender equality goals, for example, this oversight has been shown to exacerbate inequalities and vulnerability, leading to maladaptive practices. Resilient agri-food system initiatives, then, must strive to address multi-dimensional distributional issues and to do so in ways that challenge broader structural inequalities and uneven power dynamics. This requires targeting socially unjust *systems* that result in unequal distribution of impacts and opportunities for resilience rather than merely targeting marginalized groups or individuals for inclusion in unjust systems (Schipper et al. 2022).

Gender equality, in particular, has been identified as a key lever for achieving greater food security and more just, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems for all (Njuki et al. 2021, Bryan et al. 2022). Toward this end, gender-transformative and nutrition-sensitive agroecological approaches have been found to enable more resilient food systems by increasing women's leadership and participation in decision-making (Schipper et al. 2022). Overall, however, Njuki et al. (2021) find that **women's leadership and decision-making at all levels constitute a particularly under-researched pathway to gender equality and justice in agri-food systems, as well as to other desired outcomes of food systems (including resilience)**. Their review highlights evidence that women's higher participation and bargaining power in household and community decision-making can lead to more resilient agricultural livelihoods. The authors call for more targeted research on, and investment in, interventions that facilitate improvements in women's participation in decision-making and leadership at all levels.

To respond to this knowledge gap, **this paper investigates how one mode of agri-food system development (and its associated assemblage of actors) can support 'women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making', to achieve more just and resilient agri-food systems**. Specifically, the paper draws on secondary sources to consider if and how voluntary sustainability systems (VSS) contribute to women's meaningful participation, representation and leadership in decision-making in agri-food systems.

Given the various interpretations and indicators of 'women's participation', this paper starts from the definition provided in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, the wording of SDG5.5 is to: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life".

## Why Voluntary Sustainability Systems?

Voluntary Sustainability Standards/Systems (VSS)<sup>1</sup> are market-based mechanisms developed by private parties (such as NGOs) designed to address social and environmental challenges by defining responsible practices and measuring performance of actors in value chains. They often incorporate internationally agreed rights and principles and require compliance with national laws and regulations, but often go beyond these to raise the bar on sustainable practices in many fields. Labels and certifications, monitored and endowed by a third-party organization, often signal adherence to a voluntary standard. The requirements of a VSS can refer to product quality or attributes, as well as production and processing methods and transportation. In the agricultural sector, most VSS focus at the producer level; as such, most literature on VSS impacts focus on this level as well (Rubio-Jovel 2022).

VSS have proliferated since the 1990s, with more than 400 certification schemes now in place (ibid). Over 300 of these are included in a [Standards Map](#) hosted by International Trade Centre, which shows that VSS cover a number of sectors, including agriculture, textile and garments, consumer products, forestry, mining and services. The Standards Map includes VSS developed by business groups (e.g., the Responsible Business Alliance), civil society organizations, multi-stakeholder bodies, government entities or international organizations (e.g., US Organic, FAO Codex Alimentarius) and some firm-level standards (e.g., Unilever Sustainable Agriculture Code) (Schleifer et al. 2022).

In global agri-food supply chains, sustainability standards have gained importance over time and have been particularly influential for certain commodities - especially coffee and cocoa (Meemken et al. 2021). For most other agri-food sectors, they are of marginal importance, currently affecting a small number of farmers and relatively little agricultural land globally. In certain contexts, however, they provide a stable presence and have a unique standing among farmers, private actors, government agencies and other stakeholders along high-value supply chains (Foundjem-Tita et al. 2016). Across the board, the effects of sustainability standards still have high policy relevance given their prevalence and spread which affects increasing numbers of farmers and other supply chain actors. Moreover, according to Meemken et al. (2021) the most important contribution of sustainability standards is their “potential to influence the debate and draw public attention to social and environmental injustices along global agri-food supply chains” (7).

Voluntary Sustainability Standards have been gaining attention from governments, which are increasingly recognizing them as tools to achieve economic objectives, such as increasing farmers’ revenues, and to advance more sustainable production and consumption practices in line with the SDGs (Bermúdez 2021). Indeed, Schleifer et al. (2022) argue that where the policy priorities of VSS align with the SDGs there may be “windows of opportunity to generate productive private-public interactions for sustainable development” (8). The SDGs most widely covered by VSS activities are SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Bissinger et al. 2020). An overrepresentation of outcome or intermediate impact variables related to SDG2 (relative to the other SDGs) was also found in a recent systematic review of VSS impacts on SDGs in the coffee sector, especially related to income, productivity and sustainable agricultural practices (Rubio-Jovel 2022).

But there are also growing linkages between VSS requirements and SDG5 (Gender Equality), as VSS are now making an effort to address gender inequalities – though this has not always been the case

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<sup>1</sup> VSS typically refer to Voluntary Sustainability Standards, though the ISEAL Alliance has more recently used ‘Systems’.



(Smith et al. 2019, ISEAL-BSR 2020, UNCTAD 2022). Schleifer et al. (2022) find that of the people-centred SDGs, both SDG1 and SDG5 are very well-covered. The ITC Standards Map includes 1650 criteria, of which at least 20 criteria are mapped to the 'Gender' theme (see theme criteria in Annex 2). Bissinger et al.'s (2020) analysis of the ITC Standards Map showed that 136 of the 270 standards included in their review linked to at least one target of SDG5. The most popular target within SDG5 was SDG5.2 (eliminating violence against women and girls), with 122 VSS aiming to address this. The second most popular was SDG5.5, the subject of this paper, with 105 VSS including some facet in their standard criteria. Not all SDG5 targets are covered, however, as they are seen to be largely beyond the scope of VSS<sup>2</sup>.

Drilling down further into the ITC Standards Map<sup>3</sup>, there are at least 58 private verification / certification standards related to agricultural production that map to SDG5 (Gender Equality). Of these, 51 report having criteria related to the gender themes of 'Violence and Harassment' (which includes criteria on non-discrimination based on gender) and 47 have gender-related 'policies' (defined as a general principle respecting equal rights for men and women and/or policies and initiatives that respect equal opportunities on the basis of gender in the workplace and in interacting with local communities). Related to SDG5.5 specifically, just over one-half (32) report under the theme "Gender - Leadership" which means reporting criteria related to any or all of the following:

- Female workers' access to training programs,
- Incentives for women to develop their careers (e.g., specific training),
- Ensuring participation of women/minorities in management,
- Increased access to finance and support services for women entrepreneurs, and
- Development assistance policies which promote the economic role of women.

In summary, VSS provide a mode of agri-food supply chain development with global coverage and increasing spread, as well as public policy relevance. Most VSS in the agri-food sector aim to support the achievement of several SDGs though not equally, with a historically greater focus on economic growth or environmental sustainability, for example, than gender equality. However, that seems to be changing with **more VSS developing criteria and strategies to address gender inequality generally and women's participation and opportunities for leadership in decision-making more specifically**. This means **the timing is ripe to inform those strategies** by reflecting on what VSS have or can contribute to achieving gender equality in agri-food systems, and specifically, on what we know about how VSS support women's meaningful participation and leadership in all levels of decision-making in agri-food value chains and rural communities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The 9 targets that constitute SDG5 can be accessed here: <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/5-gender-equality/>

<sup>3</sup> ITC Standards Map accessed here: <https://www.standardmap.org/en/home> (4 August 2023)

<sup>4</sup> In this paper we use 'supply chain' or 'value chain' interchangeably, recognizing they are not linear 'chains' and actually a "complex assemblage[ ] co-produced by a broad set of actors, including socially differentiated farmers...[who] always operate in relation to one another" (Gengenbach et al 2017, 6).

## *Assessing the impact of VSS on gender equality*

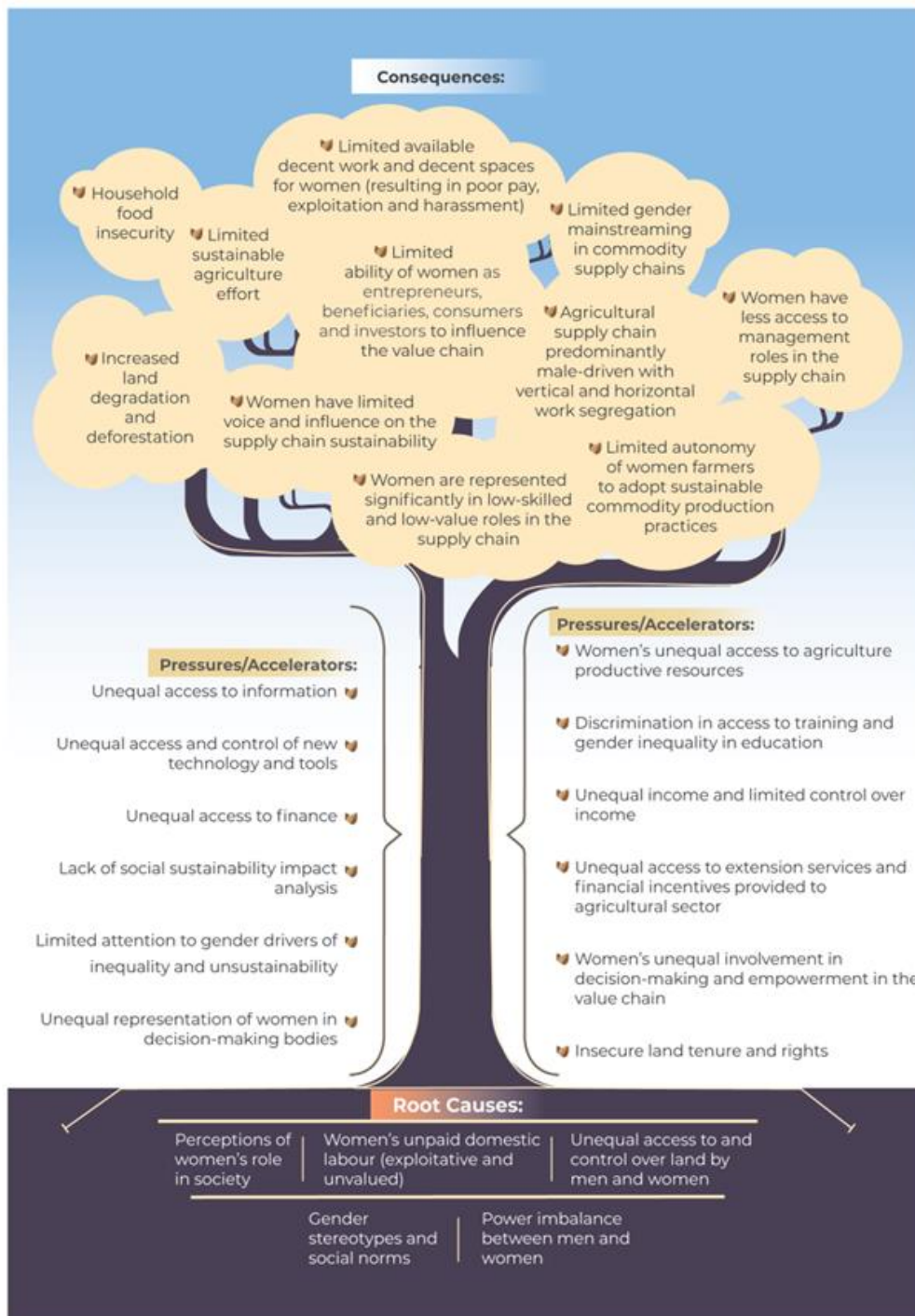
Over the last few decades, researchers have investigated the contributions of VSS to gender equality, women's empowerment and/or women's rights and there have been several efforts to comprehensively review, assess and summarize the existing research evidence on VSS and gender equality as well (including Darko et al. 2017, Gallagher et al. 2020, Günther et al 2022, Jodrell and Kaoukii 2020, Oya et al. 2017, Rubio-Jovel 2022, Sexsmith 2017, Sexsmith 2019, Smith et al 2019, Smith 2013, Smith 2020, Terstappen et al. 2013, UNCTAD 2022). There have also been related research contributions on the gender equality aspects of agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations more broadly (such as Kaaria et al. 2016, Lecoutere 2017, Gerli 2015) that are relevant to the review given the role that VSS have in shaping the policies of cooperatives and producer organizations.

There seems to be a consensus that *in general* VSS have had a minimal impact on gender inequality (Smith 2020). This is largely because most standards do not specifically mention gender equality (apart from a general clause on non-discrimination) or make efforts to address gender inequality through their standards or programmes. As such, they end up replicating existing gender inequalities in the value chains and communities that they reach and sometimes even exacerbate inequalities (Smith 2013, Smith et al. 2019). For those few VSS that have taken a more strategic and proactive approach to addressing gender and other social inequalities in value chains, progress has been slow or non-existent given the structural and deeply entrenched root causes of gender inequalities. Perch (2019) provides a good visual synthesis of the root causes underlying gender inequality in agriculture (Figure 1).

However, a scan of the empirical evidence identifies a more mixed and nuanced picture. First, **VSS are varied in their commitment, actions and performance on gender equality** (Smith et al. 2019, ISEAL-BSR 2020, UNCTAD 2022). Despite the general conclusions concerning gender equality across all VSS, there are a small number of VSS that have taken more strategic approaches to gender equality, including specifically targeting gender equality, piloting ways to address key gender issues in value chains and adapting their approaches. Fairtrade – one of the best known VSS - has been studied far more than any other VSS related to gender equality, in part because the network itself has committed to assessing its progress towards gender equality outcomes (e.g., Gallagher et al. 2020). There is important learning for other VSS on what works or not from the more targeted and intentional approaches deployed by specific VSS in addressing gender equality, even if the scale is small or progress has been minimal.

Second, it is well-documented that **VSS lead to differential impacts on women (and therefore on gender relations) because women themselves are diverse** (Smith et al. 2019). Women are not a homogenous group and may be more or less interested or capable of participating in or benefitting from VSS, depending on their social locations or positionalities in their households, communities and societies. These differences, for example, may be linked to age, marital status, education, class, ethnicity, and so on (Smith 2013). Assessing the impact of VSS on gender equality, then, requires a textured understanding of the 'who', or rather which individuals or groups are positioned to benefit from VSS initiatives, how exclusionary practices are addressed and how this affects the prospect of achieving gender equality outcomes.

Figure 1 Problem Tree on gender and agriculture based on select literature (Perch 2019, p.4)



Third, VSS can lead to **differentiated impacts on different constitutive elements of gender equality**, leading to seemingly positive increases in gender equality alongside negative changes to existing rights for women (Lyon et al. 2010). It is critical, then, to better understand how different elements of gender equality interrelate. The question then may be less of a dichotomous 'Do VSS lead to increases in gender equality? (yes/no)', and more of 'What areas of gender equality have VSS contributed to or not?', 'How and in what order did changes towards gender equality occur?', 'Does one indicator of gender equality reinforce or conflict with another, and how?', etc. Approaching the

evidence with these more nuanced questions in mind can support the elaboration of more sophisticated impact pathways for VSS interested in adopting a gender strategy.

The goal of this paper is **to revisit the body of evidence on VSS and gender equality through the lens of SDG5.5, to identify if and especially *how* VSS may support women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in decision-making in rural communities.** Cognizant of the nuances highlighted above, it will not be striving to make simple generalizations about the impact of VSS on women’s participation and leadership but rather to understand the breadth of the evidence available and to identify knowledge gaps that could inform future primary research. This will necessarily include understanding: the variety of approaches that have been studied; how these may be more or less effective for different groups of women; and in what ways these approaches have influenced different constitutive elements of gender equality, as well as the interrelationships between these (e.g., the role of VSS in women’s participation and leadership in decision-making vis-à-vis other indicators of gender equality), and gender equality outcomes as a whole.

## Methodology

A ‘rapid realist review’ (Sutton et al. 2019) of literature was chosen to deliver a useful and actionable analysis in the time available. A purposive and iterative search method was employed to identify relevant studies, first using key search terms in Google Scholar then snowballing by checking reference lists to identify commonly cited and relevant articles. The search prioritized:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles as well as robust grey literature (in particular, reports and evaluations with transparent and appropriate research designs);
- Relatively recent articles (limited to the last 15 years: 2007-2022);
- Distinct empirical studies focused on VSS in agri-food systems (thus eliminating articles on VSS impacts on gender in crafts, for example), and specifically on smallholder production systems (as opposed to hired labour or large plantation settings).

As several comprehensive reviews have already been completed on the wider topic of VSS and gender equality, it was possible to corroborate the final list of included studies with several key review papers (especially Jodrell and Kaoukii 2020, Oya et al. 2017, Sexsmith 2019, Smith et al. 2019, UNCTAD 2022). The final 25 empirical studies selected (with summaries) can be found in Annex 1. It is important to note that this compiled list of empirical studies does not include the several overarching reviews and syntheses of the larger body of evidence on VSS and gender (cited above). Regardless, the analytical contributions of the reviews also inform this paper and are highlighted throughout.

## Findings

In addition to the above criteria, **the 25 empirical studies were selected due to having findings (however minor) relevant to the research question on VSS impact on women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership.** They were not selected to include or be representative of all Voluntary Sustainability Standards in the agri-food sector or the value chains that VSS shape. **Nearly all the studies feature findings related to one specific VSS (Fairtrade),** including several where other VSS were overlapping or contrasted (Organic, UTZ<sup>5</sup> and Rainforest Alliance). Only 2 of the 25 case studies did not involve Fairtrade and looked at Organic and UTZ, respectively. In terms of commodity focus, the vast majority study the coffee value chain and specifically smallholder coffee production and coffee cooperatives, though a handful of studies focus on smallholder cocoa, tea and, to a lesser extent, banana production.<sup>6</sup> The overrepresentation of studies related to Fairtrade and coffee production is commonly found in reviews of VSS impact. Traldi (2021) similarly found a mismatch between what is certified and what is studied, with some standards and crops overrepresented (also Fairtrade and coffee) in the literature and others under-represented or not studied at all.

Overall, **the body of evidence shows that women producers are rarely able to achieve full and effective participation in decision-making or have equal opportunities for leadership,** either within producer organizations and cooperatives or in the rural communities where VSS operate. Though VSS have led to some measurable benefits on *certain aspects* of women's empowerment (especially on economic inclusion and higher incomes) for *some* women, it has rarely translated to meaningful participation, representation or leadership for women in rural organizations engaged with VSS.

Case studies of certified small-scale producer organizations across different countries and value chains show that **women are less likely than men to be registered members and, if they are members, less likely to participate actively** (Blowfield and Dolan 2010, Bullock et al. 2018, Meemken and Qaim 2018, Stathers and Gathuthi 2013, Sutton 2019). This means that women members are less likely to attend meetings, participate in activities, participate in decision-making in the organization (e.g., around the spending of the Fairtrade Premium) or take up leadership roles such as committee or board positions (Bacon 2010, Fairtrade Foundation 2015, Gallagher et al. 2020, Lyon et al. 2010, Mauthofer and Santos 2022, Sen 2014). Male dominance in the governance of Fairtrade cooperatives and the larger value chain can even unintentionally strengthen existing patriarchal relations (Sen 2014). Foundjem-Tita et al. (2016) provide a few insights into women's participation and leadership as part of a larger baseline study. They find that though women represented a decent proportion of the members (37%, on average) of the 4 certified cooperatives sampled, this did not translate into proportional participation in general assemblies (women comprised 17% of the assemblies on average) or representation on boards (20% of board positions). The women that did hold positions were mostly activity organizers for women or ordinary committee members, not in meaningful leadership positions like chairpersons.

This is not a surprising finding. Achieving women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in rural communities requires

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<sup>5</sup> In 2018 the UTZ certification program merged with the Rainforest Alliance and no longer exists as a distinct certification scheme.

<sup>6</sup> The focus on smallholder production lends more to these commodity supply chains. Including studies related to the impact of VSS on gender in large plantation/hired labour settings would also include other crops, like horticulture or floriculture.

transforming deeply rooted, reinforcing and enduring causes of gender inequality – a tall order for VSS seeking to make an impact in this area.

### *Barriers to change*

The breadth and depth of barriers to achieving changes in women's participation and leadership in decision-making, let alone meaningful changes that pave the way for and reflect true equality, are thoroughly covered in the VSS literature. These barriers are the result of gender inequalities that manifest in numerous, overlapping ways at individual, relational and structural levels and are endemic in rural communities around the world.<sup>7</sup> They present challenges to women's economic and political participation in general and specifically to women (in all their diversity) joining, actively participating in and benefitting from agricultural producer groups and cooperatives, engaged with VSS or otherwise (Kaaria et al. 2016, Dohmwirth and Liu 2020, Smith et al. 2019). They include:

- Discriminatory sociocultural norms and practices that limit women's roles, responsibilities, skills, mobility, and more. As a result, women are less educated or skilled, more often illiterate, less mobile, less confident in their skills, less trusted for their technical or leadership skills and have less experience. Men are more often seen as responsible for generating income, selling crops and taking on leadership and decision-making positions. Women have greater or sole responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, resulting in less or no time to take up paid economic opportunities or participate actively in meetings or in leadership or decision-making positions (Blowfield and Dolan 2010, Bullock et al. 2018, Fairtrade Foundation 2015, Gallagher et al. 2020, Hanson et al. 2012, Lyon 2010, Nelson et al. 2013, Smith et al. 2019, Sutton 2019, and others).
- Unequal access to productive assets and resources, which excludes many women from the services and organizations through which VSS are implemented and/or make it more difficult to invest in certain commodities (Blowfield and Dolan 2010, Bullock et al. 2018, Gallagher et al. 2020, Hanson et al. 2012, Sexsmith 2017, 2019, Terstappen et al. 2013).
- Fear of harassment and violence, which limits women – particularly when lacking the endorsement of their spouses, families or other community members and prevents them from attending meetings away from home or at night (Lyon et al. 2010).
- Personal or relational constraints, such as women's individual circumstances and choices (shaped by their positionality relative to the barriers above), lack of interest or awareness in potential benefits, increased tension in households and direct opposition from husbands or cooperative leaders in their participation (Fairtrade Foundation 2015, Hanson et al. 2012, Sen 2014).

These barriers are clearly not unique to achieving the desired outcomes of VSS, but to all initiatives that target gender equality. **Certain facets of VSS engagement have been shown to present particular obstacles given existing inequalities.** For example, gender-blind rules or practices of producer organizations associated with VSS, such as narrow membership criteria, high registration fees, inconvenient meeting times or lack of quotas or women-only spaces, can make it more difficult

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<sup>7</sup> Gender inequalities are endemic everywhere, not just in rural communities. But there is evidence that cities have higher levels of women's representation than rural areas. Also, negative attitudes towards women's leadership are more prevalent in rural areas. Recent data collected by the World Values Survey in 47 countries shows that an average of 47 per cent of rural residents consider that men make better politicians than women, as compared to 34 per cent of urban residents.

for women to join or benefit from VSS efforts and support a ‘vicious circle’ of male dominance in VSS that reproduces or exacerbates inequalities, despite striving for the opposite (Smith 2013, Sen 2014).

### *Evidence of various approaches to addressing barriers*

VSS can and have taken more proactive approaches to addressing some of these barriers, with some successes reported. Smith (2013) found that when producer organizations introduce gender-affirmative policies they have been effective at increasing women’s membership. Similarly, Sexsmith (2017) believes that certifiers as well as other external actors can have a ‘significant positive influence’ on encouraging women and men to promote women’s membership and decision-making roles. Several studies highlighted in this paper show a variety of approaches supported by VSS that have been found to contribute to women’s active participation, representation and leadership (see Table 1). These are meant to be illustrative of the different types of approaches that have been used, rather than an exhaustive list.

*Table 1: Various approaches and outcomes on women's full and effective participation and leadership in decision-making*

<b>Approaches</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Evidence of changes to women’s participation and leadership in decision-making</b>
<b><i>Organizational structure, policies or activities</i></b>		
More flexible membership requirements	Dijkdrenth (2015)	Higher proportion of women become ‘active shareholders’.
Women-only committees or initiatives	Bacon (2010); Bilfield et al. (2020); Gallagher et al. (2020); Said-Allsopp and Tallontire (2014); Sen (2014); TWIN (2013)	Women members have an avenue to express opinions (including to the executive board) and organize/contest outside of male-dominated spaces; can build women’s confidence and lead to more women on the board and/or more women into management; can help channel women’s voices to higher-level decision-making when incorporated into larger governance structure. However, evidence shows there can be a risk of elite capture.
Women in leadership and decision-making positions	Mauthofer and Santos (2022); Gallagher et al. (2020); Lyon et al. (2019); Sutton 2019	Higher representation of women’s issues and priorities; motivates the participation of other women; more positive attitudes about women in leadership. However, evidence shows that when female leaders make unpopular decisions it can negatively impact attitudes towards women’s leadership.
Quotas for representation / leadership	Gallagher et al. (2020); Fairtrade Foundation (2015); Nelson et al. (2013); Stathers and Gathuthi (2013); TWIN (2013); Sutton 2019	Certified farmers feel more positively about women’s participation and representation; leads to higher representation in other committees and/or executive positions. However, women remain a small minority on committees and on boards. Quotas do not work if other requirements (i.e., education) are unrealistic.
Payment only made when both spouses are present	Chiputwa and Qaim (2016)	Improved transparency contributes to higher proportion of female or joint decision-making (rather than male control) over coffee revenues.
Dedicated women’s enterprises	Lyon et al. (2019), Lyon (2008)	Increased number of female farmers and cooperative participation, where women were full-fledged members on their own; correlated with increased women’s voice and leadership (in producer organization and in local community assemblies);

		women significantly more likely to have served on board of directors than women not involved (but still less than male members). However, this tends to be limited to specific types of women producers (i.e., those with sufficient capital) and excludes women without existing resources.
<b>Training</b>		
Leadership training	Gallagher et al. (2020)	Increased women's technical skills, confidence and knowledge of gender equality (as well as men's).
Skills training	Chiputwa and Qaim (2016); Sutton 2019	Spouses of male farmers attending training on production have increased their involvement; increases women's influence on decision-making.
Gender awareness training	Gallagher et al. (2020); Chiputwa and Qaim (2016); Stathers and Gathuthi (2013); Sutton 2019	Couples demonstrate changes in attitude towards joint decision-making; changes to intra-household gender relations; contributes to higher proportion of female or joint decision-making (than male control) over revenues.
<b>Increasing Assets</b>		
Transfer of household assets or land shares to women	Gallagher et al. (2020); Osorio et al. (2019)	Enables women to join producer organizations on their own, even when they do not have land titles; leads to increases in women's decision-making (household and community); encouraged men to transfer more assets due to its success.
Investment in women's businesses	Gallagher et al. (2020)	Women's participation increased, especially when paired with training.

It appears that targeted approaches can lead to increases in women's representation and leadership in decision-making over time, even if the changes are small, partial or not yet close to achieving equality.

For example, Lyon et al. (2019) identify a significant shift in the number of certified female coffee producers in Oaxaca, Mexico (from 9% of total farm operators in the mid-1990s to 42% in 2013) due to the introduction of a women's coffee microbatching program. The fair-trade and organic-certified cooperative they studied had 711 members, 44% of whom were women. The number of female members increased by 59% in the ten years prior to their study, whereas male members increased by only 14% in the same period). They note that the female members are full-fledged, voting members of their producer organizations rather than default members included as part of a coffee-producing household. They also find that certain certification strategies may have contributed to women's increased uptake of leadership positions in their cooperative (with 36% serving on their boards of directors in the past 3 years), as compared to women producers not involved in that intervention (16%). But even in this scenario, it is important to note that rates of women's leadership are not equal to men's in the same organization, with 57% of men reporting serving on a board of directors in the past three years.

In 2022, Mauthofer and Santos published their third study over a decade of the same Fairtrade-certified producer organization (previously in 2012 and 2018), providing a rare investigation of longitudinal change on several sustainability dimensions, including gender equality. Their latest report finds that in general men continue to dominate decision-making within households and communities, while women are still the minority in small-scale producer organizations and women's participation in leadership is still limited. However, women belonging to Fairtrade cooperatives show more confidence in speaking up and voicing their thoughts (Ghana) and participate more in meetings



and decision-making and occupy leadership positions in cooperatives (Peru), than in non-Fairtrade-certified producer organizations. In Peru specifically, female farmers report feeling represented in their small producer organizations and women's leadership tends to motivate the participation of other women.

A few other studies also support this: while women's participation and leadership are limited overall, certified producer organizations do perceive an increase in women's active participation (that is, an increase in women attending and speaking freely at meetings, contributing to decision-making and greater representation of women on committees and councils) as a result of engaging with VSS (Elder et al. 2012, Nelson et al. 2013, Riisgaard et al. 2009). Female farmers in one certified farmer group in Ethiopia said that certification had not led to an increase in the number of women on committees and councils, but had rendered women 'better off' due to their active participation and sharing with other women farmers in meetings, which was new for them (Riisgaard et al. 2009). While efforts related to VSS have not resulted in equal opportunities for women's participation and leadership, the changes were considered meaningful to women producers themselves and are therefore worth recognizing.

In addition to studies that find some changes in women's participation and leadership over time, several other studies attempt to compare levels of women's participation and leadership between certified and non-certified producer organizations and ascertain the contribution of VSS to those changes. These studies show mixed evidence of changes related to women's participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making.

Meemken and Qaim (2018) and Chiputwa and Qaim (2016) observed impacts of certification on various dimensions of women's empowerment in their comparison of certified and non-certified coffee-producing households in Uganda. In terms of participation in decision-making, they found that women in certified households had more decision-making over cash revenues over time than women in non-certified households. Members of certified households (both male and female) were also more involved in group leadership in their community than non-certified households, though this difference was not statistically significant so the authors could not conclude if it was related to certification.

Dijkdrenth (2015) also found differences between a certified (UTZ) and non-certified cooperative in Kenya, with a higher percentage of women described as 'active shareholders' in the certified cooperative. She found that the certified cooperative had several women elected to the management committee (as opposed to the non-certified cooperative, which had none) and that women members in the certified cooperative felt they could express their concerns and have them represented by women in the committee, whereas women in the non-certified cooperative felt too uncomfortable to voice concerns to the all-male management committee. Women in the certified cooperative also felt more positive about women in leadership positions than women in the non-certified cooperative.

Despite these gains, a number of other studies did not find significant differences in women's participation in decision-making for VSS-certified households relative to non-certified households. Van Rijsbergen et al. (2016) studied a range of household welfare and livelihood aspects of certification (Fairtrade, UTZ), which included a short series of questions on gender roles (at household and cooperative levels) and risk attitudes. They found that certification improved coffee returns (in different ways), but certified households did not experience behaviour-related effects in terms of intrahousehold decision-making and gender roles relative to non-certified respondents. In Nicaragua, Ruben and Zúñiga (2011) and Bacon (2010) also found little evidence that VSS lead to

women increasing their active participation in their cooperatives or their bargaining power at either the household or community levels.

Overall, this review finds evidence that **VSS can play a role in changing some of the attitudes, behaviours, skills and practices that undermine women’s effective participation and opportunities for leadership in decision-making** – but their impact ultimately depends on several factors, including the bundle of strategies used to achieve those changes and the context. The documented increases in women’s leadership are small and women almost always remain in the minority. Even the best cases do not come close to achieving the lofty goal of SDG5.5 to ensure *equal* opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. This seems to be a particularly challenging and difficult aspect of women’s empowerment to achieve, as compared to other aspects of women’s empowerment that VSS tend to support (such as economic inclusion and higher incomes).

Finally, it is possible that VSS have contributed more to women’s participation and leadership in decision-making than what was surfaced in this evidence review. But because VSS have generally not targeted SDG5.5-related outcomes until recently the research studies and evaluations may not yet adequately capture or measure these to provide a more accurate picture.

## Discussion

As more VSS develop criteria and strategies to address gender inequality, it is important to stop and reflect on the existing evidence and how it can inform future strategies and research. The review of evidence identifies the following suggestions for VSS and related stakeholders if they would like to support women’s full and effective participation and leadership in decision-making in agri-food value chains and rural communities.

### **1. Strategies should be tailored to increase the participation and leadership of women in all their diversity**

While the review found several cases of individual women being able to increase their roles in decision-making, they are often exceptional cases who thrive despite the odds. These individual women may also have access to resources and less restrictions than other groups of women in their community, meaning that their journeys towards leadership cannot be replicated by most other women who face a range of different barriers. It is critical, then, that VSS develop strategies that recognize heterogeneity among women, identify the needs and realities of different groups of women and tailor interventions that support the participation and leadership of a diversity of women.

It may require collecting new types of monitoring data (disaggregated according to age, education, ethnicity or other key identify factors in a specific context, in addition to sex/gender) to be able to identify whether certain groups of women are over- or under-represented in VSS-related interventions. Women-targeted interventions like trainings or women-only spaces are recommended to encourage women’s participation but do not guarantee equal or representative participation among women in all their diversity. Instead, the evidence shows that within dedicated women’s groups intersectional hierarchies can separate women and result in elite capture (Gallagher et al 2020).

## **2. Strategies should be targeted towards multiple and reinforcing aspects of women's empowerment and gender equality**

Almost all studies and reviews that focus on the role of VSS in supporting gender equality centre the role of VSS in targeting women's economic empowerment, often with the implicit assumption that this will then lead to improvements in other facets of gender equality including increasing women's decision-making power (UNCTAD 2022). But the quick (and often more easily measurable) 'wins' commonly associated with primarily focusing on increasing women's economic assets and resources tend to result in narrow outcomes with limited reach and/or negative unintended consequences (ICRW 2019). Furthermore, they tend to overshadow other strategies towards gender equality that could complement and reinforce the changes sought (Baltiwala 2007).

The hopes and assumptions that economic empowerment will lead to positive 'spill overs' to other areas of empowerment such as decision-making power at multiple scales are largely unfounded. For example, Dijkdrenth (2015) observed how the strategies of one cooperative led to changes in gender relations at the cooperative level (the 'public domain'), but not in the household level (the 'private domain'). Her research found that women in a certified cooperative were more active shareholders, had more representation in the management committee and more felt comfortable speaking in meetings than women in a non-certified cooperative. Yet for women in both cooperatives the dominant discourse in the household was the same: men were the household heads who controlled most assets and decided on important issues; if women did have some power it was granted by her husband. Increasing women's participation in decision-making at different levels cannot be achieved by focusing only at one level:

The gender policy of Rianjagi was in most part focussed on including women within the cooperative, e.g. the public domain of the economy ... Inclusion into the economy does only change the position of women in the public domain but not in the private domain, because the dominant gender discourse is not challenged. Most of the lives of farmers take place within their households and families, and gender relations within the household were not challenged. Even though Rianjagi accepted three women in the management committee who held influential positions, this did not change the perception regarding men or women within the households, because these perceptions were never questioned ... Without questioning the gender discourse women can gain some power in one field through economic inclusion, but in society in general the gender discourse does not change (231).

Dijkdrenth's work is a reminder that VSS interventions targeting only some aspects of empowerment are unlikely to automatically 'spill over' to other areas or different levels of decision-making. Discriminatory perceptions and dominant gender relations related to women's participation in decision-making have to be targeted directly.

Relatedly, previous research has demonstrated that increasing women's economic empowerment is itself unlikely to be successful unless other non-economic outcomes are simultaneously targeted across multiple scales (Cheema 2017, Cornwall 2016). Drawing from the large multi-country Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme, Cornwall (2016) summarizes the issue with focusing primarily on increasing women's economic resources to achieve empowerment:

Indeed, it is commonplace for contemporary 'empowerment' initiatives to begin and end with increasing women's access to resources rather than [...] with changing how they may have been taught to see themselves as women, as citizens and as human beings. The assumption often underpins these initiatives that once women have access to economic

resources, they will be able to make changes in other areas of their lives. This may of course happen [...]. Yet it remains a contingent rather than necessary outcome. For all that they acquire spending power by becoming the entrepreneurs that development intervention would turn them into, women may find themselves unable to envisage the kinds of changes that could bring them greater empowerment, precisely because prevailing social norms and limiting self-beliefs conspire to restrict their ability to re-imagine the horizons of the possible (356).

In a more recent study on the effects of a market access intervention on women's empowerment in India, Pandey et al. (2020) found that when program participation was coupled with opportunities for political agency (in this case, more gender-inclusive formal political institutions) women were far more likely to publicly speak out and participate in community issues as compared to participating in the market initiative alone. The authors suggest that market development efforts provide only 'passive' forms of agency to women, but when combined with political initiatives they can support more 'active' forms of agency, leading to larger and long-term empowerment. If anything, this case shows positive spill-over can come from political initiatives that reinforce program outcomes.

In summary, if VSS intend to contribute specifically to increasing women's full and effective participation and leadership in decision-making they should not take for granted that market-based or economic interventions will lead to a positive spill over to other gender equality outcomes. Complementary approaches are required that target different and reinforcing aspects of women's empowerment in a holistic way. Further, the benefits of economic empowerment are more likely to be realized this way as well. Fairtrade's women leadership schools are a good example of such an approach, combining targeted training on leadership with gender awareness or critical consciousness-raising, technical farming skills and economic investment in women's businesses and market access (Gallagher et al. 2020).

### **3. Strategies should seek to address the structural barriers that limit *all* women**

There is a clear consensus in the literature that the barriers to rural women being able to participate in and benefit from any kind of value chain development are deep-seated and pervasive. Women may be able to slightly increase their participation or leadership in decision-making but typically do so despite the many barriers – rather than because the barriers have been eliminated. Ongoing barriers and discrimination limit how many women can participate in decision-making (especially vis-à-vis men) and how long women can or want to continue in these roles, given how difficult the lived experience often is.

If VSS want to extend their reach beyond more than a few exceptional individual women and support changes that go wider, deeper and are sustained, they will need to work more on addressing the structural barriers limiting women's participation in decision-making at different levels. This way of integrating gender equality is increasingly referred to as a 'Gender Transformative Approach' as it seeks to go beyond the surface symptoms and solutions to gender inequality to identify and address the root causes that prevent women's full and effective participation and leadership.

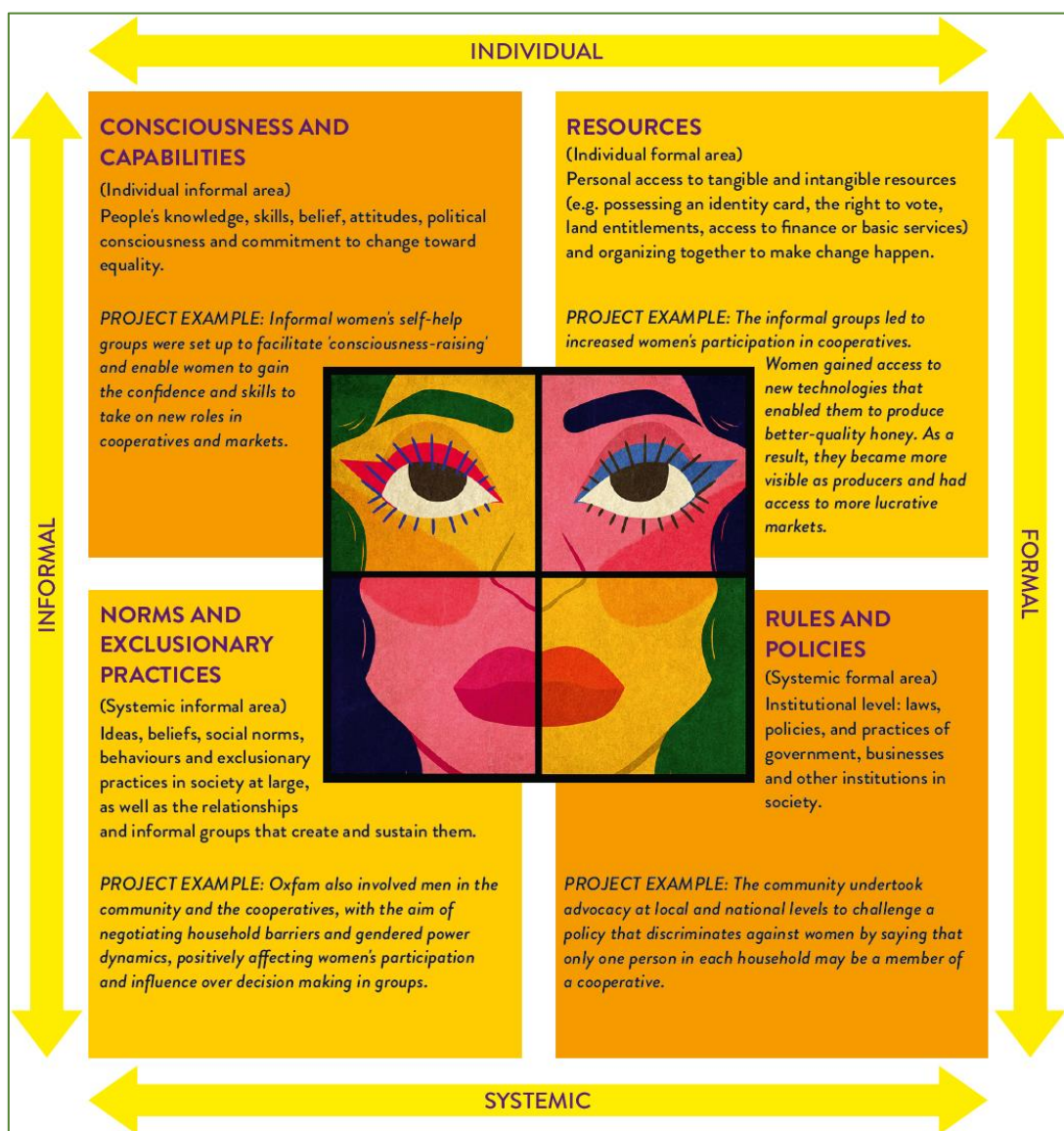
The Gender at Work framework provides one useful way for VSS to understand how to develop a holistic strategy that addresses structural barriers<sup>8</sup> (see figure 1). It identifies four quadrants of

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<sup>8</sup> The original [Gender At Work framework](#) has been used and adapted for many contexts. See [Oxfam's Conceptual Framework on Women's Economic Empowerment](#) and Shakun et al (2021) for more ideas on how the framework can apply to supporting gender equality in value chains. Fairtrade International (2016) adopted the framework for its five-year gender strategy 2016-2020.

change required to achieve gender equality: individual and systemic (or structural), formal and informal. Currently, interventions tend to target only individual-level changes (for example, including women producers in existing training or seeking to increase women’s incomes) – the top half of the framework. These should be complemented with approaches that target changing discriminatory informal and formal institutions, systems and structures that limit *all* women. For example, it could include advocating for formal laws that secure women’s land rights (Sexsmith 2019) and for policies that support the redistribution of unpaid care responsibilities. It may involve working with partners who facilitate group reflections on the impact of discriminatory sociocultural norms for both men and women and engaging male allies to advocate against gender-based violence in their communities<sup>9</sup>. Figure 1 provides other examples of actions targeting informal and formal changes at the ‘systemic’ or institutional level (beyond the individual).

Figure 2: Gender At Work Framework with examples from an Oxfam project to strengthen women's participation and leadership in honey cooperatives in Ethiopia (Shakun et al 2021, p.18)



<sup>9</sup> A recent USAID Feed the Future Toolkit (Eckman et al 2022) provides suggestions for ways that market systems development interventions can address gender-based violence at multiple levels (household, workspaces, institutions and the enabling environment).

#### **4. Strategies will need to involve partnerships and engagement with key stakeholders**

To contribute to women's participation and leadership in decision-making VSS should develop strategies that are holistic and address structural barriers. But this is not to suggest that any one VSS can nor should directly implement interventions and activities at all levels and regarding all aspects of gender equality. VSS need to identify which parts of the strategy they are best placed to deliver given their strengths and expertise and which areas would benefit from working in partnerships with external actors at multiple scales. If the target is on shifting policies and legal frameworks, for example, then it may involve engaging with local and national governments. If the strategy concerns addressing gender-based violence or discriminatory social norms in communities, then local women's rights organizations are likely better positioned than VSS. Hanson et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of carrying out work on gender equity with local partners, with actions defined and implemented by partners.

VSS will need to reflect on their unique strengths and potential contributions to gender equality vis-à-vis potential partners and the larger system that they are embedded in. Their impact is unlikely to be directly through consumers and farmers given that VSS only affect a small number of consumers and farmers and relatively little agricultural land (Meemken et al. 2021). Ultimately, transforming global food systems requires government action and social and environmental regulations at every level, though VSS can seek to influence the debate and draw public attention to social injustices along agrifood supply chains (ibid). According to Smith (2020):

It is also important to recognize that VSS alone cannot be expected to address all the structural causes of gender inequality. In this context, a key contribution of VSS may be establishing criteria and norms for a gender-equitable and inclusive environment for workers and producers in global value chains, and providing hard evidence (data) of the systemic issues that need to be addressed by states, businesses and civil society in order for women to participate in the global economy on equal terms with men (vi).

#### **5. Strategies should respond to what women want**

Women's leadership is often uncritically represented as patently beneficial for women and for gender equality, and for achieving other sustainability outcomes. However, the assumption that individual women want to be leaders and that they will be uniformly benefitted by leadership needs to be challenged. Publicly pushing against societal expectations is often a thankless, tiring – and sometimes dangerous – job (Galiè and Farnworth 2019, Kabeer 1999, Berry et al. 2021, Restrepo Sanin 2022). Women leaders may have to (or perceive they will have to) make significant sacrifices to take on such roles, including increased tension in their households or communities, less time on food crops, fear of harassment, increased labour burdens and associated time poverty (Fairtrade Foundation 2015, Lyon 2010). Until the structural barriers are diminished becoming a leader may present more trade-offs than benefits for most rural women.

If women's leadership is to be targeted, it needs to be appropriately supported. Costs and trade-offs for women's leadership must be reduced and an enabling environment created that allows leadership to be perceived as a safe, beneficial and empowering option. To do this it is crucial to speak to women being targeted by leadership initiatives to understand whether – and more importantly, under what conditions – they want to assume leadership roles. What kind of support would they need to take up opportunities for leadership in decision-making? Are there alternative leadership models or configurations (e.g. collective forms of leadership) that are more desirable? For

existing leaders, what support would enable them to participate more fully and effectively, without compromising their own well-being?

Centring local women's voices (individual and collective) and responding to their needs, wishes and priorities is not just important for shaping VSS strategies related to women's leadership, but for the design of VSS in general (Loconto 2015). According to Smith et al. (2019), "women's needs and interests have not been adequately reflected in the content of VSS" (14). They recommend that the interests of women business owners, producers and workers be represented in key forums and processes, including through representation in VSS governance structures, in standard setting processes and in the design, implementation and monitoring of initiatives. Furthermore, they suggest engaging with women's rights organisations, informal workers associations and other organizations that represent women and involving them in governance and advisory roles. In short, rural women's representation and leadership in decision-making should be embodied in VSS themselves.

#### **6. Strategies require more evidence and different research methods to understand women's participation and leadership in decision-making**

Overall, the existing evidence on VSS contributions to women's decision-making is sparse, lacking depth and makes it difficult to generalize across value chains and contexts. Given that most VSS have not explicitly targeted women's representation and leadership in value chains until now and thus have not sought to measure their contributions towards it, there are limited studies that mention this facet and even fewer dedicated studies or evaluations. This results in a series of unanswered questions when exploring the contributions of VSS to SDG5.5 and to gender equality in general: not just whether there is convincing evidence of these types of changes (yes/no), but also the direction and sequencing of changes, the depth and breadth of changes, what changes for whom (which types of women), whether changes observed are sustained over time, what types of changes spread or spill over and how, and why and whether certain approaches (or combination of approaches) are more or less effective than others under certain conditions. Generating evidence related to these questions in future will be critical to supporting VSS to develop and refine evidence-based strategies.

There is a need for more evidence. It would help to have more dedicated studies that explore the impact of VSS on women's full and effective participation and leadership and how change occurs, with a view to contributing more complex understandings on the pathways to change. Ideally this could include studies that look at the interactions and interrelationships between different dimensions of changes sought by VSS (whether between different aspects of women's empowerment and/or between these and other sustainability outcomes). Given there is already a lot of research on the range and types of barriers to gender equality, it would help to focus efforts instead on what is proving to be effective in addressing barriers across different contexts. Studies that address other types of commodities and engage with other VSS on the topic would also be helpful given the lack or non-existence of studies beyond Fairtrade and coffee.

There is also a need for new or different types of measurement approaches to generate this kind of evidence. Ongoing efforts to measure progress towards SDG5.5 produce globally comparable data, but these so far are narrow and limited only to the target's indicators: 'Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments' (5.5.1); and 'Proportion of women in managerial positions' (5.5.2). There is a recognition that broader and more comprehensive data, supported by new data collection tools, are needed to capture women's full, equal and effective

participation and leadership in decision-making at all levels and spheres (Berevoescu and Ballington 2021, Mama Cash 2020).

For VSS in particular the globally agreed indicators for SDG5.5 do not provide useful or insightful measures of change. Nor do the various (and largely non-comparable) approaches that have been used to measure women's participation in decision-making in VSS in the past. These tend to provide a weak understanding of women's participation in decision-making at different levels and if/how efforts are affecting changes for rural women in all their diversity. For example, using existing monitoring data on the number of women who hold formal membership in associations, who attend training/meeting or occupy executive positions gives limited information, especially if the goal is meaningful or 'full and effective' participation in decision-making. Furthermore, the data collected on 'women' is often not disaggregated further, so it is not clear whether certain groups of women (younger women, older women, women from certain caste or ethnic groups, etc) are more represented or benefitting more than others in VSS-related initiatives. This makes it difficult to identify the needs of different subgroups of women and to tailor interventions so that all women have opportunities to participate and benefit.

Finally, almost all existing measures of women's leadership in decision-making are limited to counting the number of individual women in formal leadership roles (in national and local governments or in managerial positions) or understanding perceptions of and about individual women leaders. Conceiving of women's leadership as a largely individual phenomenon with outcomes measured only at the individual level ignores the role of collective women's agency and leadership – critical not only as a possible outcome but as a means of achieving more effective participation in decision-making for women generally (Bolin 2020).

Going forward it will be important to use a variety of research approaches and methods to respond to the research gaps identified. High-quality impact evaluations would help to observe if change is happening and possibly for whom but would need to be combined with in-depth qualitative methods to understand the complexity of change processes and what can be done to improve outcomes. Longitudinal or panel studies would be particularly useful for improving evidence on how change happens over time including what changes are relatively easy versus those that are 'sticky', and the key factors to sustaining change. Whatever the chosen approach, research methods and monitoring tools will need to be able to detect potentially small and slow changes as well as respond to potentially negative changes that may accompany change processes, such as adverse inclusion, signs of backlash and increases in violence and workload that decrease well-being (Batliwala and Pittman 2010, ICRW 2019, van der Harst et al. 2023). They will also need to capture changes at different levels (individual, relational and structural) and for different groups of women. Finally, research approaches should meaningfully elicit and centre women's voices and perspectives so that VSS strategies be led by, aligned with and adapted to the (evolving) needs and priorities of women being targeted by interventions.



## Conclusion

The objectives of this paper were two-fold: first, to review what the existing research on VSS and gender equality reveals on the contributions specifically to women's participation and leadership in decision-making; and secondly, to identify knowledge gaps to inform the direction of future research on this topic. The evidence shows the significant challenges that VSS face in supporting women's decision-making at all levels. It also highlights the lack of evidence on impact pathways and the need for research approaches that can shed light on these pathways and that centre women's perspectives to inform future strategies and efforts.

The challenge of achieving rural women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in decision-making may seem insurmountable but it is also non-negotiable: both as a standalone imperative for realizing gender equality, social justice and human rights *and* as a way of achieving more sustainable and resilient agri-food systems (Njuki et al. 2021, Deninger et al. 2023). Though the review focused on how Voluntary Sustainability Systems contribute to key gender equality outcomes, VSS are not expected to address inequalities in agrifood systems alone. As Smith (2020) points out, addressing structural barriers and upholding women's rights is fundamentally an issue to be addressed by states, businesses and civil society, with VSS playing a role in drawing these actors' attention to systemic issues and in establishing criteria and norms for gender-equitable value chains. The scale of the task to deliver on SDG5.5 will ultimately require all these actors to work together, combining efforts to create an enabling environment for rural women's decision-making and leadership at all levels.

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## Annex 1: Selected studies on VSS and women's participation and leadership in decision-making

(Descending date order)

Reference	Countries	VSS	Methods	Main findings related to women's effective participation and leadership in decision-making
Mauthofer, T. & Santos, M. (2022). <i>2<sup>nd</sup> Follow up study: Assessing the impact of Fairtrade on poverty reduction through rural development</i> . Fairtrade Germany and FAIRTRADE Austria.	Ghana, Peru	Fairtrade	Focus Group Discussions. Key Informant Interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In general women's participation in leadership positions is still very limited.</li> <li>• In Ghana (cocoa): in general, men continue to take final decisions within the communities and often within the household. Fairtrade women, however, showed more confidence in speaking up and voicing their thoughts. A women's group was initiated in 2018 to promote income diversification for women.</li> <li>• In Peru (bananas and coffee): women are still the minority within small producer organizations (SPOs). However, they are participating more in meetings and decision-making and women occupy leadership positions in cooperatives. Female farmers reported feeling represented in their small producer organizations but there is room for improvement in trainings on leadership and informative sessions on gender. Women in leadership positions tend to positively motivate the participation of other women in their organizations. However, when female leaders make poor managerial decisions, this can have strong negative impacts as members doubt women's ability to manage.</li> <li>• Improvements were observed in the participation of women in non-certified small producer organizations, with efforts made to increase the participation of women in board meetings and in leadership roles.</li> </ul>
Bilfield, A., Seal, D., & Rose, D. (2020). <i>Brewing a more balanced cup: supply chain perspectives on gender transformative change within the coffee value chain</i> . <i>International Journal on Food System Dynamics</i> , 11(1), 26-38.	Guatemala	Fairtrade, organic	Semi-structured interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspectives of international coffee value chain stakeholders on women producers and impacts on women's empowerment.</li> <li>• Respondents felt that fair trade certification has accelerated the inclusion of women in cooperatives, though women's involvement in cooperatives is not new.</li> <li>• Creation of women's committee in executive board structure provided women cooperative members with an avenue to express opinions to the executive board; this has led to more women on the board and attempts to get more women into management positions.</li> <li>• To counteract institutional power imbalances and support women's meaningful/quality participation (not just 'inclusion for inclusion's sake'), the research identifies the importance of: supportive organizational structures; leadership/communication skills; technical training/education on gender sensitization; involving and educating men; and creating women-only spaces.</li> </ul>

<p>Gallagher E.J., Monterroso I., &amp; Sanjaya, M. (2020). <i>Women’s access, equity and empowerment: Progress and uptake of the Fairtrade Gender Strategy 2016-2020</i>. Fairtrade International.</p>	<p>Guatemala, Indonesia, Kenya</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Household surveys.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field study of 6 coffee producer organizations with different levels of involvement in gender programmes across three countries.</li> <li>• In each of the 6 cooperatives studied, women are in elected leadership roles, including as board members. But women are not taking up board positions in proportion to their membership despite some POs proactively encouraging this. Women respondents felt that the presence of more women in decision-making roles would bring about “transformative change” in perspective and PO priorities.</li> <li>• Women members across all three case studies tend to have less detailed knowledge about the POs and Fairtrade, are less likely to attend meetings, less likely to take up leadership roles or participate in activities, and less likely to participate in Premium decisions.</li> <li>• It is difficult to assess frequency and quality of participation beyond membership and training records.</li> <li>• Ongoing barriers to women’s full and equitable and participation include: PO rules and practices, including around membership; socio-cultural norms and roles; and women’s life circumstances; and insufficient incentives to participate.</li> <li>• Producer Organizations (POs) have established women’s committees or other entities that enable women to raise specific issues. But it is important not to overemphasize these. Intersectional hierarches and cultural norms can separate women and there is a risk of elite capture within women’s collective organizations.</li> <li>• Fairtrade’s women leadership schools in different countries have increased women’s capacities, including their technical farming skills, their self-confidence and knowledge of gender equality (as well as men’s). Successful programs go beyond training but also involve investment to support women to expand their businesses or access markets for their crops.</li> <li>• In Kenya there was a more systemic attempt to address barriers to women’s entry in small producer organisations (SPO) and the coffee value chain. This included engaging men as allies in gender-awareness trainings and as benefactors who transferred a portion of their coffee bushes to their spouses so women could join and participate in the SPO on their own despite not having land titles. Women have ‘exceeded men’s expectations’: men report that women are good farm managers and more responsible with the income. Women participate more in decision-making about farm management.</li> <li>• Important to clarify what role Fairtrade should be playing in the social construction of gender norms: “what is the role of Fairtrade in transforming culturally and institutionally embedded gender norms at different nodes in the value chain?”</li> </ul>
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<p>Lyon, S., Mutersbaugh, T., &amp; Worthen, H. (2019). Constructing the female coffee farmer: Do corporate smart-economic initiatives promote gender equity within agricultural value chains? <i>Economic Anthropology</i>, 6(1), 34-47.</p>	<p>Mexico</p>	<p>Fairtrade, Organic</p>	<p>Household surveys. Interviews. Focus Group Discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared one organization that participated in part in a corporate-initiated microbatching women’s coffee program (Café de Oro) with communities that did not participate. Focus was on small coffee farm owners, rather than wage labourers. Way to pair new marketable qualities, such as ‘women produced’ with ‘organic’, ‘fairtrade’ and other premium qualities. The strategy was pioneered in the early 2000s (Las Hermanas coffee, Café Feminino).</li> <li>• From mid-1990s to 2013, the number of female farmers had increased from 9% of ‘farm operators’ to 42%. Relatively high rate of female coffee production and cooperative participation is reflected in membership in the women’s coffee program organization, which is 44% female (spread across 25 different communities). Women were full-fledged, voting members of the producer organizations, not simply belonging by default as part of a coffee-producing household.</li> <li>• Women producers of high-quality coffee benefit from price premiums and a dedicated market niche. But the price premium is not substantial and not returned directly to the farmers (it is used to hire an employee who runs women’s programming).</li> <li>• Membership in Café de Oro did not appear to substantively reduce gendered agricultural asset gaps, enhance women’s economic accumulation or promote gender equity, relative to women of other coffee organizations. Though women receive significantly higher rates of agricultural training, than men in the program or than women in other organizations.</li> <li>• But the women’s coffee program is correlated with increased women’s leadership (within producer organizations as well as in local community assemblies) and women believe that engagement with the program has enhanced their voice and leadership in local organizations. Café de Oro women members are significantly more likely to have served on the board of directors than women of other organizations (36% vs 16% of women of their respective organizations). These communities practice communal governance and electoral voting. A female president was recently the head of the whole organization, which may have encouraged more women to become involved or lead daily operations of their local committees. That said, still more male members served on local committees’ board of directors in the past three years (57% of male vs 36% of female members).</li> <li>• Both men and women members of Café de Oro reported feeling uncomfortable voicing their opinion during meetings (with no significant difference between men and women); this was also common for the members of the other coffee producer organizations, but women were significantly more likely to report feeling uncomfortable than men.</li> <li>• Mobility restrictions for women across the board make it difficult for women to serve in leadership positions, attend meetings or maintain their coffee plots.</li> </ul>
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				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Microbatching programs are necessarily limited to coffee producers who are relatively well-capitalized and engage in traceability (like certified organic). Not realistic for these types of programs to be scaled up to meet the needs of women coffee producers as a whole. Need to be suspicious of policies that promote development alternatives that serve only a select group of rural farmers.</li> </ul>
Sutton, S. (2019). Female Participation and Voice at Tanzanian Fair Trade Co-operatives. <i>Review of International Co-operation</i> . 105, 63-82.	Tanzania	Fair Trade	Interviews. Focus Group Discussions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are highly visible in coffee cultivation but are not necessarily participating as members. This is due to patrilineal customs around land ownership (making men the typical landowners) and cultural norms that dictate that women are predominantly responsible for the work (both household responsibilities and coffee-related work) but men are the ones with the membership and who get to vote.</li> <li>• There are few female leaders and managers at Tanzanian co-operatives. Most women are not co-operative members and those interviewed said that their husbands would not encourage them to be leaders. Board members require a minimum level of education and literacy, which many rural women have less of relative to men.</li> <li>• Capacity building via training and education can create opportunities for female participation and voice. Producers voice support for gender equality training. Education is changing attitudes (including helping men learn that women can own land and the importance of giving wives coffee trees) and providing new skills for women to participate in co-operatives (such as public speaking).</li> <li>• Gender equality training for producers and union staff could serve to address challenges in all four quadrants of the Gender At Work framework. It is not a silver bullet. There must also be efforts towards reducing barriers, such as those around educational requirements in leadership applications, and shifting cultural norms.</li> <li>• Importance of understanding heterogeneity and diversity among producers to provide support to individuals.</li> </ul>
Bullock, R., Gyau, A., Mithoefer, D., & Swisher, M. (2018). Contracting and gender equity in Tanzania: Using a value chain approach to understand the role of gender in organic spice certification.	Tanzania	Organic	Household surveys, interviews, focus group discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Household and chain analyses shows that interventions differentially influence women's inclusion and household decision-making. Gender norms and institutions create gendered patterns of participation in contracting (certified) households and non-contacting households.</li> <li>• Contracting does not provide significant opportunities for women to participate and benefit from the spice value chain. This is because participation of female-headed households is low (likely because they are too resource constrained to invest in cash crops) and wives in contracting households have low levels of group membership and training relative to their spouses.</li> <li>• Women do not participate in decision-making about how to spend income from spice sales because they do not often sell independently from their spouses and because it is a crop managed predominantly by men.</li> </ul>

<i>Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems</i> , 33(1), 60–72.				
Meemken, E.M., & Qaim, M. (2018). Can private food standards promote gender equality in the small farm sector? <i>Journal of Rural Studies</i> , 58, 39–51.	Uganda	Fairtrade, UTZ	Household surveys.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observed impacts of certification on various dimensions of women’s empowerment in coffee producing households, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Positive effect on improving women’s access to markets and/or increasing women’s control over income and wealth from cash crop production. Women in certified households have greater control over cash revenues than counterparts in non-certified households.</li> <li>○ Mixed impact on access to extension services. Male and female household heads benefit more than female spouses of members. Female spouses are less likely to be registered members, participate in group meetings, or influence decisions on services.</li> <li>○ No significant effect on workload.</li> <li>○ No impact on meeting participation. Male household heads are more likely to attend meetings of the farmer organization than female spouses and female household heads</li> <li>○ Positive effect on leadership. Male household heads and female spouses are more often involved in group leadership in certified households than non-certified.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Ways of measuring women’s representation in farmer organizations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If respondents had participated in any meetings of farmer organization</li> <li>○ If respondents had held a leadership position in any group</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Need to do more to improve access to rural services for female spouses and encourage their registration.</li> </ul>
Chiputwa, B. & Qaim, M. (2016). Sustainability Standards, Gender, and Nutrition among Smallholder Farmers in Uganda. <i>Journal of Development Studies</i> , 52(9):18.	Uganda	Fairtrade, Organic, UTZ	Household surveys. Focus Group Discussions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empirical results find that sustainability standards have positive impacts on food security and dietary quality for smallholder farmers in the coffee market. In terms of impact pathways, the results indicate that sustainability certification increases household incomes and improves gender equity. Both these factors contribute to improved nutrition.</li> <li>• When a household is certified the probability that a male alone controls coffee revenues is reduced by 0.66. There is a higher proportion of female or joint control in certified households, which increases relative to male control over time. This may be explained by two factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sustainability standards promote gender equity through special training, awareness building, and other gender mainstreaming activities, as well as zero tolerance of discrimination and unfair treatment of workers/family members on farms. There are cases where payment is only made if both spouses are present, improving transparency.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Stricter standards increases demand for labour, so female household members are more involved in the coffee crop. More labour on the coffee crop seems to improve women's bargaining power and influence on decision-making.</li> <li>● Spouses of male farmers often stated that intra-household gender relations have changed through certification. Women have received training courses on coffee production and marketing. They reported that both partners were required to attend workshops on gender equity (where couples discussed gender roles in agriculture and possibilities to make division of labour and resources within the household more equitable).</li> <li>● Also, certified cooperatives hire more women as extension workers and foster equal representation of women in the leadership structure.</li> </ul>
Foundjem-Tita D, Donovan J, Stoian D, & Degrande A. (2016). <i>Baseline for Assessing the Impact of Fairtrade Certification on Cocoa Farmers and Cooperatives in Ghana</i> . World Agroforestry Centre.	Ghana	Fairtrade	Household surveys.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women represented 32-42% of membership in the 4 sampled cooperative unions; on average 37% of the total membership. But women averaged only 17% of the cooperative unions' general assemblies and occupied 6 of 29 board positions (20%). Most of the women held the position of organizer of activities for women or ordinary committee members, not as chairpersons.</li> <li>● Women said they lacked confidence in speaking in group settings and had limited experience in business dealings. There was a perception that women who did participate in leadership were figureheads to respect the principle of gender balance advocated by Fairtrade.</li> </ul>
van Rijsbergen, B., Elbers, W., Ruben, R., & Njuguna, S.N. (2016). The ambivalent impact of coffee certification on farmers' welfare: a matched panel approach for cooperatives in central Kenya. <i>World Development</i> . 77, 277-292.	Kenya	Fairtrade, UTZ	Household surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Compared certified and non-certified households.</li> <li>● Constructed gender indices (separately for male and female) using the sum score of the replies to the following 5 statements: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The biological nature of women makes them restrict their tasks to the house keeping.</li> <li>2. Family planning is a responsibility of both men and women.</li> <li>3. Men tend to get most positions in the cooperative.</li> <li>4. Women are better administrators of goods and services.</li> <li>5. There is normally equal treatment between men and women.</li> </ol> </li> <li>● Behavioural effects related to changes in gender roles or attitudes were not found.</li> </ul>

<p>Dijkdrenth, E. (2015). Gender equity within UTZ certified coffee cooperatives in Eastern Province, Kenya. In R. Ruben &amp; P. Hoebink (Eds.), <i>Coffee certification in East Africa: Impact on farms, families and cooperatives</i> (pp. 205–234). Wageningen Academic Publishers.</p>	<p>Kenya</p>	<p>UTZ</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews. Focus group discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared a UTZ-certified cooperative with a ‘control’ cooperative. Both cooperatives had comparable number of women members in absolute terms, but higher percentage of women were ‘active shareholders’ in the certified cooperative (they required significantly less product to be members, have voting power and be elected to the management committee).</li> <li>• The certified cooperative had several women on the management committee, elected by shareholders. Women members felt they could bring up issues with women in the committee and that their concerns were represented. They felt more positive about women in leadership positions, as compared to women in the non-certified cooperative.</li> <li>• In the non-certified cooperative, there were no women in the management committee and women were discouraged from participating in elections. General meetings were considered hostile. Women members felt too uncomfortable to talk to the all-male management committee.</li> <li>• However, increases in women’s active participation, representation and leadership in the cooperative/public domain had not led to any changes to gender relations within the household/private domain (men were acknowledged to be the head of the household and controlled assets and decision-making). Husbands still largely dominated cooperative affairs and women still needed permission to be representatives at meetings.</li> </ul>
<p>Fairtrade Foundation. (2015). <i>Equal Harvest: Removing the Barriers to Women’s Participation in Smallholder Agriculture</i>.</p>	<p>Dominican Republic, India, Kenya</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Focus group discussions, Semi-structured interviews.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 case studies of small producer organizations, focused on banana production (Dominican Republic), cotton production (India) and tea production (Kenya). Only 3 women board members in total. More women in Buying Centre Committees (Kenya) and Disciplinary and Vigilance Committees (Dominican Republic), but still a minority. Fairtrade Premium Committees (Kenya) have more equal balance.</li> <li>• Three main barriers to women’s participation include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Barrier 1: Producer organisation rules, structures and practices (women’s participation and leadership limited by membership rules; lack of gender awareness limits planning; recruitment). E.g. quota for women’s representation on board, but few women farmers meet minimum education requirement (Kenya).</li> <li>○ Barrier 2: Sociocultural norms and practices (active participation limited by: unpaid care work; lack of mobility; lack of trust in women’s leadership and technical skills).</li> <li>○ Barrier 3: Women’s individual circumstances and choices.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Women’s leadership also constrained by lack of experience/confidence and lack of awareness of potential benefits. Potential costs of increasing women’s participation includes: increased workload, increased tension in households, less time on food crops.</li> </ul>
<p>Said-Allsopp, M., &amp; Tallontire, A. (2014).</p>	<p>Kenya</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Focus group Discussions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint Bodies are a standards mechanism designed to empower workers and administer the Fairtrade premium. But lack of transparency of the Joint Bodies and the dominance of men on committees led</li> </ul>

<p>Enhancing Fairtrade for women workers on plantations: insights from Kenyan agriculture. <i>Food Chain</i>, 4(1), 66-77.</p>				<p>to gender bias in premium project selection. In only 4 of 13 farms studied did women feel like the Fairtrade premium money was used in ways that met women’s needs. Men often outvote or veto projects favoured by women and women workers view the projects as more beneficial for men.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All-women Gender Committees on flower and tea plantations can be an important channel for women workers’ voices to be heard in Joint Body decision-making processes. These were instituted prior to Fairtrade and are separate from other mixed gender groups such as trade unions and welfare committees.</li> <li>• Gender Committees are an important tool to fight against sexual harassment and also provide education and training for women. Women express confidence in the Gender Committees as a forum where they can defend the rights of women workers without being under the control of men.</li> </ul>
<p>Sen, D. (2014). Fair Trade vs. Swachha Vyapar: Women’s Activism and Transnational Justice Regimes in Darjeeling, India. <i>Feminist Studies</i>, 40(2), 444–472.</p> <p>AND</p> <p>Sen, D. (2009). <i>From illegal to organic: Fair trade-organic tea production and women's political futures in Darjeeling, India</i>. [Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey].</p>	<p>India</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Ethnography</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fair trade initiatives related to a smallholder tea cooperative unintentionally strengthened existing patriarchal relations within households and communities involved. The cooperative was male-dominated and local middlemen controlled the profits from tea sales. Women felt that gender inequalities limited their market access and benefits.</li> <li>• Women tea farmers strengthened a separate Women’s Wing of the cooperative, where they sought to claim a separate share of the cooperative’s fair trade premium for their own economic projects. They juxtaposed their concept of ‘real’ fair trade (‘Swachha Vyapar’) against the fair trade that was male-dominated. Fair trade inspectors who were not familiar with the context made inadequate suggestions for empowerment (to further include the women in the male-dominated cooperative), which the women rejected.</li> <li>• New reiterations / interpretations of fair trade by marginalized farmers can open new critical dialogues for justice, equity and sustainability in producer communities. Women-only groups can provide valid spaces for women to organize.</li> </ul>
<p>Nelson, V., Opoku, K., Martin, A., Bugri, J. &amp; Posthumus, H.</p>	<p>Ghana</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Survey. Focus Group Discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women’s influence in the cocoa sector has been extremely limited in the past. In some households, husbands consult with their spouses in regards to spending the income. Women who inherit land take more decisions themselves, although some still rely on ‘caretaker’ farmers.</li> </ul>



<p>(2013). <i>Assessing the poverty impacts of sustainability standards: Fairtrade in Ghanaian Cocoa</i>. UKAid and Natural Resources Institute.</p>			<p>Key Informant Interviews.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women can attend meetings and are said to speak freely, especially in the certified groups. Though female farmers reported not attending meetings due to time constraints or because it was men's task.</li> <li>• Kuapa Kokoo is more committed to action on gender issues than non-certified buying companies. They have a clear gender policy and quotas on women's representation in the primary society (2 out of 6 executive positions reserved for women).</li> <li>• Certified farmers were more positive about women's representation and participation compared to non-certified focus groups.</li> </ul>
<p>Stathers, T., &amp; Gathuthi, C. (2013). <i>Poverty impact of social and environmental voluntary standard systems in Kenyan tea</i>. UKAid and Natural Resources Institute.</p>	<p>Kenya</p>	<p>Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance</p>	<p>Household surveys, interviews, focus group discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the smallholder tea farming sector, women have an active and often dominant role in delivering Green Leaf. But most Fairtrade registered members are male and this hinders women's representation in the organization (registration is required to vote and hold a position). Further, men reportedly would prevent their wives from attending meetings.</li> <li>• No women's representation at Board level due to political and cultural barriers. One Fairtrade outgrower organization was planning reserve Board positions for women and also reach out to youth.</li> <li>• Women are represented on Fairtrade Premium committees (quota for representation) and this has also possibly influenced women's participation in collection centre committees as well.</li> <li>• Most of the certified organizations researched did not have a gender policy or track membership by sex/gender, though some do track women's attendance at trainings.</li> <li>• Re household decision-making: Certification was identified as having raised awareness about the importance of joint household planning and decision-making, along with wider societal drivers.</li> <li>• Women's ownership of tea is limited. Women associated with a fairtrade-certified cooperative said if women were formally given a share of the household's tea bushes, they could control the use of the income and this would benefit the household more.</li> </ul>
<p>TWIN. (2013). <i>Empowering Women Farmers in Agricultural Value Chains</i>.</p>	<p>Peru, Nicaragua, Malawi, Ghana, Uganda, India</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Interviews, group discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This study involved 14 producer organizations to understand the role of women in coffee, cocoa and nut (groundnuts and cashew nuts) value chains.</li> <li>• Women have formed committees in some organizations. Incorporating the committee into the governance structure of the organization provided a higher-level of decision-making for women. This enabled their voices to be officially represented at board level and they were usually allocated some budget.</li> <li>• Majority of producer organisations have quotas for female representation of boards and actively encourage more women to join.</li> </ul>

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to membership and participation include land ownership, cost of membership fees and barriers to attending meetings (opposition from husbands, prejudices, unpaid care work, lack of confidence, low literacy).</li> <li>• Women who begin participating in women-only activities or in women's groups often find confidence to take on leadership roles and contribute to the organization as a whole.</li> </ul>
Elder, S. D., Zerriffi, H., & Le Billon, P. (2012). Effects of fair trade certification on social capital: The case of Rwandan coffee producers. <i>World Development</i> , 40(11), 2355-2367.	Rwanda	Fair Trade	Semi-structured interviews. Household surveys.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on impact of Fair Trade on social capital, comparing certified and non-certified cooperatives.</li> <li>• Cooperative membership, regardless of certification, is positively correlated with a perceived increase in farmer participation in decision making.</li> <li>• Certification is associated with producers' perceiving that women specifically have increased participation in cooperative decision making.</li> </ul>
Hanson, L., Terstappen, V., Bacon, C.M., Leung, J., Ganem-Cuenca, A., Flores, S.R.D., & Rojas, M.A.M. (2012). Gender, health, and Fairtrade: insights from a research-action programme in Nicaragua. <i>Development in Practice</i> , 22(2), 164-179.	Nicaragua	Fairtrade	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women have a double burden of work that is unaffected by Fairtrade; the certification system is complicit in the continued invisibilisation of women's work by ignoring women's household labour.</li> <li>• No evidence of active discrimination or exclusion of women by organizations, but gender equity is severely constrained by socio-cultural and organizational challenges including: illiteracy, unpaid care and domestic work, land tenure arrangements, gendered power relations in decision-making, and attitudes and influence of cooperative leaders, etc.</li> <li>• Policies and practices at the cooperative and certification level promote commercial and economic interests over social dimensions. It is important to partner with local organizations to address barriers to women accessing and benefitting from Fair Trade.</li> <li>• Mixed gender spaces are perceived by women as not safe spaces; women-only spaces need to be expanded to stimulate more meaningful forms of equity.</li> </ul>
Ruben, R., & Zúñiga, G. (2011). How standards compete: Comparative impact of coffee certification schemes in Northern Nicaragua. <i>Supply</i>	Nicaragua	Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, Café Practices (Starbucks)	Household survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared Fair Trade farmers with cooperative farmers (under Rainforest Alliance and Café Practices labels) and independent farmers. Looked at impacts at household level, as well as some intra-household aspects (gender relationships).</li> <li>• Little evidence that Fair Trade households show greater gender awareness or higher gender participation (relative to other standards) or that women structurally increased their bargaining</li> </ul>

<p><i>Chain Management: An International Journal</i>, 16(2), 98–109.</p>				<p>power at either the household or the community level. This is despite several consciousness-raising activities, workshops and targeted credit programmes launched by Fair Trade.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The trickle-down effect of organized gender activities towards concrete decision-making is limited.</li> </ul>
<p>Bacon, C. M. (2010). A spot of coffee in crisis: Nicaraguan smallholder cooperatives, fair trade networks, and gendered empowerment. <i>Latin American Perspectives</i>, 37(2), 50-71.</p>	<p>Nicaragua</p>	<p>Fair Trade, Organic</p>	<p>Participatory-action research. Household surveys.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared 3 cooperatives (Fair Trade organic, Women’s Fair Trade and conventional)</li> <li>• After initial resistance, most male spouses supported women’s cooperative membership.</li> <li>• Overall low levels of women’s empowerment across all cooperatives, as men continued to occupy all the leadership positions.</li> <li>• In the certified cooperatives studied fewer women had land titles, so could not actively participate. Fair Trade was not supporting women’s access to land or their voting and participation.</li> <li>• There are some innovative cooperatives in Nicaragua which have high female membership and leadership. This is not linked to certification, but due to prior government policies related to autonomy of women’s organizations, granting of women’s land titles, etc</li> <li>• Most of the work related to women’s empowerment comes from local women’s civil society-based initiatives, local organizing practices, the national women’s movement and the consciousness it has created, and international development funding.</li> <li>• Participation in fair trade is not a panacea. It is one strategy used by coffee cooperatives and farmers, but many other drivers have converged to offer opportunities for empowerment (including the Sandinista revolution, collective organizing, state-sponsored agrarian reforms, female access to land titles and participation in international NGO projects).</li> </ul>
<p>Blowfield, M., &amp; Dolan, C. (2010). Fairtrade facts and fancies: What Kenyan Fairtrade tea tells us about business’s role as development agent. <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>, 93, 143–162.</p>	<p>Kenya</p>	<p>Fairtrade</p>	<p>Interviews</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customary norms of gendered rights and responsibilities have a considerable effect on the distribution effects of Fairtrade, especially on prospects for gender equity for smallholders.</li> <li>• Social norms that define work allocation by gender result in women and children performing the most labour-intensive tasks associated with production (especially weeding and tea plucking). Also women are responsible for childcare and domestic labour, such that most (78.1%) claim that this negatively affects their income earning options.</li> <li>• Time constraints limit their capacity to serve on committees, boards or from attending Annual General Meetings. Only 7 (of 240) registered women attended the Annual General Meeting in 2007, when the research was conducted.</li> <li>• Access to land also mediates benefits to Fairtrade and inclusion to voting, with particular impact on the resource-poor especially women. Women comprise less than 20% of the cooperative’s registered</li> </ul>

				smallholders so they do not have legitimate stakeholder status and direct access to Fairtrade benefits.
Lyon, S., Bezaury, J.A., & Mutersbaugh, T. (2010). Gender equity in Fairtrade-organic coffee producer organizations: cases from Mesoamerica. <i>Geoforum</i> , 41(1), pp.93-103.	Guatemala, Mexico	Fairtrade, organic	Administrative data, qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fairtrade-organic networks in coffee value chains can bring significant benefits to women (including improved access to coffee organizations, skilled jobs and higher prices), but these accrue with greater certainty to women who become farm operators. The mode of women's workforce integration is key. Farm operator status may serve to bolster women's property rights and improve their ability to take farm management decisions to their benefit.</li> <li>• Women's participation tends to diminish at higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. Managerial staff and boards of directors in certified coffee organizations in Indigenous communities are overwhelmingly male. This is due to: cultural biases that limit women's participation in public spheres; women not having time due to domestic responsibilities; women lacking required skills (literacy, Spanish fluency and knowledge of accounting and administration); barriers to attending meetings (lack of mobility and fear of harassment, especially when meetings were at night).</li> <li>• Some elements of the fairtrade-organic bundle can exert a beneficial effect on women's abilities to shape farm decision-making, while other elements can limit other gendered rights and responsibilities. Gender analysis of fairtrade-organic mechanisms need to do a concomitant assessment.</li> </ul>
Riisgaard, L., Michuki, G., Gibbon, P., Bolwig, S., Warring, N. & Rants, L.L. (2009). <i>The Performance of Voluntary Standard Schemes from the Perspective of Small Producers in East Africa</i> . Danish Institute for International Studies and Traidcraft.	Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia	Fairtrade, UTZ, Rainforest Alliance	Focus Group Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies of tea and coffee value chains that are certified.</li> <li>• Some female farmer groups (in Kenya and Uganda) reported active participation of women, that women attended meetings and contributed in meetings more often and there were more women on committees and councils as a result of the standard schemes.</li> <li>• In Uganda, female organizational representation happened prior to certification due to a stipulation by the Ugandan Cooperative Union. Female representation began as a condition of the Fairtrade Premium committee but was later transferred to all other committees in the cooperative.</li> <li>• In Ethiopia, female farmers did not experience an increase in the number of women on committees and councils but said women were better off. This was attributed to women interacting and sharing ideas with other women farmers through meetings, which was new.</li> </ul>
Lyon, S. (2008). We Want To Be Equal to Them: Fair-trade	Guatemala	Fairtrade	Semi-structured	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of female participation in the certified coffee cooperative's elected board of directors and in cooperative meetings. This is due to patriarchal relations that discriminate against female</li> </ul>

<p>Coffee Certification and Gender Equity within Organizations. <i>Human Organization</i>, 67(3), 258–268.</p>			<p>interviews. Life histories.</p>	<p>participation in the organization and women not actively seeking leadership roles due to their household responsibilities. Very few members were female (7 of 116).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women cooperative members and wives expressed interest in being more active in the cooperative but did not feel welcome.</li> <li>• Differences among certified cooperatives with some seemingly more willing to provide opportunities for women as leaders and managers, not only as producers. This may be because: they are often initiated by development agencies and there is a requirement for female participation for ongoing funding; new cooperatives have less entrenched power hierarches and include younger generations with more flexible conceptions of gender appropriate behaviour; newer cooperatives encourage female participation from the outset to satisfy certification requirements that they are seeking; or newer cooperatives engage in internal social auditing that help to identify and correct gender inequities.</li> <li>• There are examples of coffee cooperatives that actively promote female participation through gender training, forming female-only associations or actively requiring female participation.</li> </ul>
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## Annex 2: ITC Standards Map for 'Gender' theme\*

<b>Standards Map Theme</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Guidance</b>
<b>Gender - Policies</b>	<b>Gender issues: general principle</b>	Does the scheme include a general principle addressing gender issues when interacting with local communities?	Refers to the scheme including a general principle respecting equal rights for men and women (e.g. inclusion, and the acknowledgment of the different roles of women and men).
	<b>Criteria on gender policies and best practices</b>	Does the scheme require policy development and implementation of initiatives that promote gender equality?	Refers to the development of policies and the implementation of initiatives that acknowledge and respect equal opportunities on the basis of gender in the workplace as well as when interacting with local communities (e.g. community consultation, dialogue, complaints and disputes, engaging local knowledge).
<b>Gender – Violence and Harassment</b>	<b>Criteria relating to sexual exploitation / harassment</b>	Does the scheme include explicit criteria on sexual harassment to protect all types of workers including permanent, temporary, migrant women and men workers from any type of sexual exploitation or harassment as defined by the ILO?	Refers to sexual harassment, defined (by ILO). Sexual harassment is defined (by ILO) as a sex-based behaviour that is unwelcome and offensive to its recipient. Behaviour that qualifies as sexual harassment: physical violence, touching, unnecessary close proximity, verbal comments and questions about appearance, life-style, sexual orientation, offensive phone calls. Non-verbal whistling, sexually-suggestive gestures, display of sexual materials to its recipient.
	<b>Criteria related specifically to non-discrimination based on gender</b>	Does the scheme require policies and/or processes in place that prevent discrimination based specifically on gender in the workplace?	Refers explicitly to having policies and/ or processes in place to prevent discrimination based specifically on gender in the workplace and throughout the working cycle (e.g. hiring, firing, access to training, promotion, terms and conditions of work (excluding compensation), termination, retirement, representation in workers association, representation in higher management, etc.). This prevents gender discriminatory recruitment processes to take place (pregnancy tests or the use of contraception shall not be used as a condition of hiring or continued employment for instance, age and

			marital status should not part of the recruitment forms, no employee should be asked to sign a blank letter of resignation on hiring etc.).
<b>Gender - Agency</b>	<b>Criteria relating to women's rights at work</b>	Does the scheme include explicit criteria to protect women rights at work?	Refers to rights such as regular pay and regular working hours; permanent contracts; safe and non-hazardous work environments; freedom from sexual violence, harassment and forced pregnancy tests, etc.). This criterion goes beyond a non-discrimination clause, or legal compliance. It refers to any process or policy that not only protects women's rights at work but is further aimed at promoting women's (economic) rights (e.g. special quotas for women workers).
	<b>Criteria on grievance committee being gender balanced in its composition</b>	Does the scheme require a grievance mechanisms committee to be in place and being gender balanced in its composition?	Refers to an independent and representative decision-making body in charge of managing grievances and complaints, which is gender-balanced in its composition, in order to be fully representative, to be inclusive of women who are at heightened risk of vulnerability in terms of human rights violations, and of marginalization from grievance mechanisms. A confidential, unbiased, nonretaliatory grievance procedure should be established allowing women and men workers to make comments, recommendations, reports, or complaints concerning their treatment in the workplace including regarding gender equity. References: United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP); OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises.
	<b>Criteria on factoring gender equity considerations in stakeholder engagement process</b>	Does the scheme require equal inclusion on the basis of gender in the stakeholder engagement process?	Refers to stakeholder engagement processes, which are context-specific, meaning that techniques, methods, approaches and timetables need to be tailored to the local situation and the various types of stakeholders being consulted. This criteria refers to a gender-inclusive consultation process based on an awareness that men and women can have differing views and needs.
<b>Gender – Economic opportunities</b>	<b>Criteria on management systems practices to monitor, evaluate and remediate gender specific issues</b>	Does the scheme require to set up management practices to monitor gender specific issues?	Refers to specific criteria covering management systems practices including sex disaggregated data to be able to monitor, evaluate and remediate gender specific issues.
	<b>Criteria on access to financial services for women (payment, credit, savings, subsidies)</b>	Does the scheme explicitly include criteria on access to financial services for women	Refers to requiring specific access to payment, credit, savings, subsidies for women. The scheme organization may play a role in facilitating access to financial products that traditionally have

		(payment, credit, savings, subsidies).	barriers to entry for the most precarious and isolated populations such as women.
	<b>Criteria on family-friendly policies to increase the labour force participation of women</b>	Does the scheme promote active female participation through the implementation of family friendly policies?	Refers to promoting increase in the participation of female workers. Family friendly programmes or policies provide women more equal opportunities to enter the work force and to develop their work (e.g. paid leave and flexible work arrangements).
<b>Gender - Leadership</b>	<b>Criteria related to female workers' access to training programs</b>	Does the scheme include criteria on the provision of professional training for women, making suitable arrangements related to time and location?	Refers training that are made accessible to women and that imparts skills and knowledge for personal development and career advancement.
	<b>Criteria on incentives to women to develop their careers (e.g. specific training)</b>	Does the scheme promote incentives for women to develop their careers?	Refers to incentives such as equitable access to specific and specialised training and coaching; employment guidance and counselling services; leadership and management training; increased access to traditionally male dominated training; pay equity plans)
	<b>Criteria on ensuring participation of women/minorities in management</b>	Does the scheme promote the advancement of women and minorities in leadership/management positions?	Refers to the promotion of women/minorities in management and decisionary positions, ensuring that women/minorities get senior management employment opportunities.
	<b>Criteria on increased access to finance and support services for women entrepreneurs</b>	Does the scheme promote the implementation of gender policies to increase access to finance and support services for women entrepreneurs?	Refers to specific gender policies in place that encourage and promote increased finance and support services for women entrepreneurs (e.g. capacity building, Internet access where women can access information, networking programmes), including access to financial products and services that traditionally have barriers to entry for the most precarious and isolated populations such as women in rural areas. Innovative approaches and partnerships are needed to scale up better access to finance and support services for women entrepreneurs.



	<b>Criteria on development assistance policies which promote the economic role of women</b>	Does the scheme encourage the implementation of development assistance policies aimed at promoting the economic role of women?	Refers to increasing women's access to economic opportunity and thus earnings and productivity through development assistance policies (e.g. improved remuneration for women, child care benefits, paid leave).
<b>Gender – Women's Health and Safety</b>	<b>Criteria on women's access to health and safety services</b>	Does the scheme include criteria related to women specific health and safety issues, especially those related to/affecting pregnancy and breastfeeding?	Refers to the requirements asking to provide access to health and safety services for women workers, taking special considerations to women reproductive health issues (e.g. during pregnancy or nursing periods) (e.g. medical services, safety equipment, uniforms, sanitary facilities, etc.).
	<b>Criteria on special leave (sickness, marriage, family leave)</b>	Does the scheme include criteria related to special leave days, including sickness, marriage, family leave?	Refers to workers being entitled as per national regulations to full paid leave by personal reasons, including death of close relative, workers or relatives' marriage, house moving, etc
	<b>Criteria on maternity protection</b>	Does the scheme include criteria on maternity protection (as defined in ILO 183)?	Refers to entitlement to a period of maternity leave of not less than 14 weeks; the right to prenatal leave in case of (risk of) complications or illness; cash benefits shall be at a level which ensures that the woman can maintain herself and her child in proper conditions of health and with a suitable scheme of living (min. 2/3 or previous earnings); medical benefits (where not provided by the state); the right to return to an equal or equally paid position and the right to breaks to breast-feed--to be counted as working time. REFERENCE: C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000.
	<b>Criteria on child care benefits and on-site day-care facilities</b>	Does the scheme have criteria on childcare benefits and on-site day-care facilities?	Refers to specific criteria asking investments in/provision of day care facilities by the company.
	<b>Criteria on female workers' entitlement to breaks (e.g. meals / breastfeeding breaks)</b>	Does the scheme require entitlement to breaks (e.g. meal breaks) for workers; including appropriate breaks to accommodate pregnant workers?	
	<b>Criteria relating to factoring gender</b>	Does the scheme require the inclusion of gender	Refers to impacts and risk assessments developed with the differences between men and women taken into account. (e.g.

	<b>considerations in impacts and risks assessment of production</b>	considerations in impacts and risks assessments frameworks/mechanisms, including tracking sex disaggregated data?	lifting, twisting, chemical exposure, long hours, stress, and extreme temperatures can affect women more seriously than men due to physical differences. Pregnancy, breast-feeding, menstruation, and menopause can exacerbate these effects.).
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\*The ITC Standards Map can be accessed here: <https://standardsmap.org/en/identify>