

# Exploring the role of voluntary sustainability standards in women's economic empowerment in the agriculture sector in developing countries

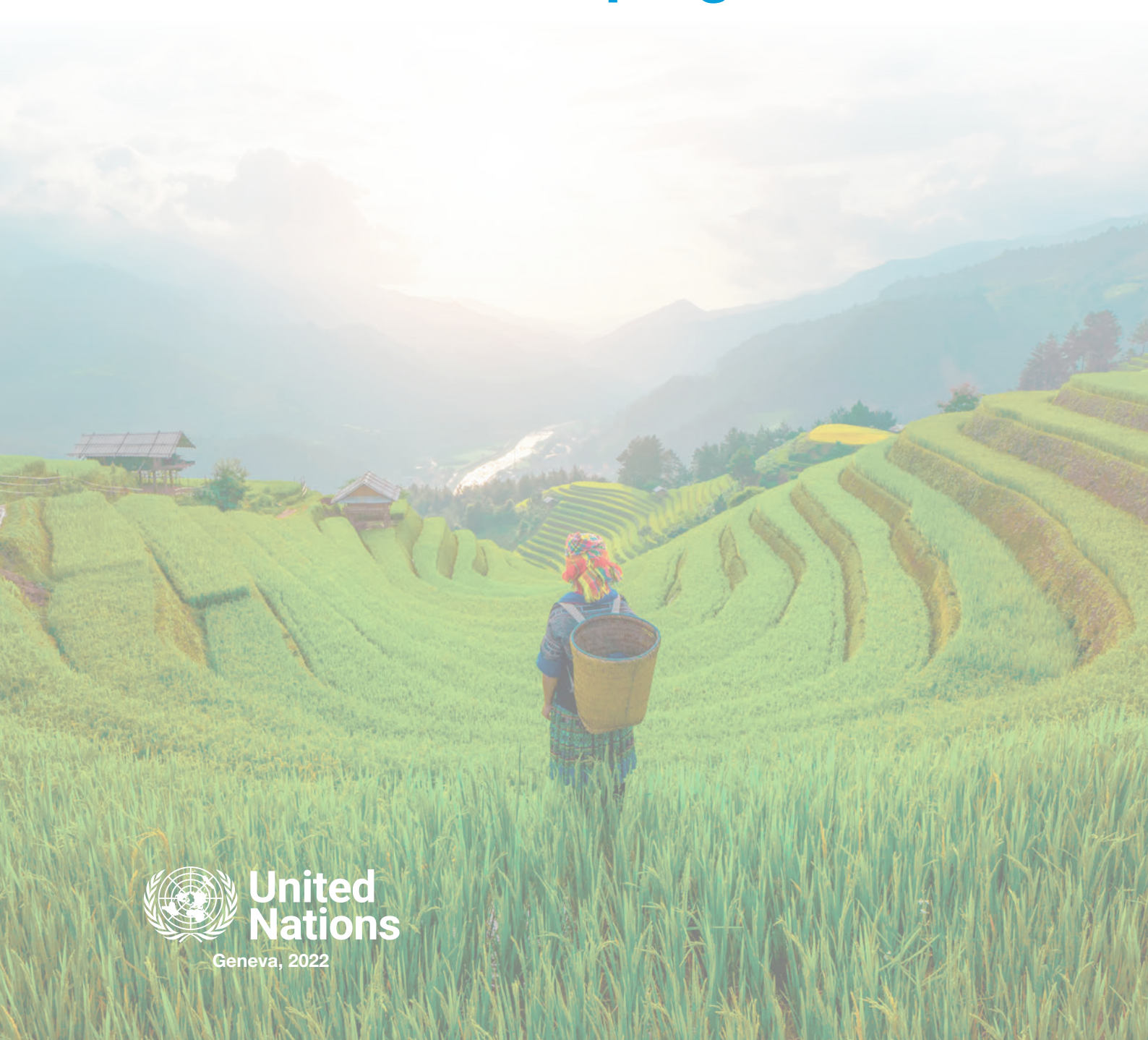


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United Nations

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# ABSTRACT

Women are equally as important economic actors as men, yet they suffer gross inequalities such as gender gaps in income and human capital, despite rapid improvements in global living standards and educational attainment. The compilation of evidence and data presented in this report proves that the many gender-related gaps identified in the agriculture sector in developing countries often lead to missed economic opportunities. Market demand tools such as Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) have been identified as having the potential to contribute to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, while fulfilling parity in the economy. These positive contributions, as identified in this paper includes possible equality in wages and income, and skills upgrading, and the externalities that expand from having better wages and skills. However, research indicating the socioeconomic impacts of VSS is limited in nature and often offers mixed results. Thus, the challenge of 'qualifying' these positive contributions of VSS have yet to be assessed when more independent empirical studies are available. While there are specific examples reported from certain countries, wider research in particular on Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) and the role of VSS is very limited if not non-existent. Thus, this report aims to first demonstrate the role VSS plays in fostering WEE; and second illustrate the contribution of VSS to the global agenda of SDG 5: Gender Equality with the available empirical findings on the impact of VSS on gender equality and WEE. The report also presents case studies where this link was investigated.

*Keywords:* Women's Economic Empowerment; Gender Equality; Voluntary Sustainability Standards, VSS



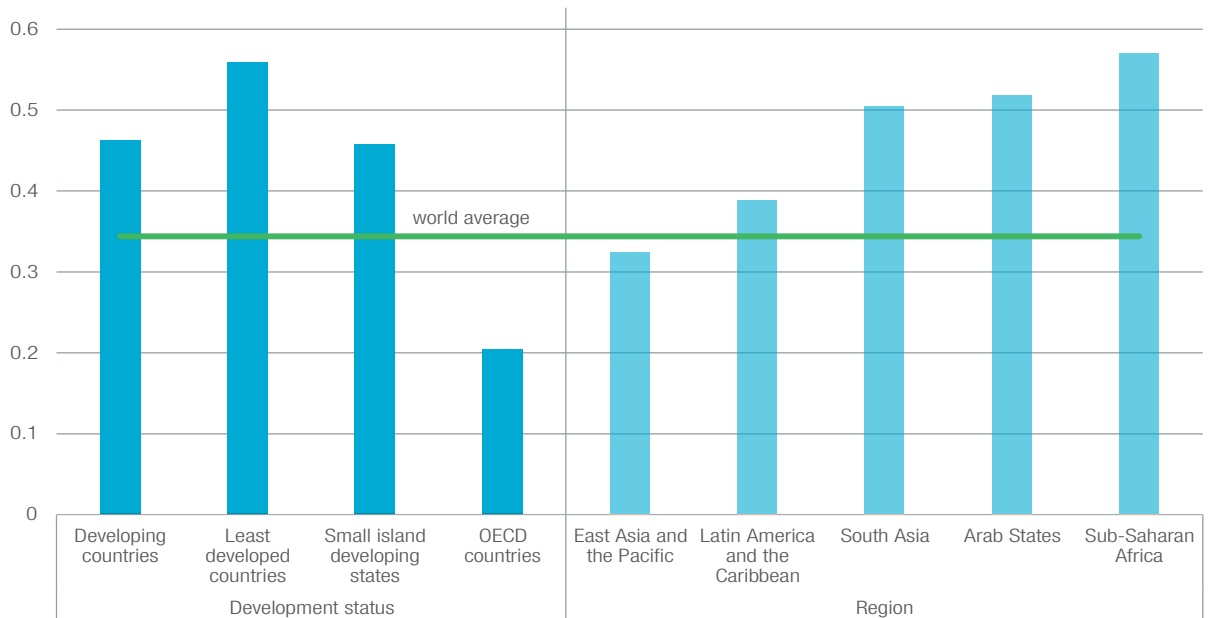


# CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Women make up almost half of the human population, yet they suffer gross inequalities: gender gaps in income and human capital. This continues to be the case despite rapid improvements in global living standards and educational attainment. Women continue to disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work and are subjected to gender-based discrimination and violence (Grantham et al., 2021; UN Women, 2022).

Although gender inequality is present all around the world, it appears more in some regions and countries than others, as can be observed in the Gender Inequality Index (GII).<sup>1</sup> Developing countries, Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) show above average levels of gender inequality. Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab States and South Asia tend to show higher levels of gender inequality compared to other regions (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Gender Inequality Index (GII) by development status and region**



Source: Authors' calculations based on UNDP data.

Gender equality is a prominent and cross-cutting feature of the 2030 Agenda,<sup>2</sup> and is key to realizing women's and girls' human rights and catalysing progress across all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN Women 2018). Empowering women on all dimensions can contribute to reducing poverty and improving the health and wellbeing of future generations and therefore assist in achieving the SDGs. Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) is central to realizing women's rights and gender equality. In other words, enhancing WEE sets a direct path towards gender equality.

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as the capacity of women to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways which recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity, and make it possible to

<sup>1</sup> The GII is a composite measure reflecting inequality between women and men and is denoted in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour. GII was introduced in the 2010 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

<sup>2</sup> For more information: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

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negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits from growth. Economic empowerment increases women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development, and market information (OECD, 2011).

In addition to the SDGs, many international commitments support WEE, including the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and a series of International Labour Organization conventions on gender equality. United Nations supports WEE in line with these, and with the growing body of evidence that indicates that gender equality significantly contributes to advancing economies and sustainable development.

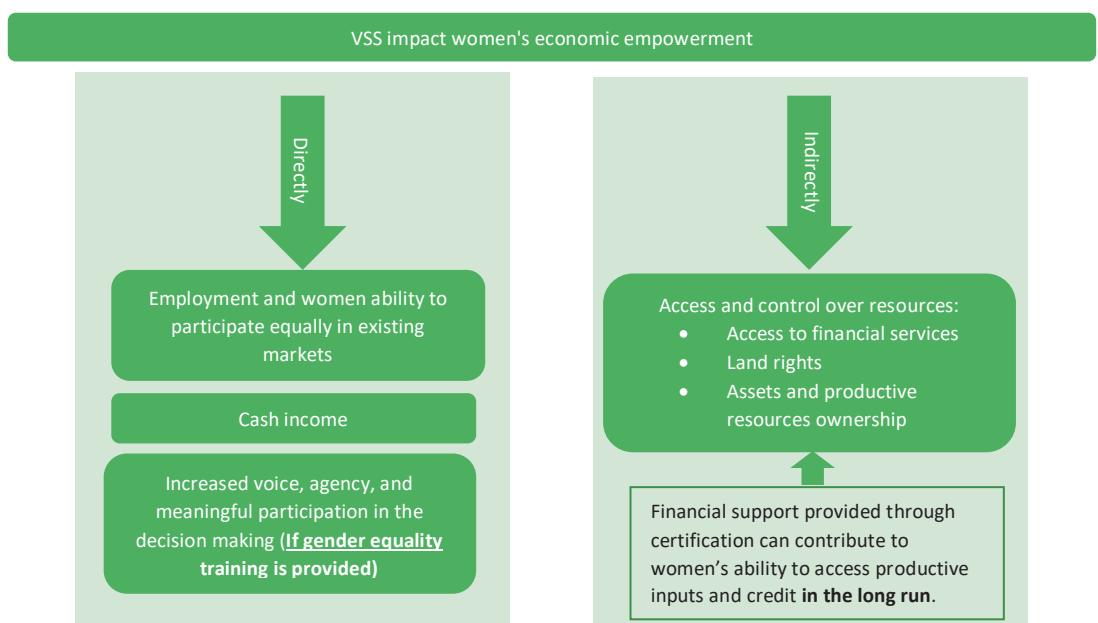
In light of the increasing number of efforts to accelerate the achievement of WEE, many actors are exploring the role that market-based instruments like Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) can play.

VSS have proliferated over the past decades, shaping trade in global value chains and their governance mechanisms. VSS are defined as “standards specifying requirements that producers, traders, manufacturers, retailers or service providers may be asked to meet, relating to a wide range of sustainability metrics, including respect for basic human rights, worker health and safety, environmental impacts, community relations, land-use planning and others” (UNFSS 2013).

According to research on the topic, VSS have the potential to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment in two ways: (i) the effectiveness of the standard at integrating gender into its certification criteria; and (ii) the outcomes from applying their design through specific activities and interventions by certifying bodies, producers as individuals and groups, and the organizations that work with and assist them (Sexsmith, 2019).

Figure 2 highlights the potential role of VSS in advancing WEE, directly and indirectly. Directly, through their explicit impact on employment conditions, their certification scheme financial support and by providing a higher and more stable income stream. And indirectly by enabling better living conditions, for example through expanded conditions for access to education and land rights and increased voice in decision making process. Financial support provided through certification can further contribute to women's ability to access productive inputs and credit. A stable income stream can also help with household food security.

**Figure 2 Role of VSS in advancing Women's Economic Empowerment**



## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

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Based on the theoretical framework in Figure 2, this report aims to study the link between VSS and WEE through both the direct and indirect channels. First, the report provides an overview of the status of gender equality and WEE in developing countries by focusing on the agricultural sector in these countries. The reason for the focus on the agricultural sector is that in addition to being a significant sector to the economy and international trade for developing countries, a considerably high share of women in developing countries work in this sector. Also, in comparison to other sectors, agricultural products have been found to be the most covered by VSS schemes.

The report then presents the link between VSS and gender equality by highlighting gender descriptions in VSS design and its role in fostering WEE; and VSS contributions to the global agenda of SDG 5: Gender Equality. The report presents empirical findings on the impact of VSS on gender equality and WEE and some case studies where this link was investigated. Finally, the paper provides a set of recommendations to enhance the role of VSS in order to achieve WEE.

## CHAPTER 2. OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

This chapter provides an overview of the status of WEE's indicators in developing, low-, and middle-income countries, with a focus on women in the agricultural sector. As mentioned before, the agriculture sector, both in terms of employment and its interlinkages with welfare opportunities, represents an important sector for women in developing countries.

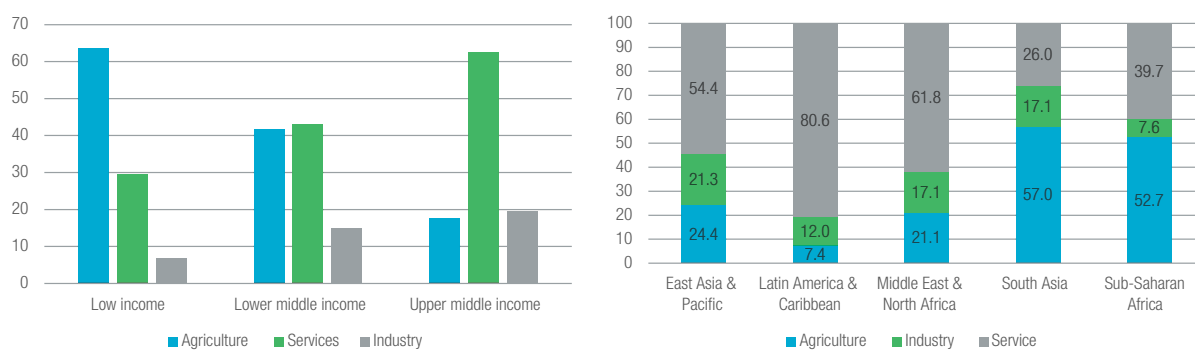
The report focuses on the following two themes on issues related to WEE in the agriculture sector:

1. **Wage and Income:** receiving access and control over resources, including, but not limited to:
  - Financial services
  - Land rights
  - Assets and productive resources ownership
  - Cash income
2. **Skills Upgrading:** receiving opportunities through employment and women's ability to participate equally in existing markets where VSS have been identified as playing a potential role.

### 2.1 EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME FROM AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT

Income and employment are among the key indicators to assess gender inequality in access to economic resources and opportunities (UNCTAD,2021). 64 per cent of women in low-income countries and 42 per cent in lower middle-income countries were employed in agriculture in 2019 (see Figure 3). This is especially the case for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa where in 2019, 57 per cent and 52.7 per cent of women, respectively, worked in agriculture.

**Figure 3** Female employment in agriculture, industry and service by income status and region in 2019 (modelled ILO estimate)



Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank data.

Although women in low-income countries are mostly employed in agriculture, data is unfortunately not available for all countries. For countries where data is available, it can be observed that women are paid less than men. Table 1 shows the mean nominal monthly earnings of men and women in the agricultural sector (2017 PPP \$) for these countries. In all seven countries that have available data, women earn on average 42 per cent less than men. In Chad for instance, women earn 85 per cent less than men in the agricultural sector.

**Table 1** Mean nominal monthly earnings in agricultural sector (2017 PPP \$) by gender in some low-income countries

	Burkina Faso	Chad	Gambia (the)	Guinea-Bissau	Rwanda	Togo	Uganda
Female	84	35	171	196	75	122	69
Male	485	231	247	245	87	159	117
Difference	-83%	-85%	-31%	-20%	-14%	-23%	-41%

Source: Authors' calculations based on ILO data.

## 2.2 ACCESS AND CONTROL OVER RESOURCES

### Access to financial services

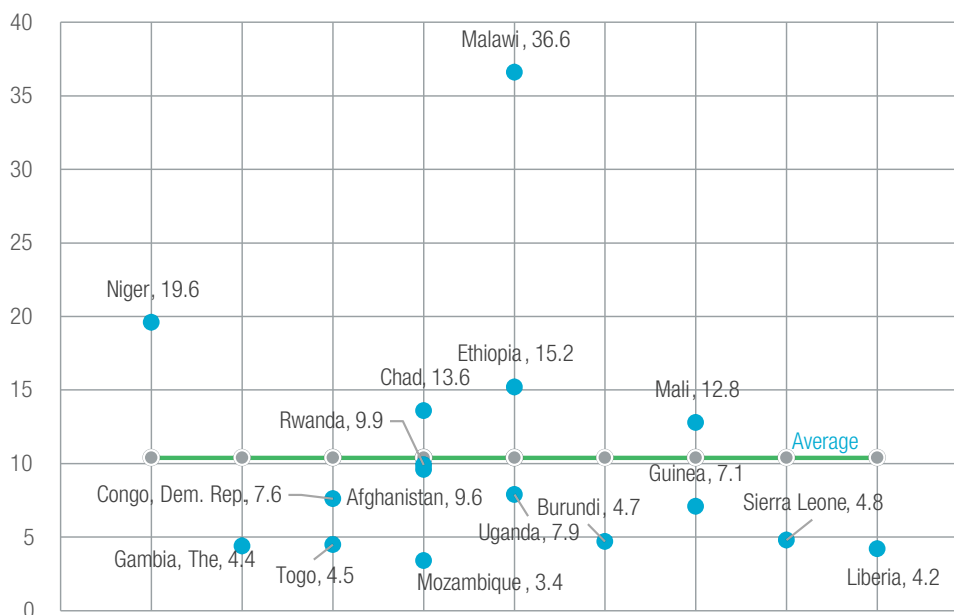
Women in low-income countries have less access to financial resources. In 2017, for example, only 29 per cent of women owned accounts at a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider, compared to 40 per cent of men (% of population ages 15+). Moreover, in low-income countries, only 6.6 per cent of women have debit cards and only 1.7 per cent have credit cards.<sup>3</sup>

### Access to Land

Although more women than men work in agriculture in low income countries, the share of women who own land is very low in these countries. Globally, women own an estimated 12.8 per cent of agricultural land (UN Women, 2018).

Evidenced from the data available in low-income countries, Figure 4 points out that (in most cases) less than 10 per cent of women own land by themselves.

**Figure 4** Women who own land alone (% of women aged 15-49) in some low-income countries



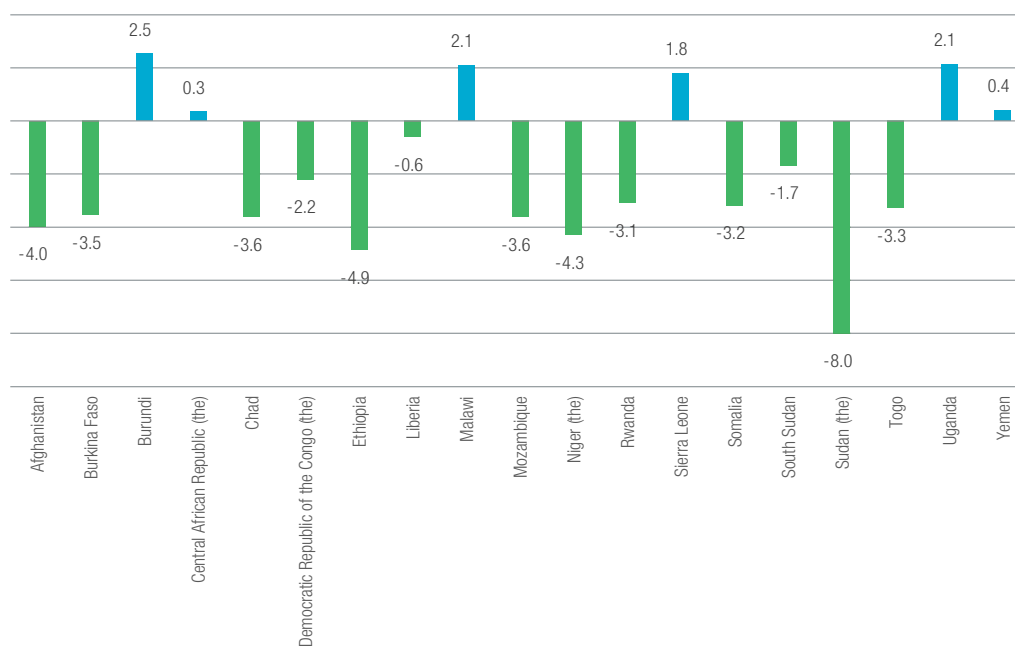
Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank data.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the World Bank's world development indicators.

## Assets and productive resources ownership

To determine female ownership of assets and productive resources, data reflecting the percentage of women who borrowed to start, operate, or expand a farm or business in some low-income countries is analysed. Only the countries included in the proceeding figure have available data. In line with the findings detailed above, fewer women borrowed to operate a farm or business in 2017 than men in most of these countries.

**Figure 5** Difference between share of women and men (% age 15+) who borrowed to start, operate, or expand a farm or business 2017 in some low-income countries



Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank data.

Additionally, in all low-income countries where data is available, fewer women own houses on their own than men. Based on our calculations using data from the World Bank, in some countries the difference is more than 30 per cent.



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## CHAPTER 3. VSS AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

### 3.1 WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Women are important participants in the productive sector of economies and perform a wide range of economic roles. Many of these roles are affected by and affect international trade directly and indirectly.

Existing evidence suggests that trade policies can have a significant and distinctive impact on women and men, particularly in terms of wages and employment, this impact, however, is multifaceted (UNCTAD, 2017). On one hand, international trade has often helped women participate in the labour force. Both data and research have indicated a potential positive relationship between women's economic opportunities at the international level and their competitiveness and productivity (UNCTAD, 2022a). However, the positive effects of women's economic opportunities from international trade can materialize only if the barriers women typically face are minimized. This includes access to resources (i.e., technical, productive, and financial), time poverty and mobility constraints, lack of skills and expertise and potential to experience abuses and discrimination during import/export are just a few supply-side constraints that women traders are facing. These constraints are deeply rooted in the existence of gendered social structures and are country- or sector-specific (ibid). Also, women can be disproportionately affected by technical trade regulations or standards because of the high compliance costs they face and the existence of gendered social structures (ibid). Thus, the impact of more open trade on individual female workers can differ widely depending on where they work, where they live, and their specific characteristics (The World Bank and WTO, 2020).

The competitive pressure generated by trade raises the cost of discrimination against women. While there are evidence where countries that do not allow women to fully participate in the economy turn out to be less competitive internationally, particularly those countries that have high female employment rates in their export industries (World Bank, 2012), it can also be the case in support of feminist heterodox economists of trade, that countries could leverage informal (and low cost) female workers to become competitive in international markets. Because they cannot "fully" participate (i.e. not benefitting in trade due to skills gap, especially where countries that have moved up the technological ladder in addition to gender stereotypes), women are generally underrepresented in higher value-added tasks and activities, which limits their ability to capture benefits along the value chain (UNCTAD, 2019). In what is known as *feminization of labour*, low value-added and low-wage export sectors such as garments, textiles, leather and toys commonly make up a large proportion of women's share of total employment. In addition, unfavorable working conditions such as low wages and job insecurity traditionally characterize women's jobs (UNCTAD, 2022b).

In the garment supply chain, for example, women workers make up at least three-quarters of the workforce.<sup>4</sup> Even though wage employment in agriculture has a positive impact on women, female workers tend to be paid less than male workers (as captured in the previous chapter), and wages, in general, tend to be low, especially if the competitiveness of the sector is based on price efficiency (which tends to be the case for global value chains in fruits, vegetables and fisheries, as well as traditional export commodities such as coffee, cotton and cocoa) (UNCTAD, 2019).

Therefore, gender mainstreaming is of relevance in the case of trade liberalization. Mainstreaming gender in trade policy has significantly raised the profile of gender equality issues in trade discourse, and international standards such as VSS can play an important role in this. Box 1 describes the trade impact of VSS, regardless of gender, and the proceeding sections will expand the contributions of VSS to Women's Economic Empowerment through international trade channels.

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<sup>4</sup> Where do women work in global supply chains? [https://gbv.itcilo.org/index.php/briefing/show\\_paragraph/id/40.html](https://gbv.itcilo.org/index.php/briefing/show_paragraph/id/40.html)

### Box 1. The Trade Impact of VSS

There are different channels through which VSS can potentially affect trade. UNFSS (2018) shows that VSS affect trade through their effect on the structure of the market, and on global value chain participation and structure. Sexsmith and Potts (2009) highlight three channels through which sustainability standards can principally change value chain structures. First, by converting products to markets that have higher demand and where consumers are willing to pay a premium price for items that have been produced under sustainable conditions. Second, by changing the relations of participants with other chain actors, policymakers and other organizations. And third, by altering the rules of value chain involvement and participation and shifting the distribution of authority to make these rules.

International standards can be catalysts or barriers to trade. One body of the literature suggests that these standards could lead to increased exports, as VSS provide a competitive advantage to complying producers, affirm high product quality and signal sustainable production practices that facilitate their access to foreign markets. Studies that confirmed the favourable impact of VSS on trade attributed this to a demand enhancing effect, reduced information asymmetries and transaction costs, higher productivity and lower input costs.

However, a second body of literature suggests that the expansion and increasing influence of VSS have become a growing concern for suppliers, particularly in low-income countries. If VSS are de facto mandatory for specific markets, it is mainly small-scale producers that risk being excluded from export value chains due to high compliance costs and increased monitoring costs (Unnevehr, 2000; UNCTAD, 2008). Masood & Brümmer (2014) state that the negative effect of VSS on trade is captured through the cost effect, either the compliance cost or delaying effect and the drive out effect. Also, other non-financial obstacles like financial literacy are found to constrain farmers' adoption of such standards (Müller & Theuvsen, 2015, in addition to regulatory environment in developing countries Marx & Wouters (2015).

The main argument for voluntary standards having a deleterious impact on international trade revolves around the burden of compliance costs (Hobbs, 2010). Mangelsdorf (2011) and Swan (2010) conclude that standards reduce trade when compliance costs outweigh transaction costs and otherwise foster trade.

## 3.2 VSS CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

VSS are generally not designed with a focus on women or gender equality (ICTSD and IISD, 2018). Among those VSS that do cover issues relating to gender, there is considerable variation in how this coverage is integrated in documents detailing standards and in how this translates into practice.

The clauses that relate to gender, according to the ITC Standards Map portal, include general non-discrimination requirements, as well as a number of other specific clauses and criteria such as: (ICTSD and IISD, 2018)

- General principles addressing gender, including commitment to gender equality and disaggregation data;
- Process requirements (gender policies, which could be overarching or specific human resource management policies; gender impact and risk assessments, usually associated with the specific workplace and procurement activities and risks that are analysed in a gender sensitive way);
- Specific criteria around women's workers' rights and protection from sexual harassment, which might include transparent grievance mechanisms and structures, membership and representation in unions and workers associations.

With these general requirements, implementation of VSS, according to the literature, has potentially contributed to many desirable outcomes. The following sections illustrate the role of VSS in advancing WEE, in line with the two thematic focus of this report – Wage and Income and Skills Upgrading.

### 3.2.1 The role of VSS in furthering equality in wages and income

Most low-income and least developed countries are economically dependent on agri-food and textile exports, both of which are women intensive sectors. Thus, empowering women in these sectors will enhance the economy and export potential in developing countries. For example, a study by UK Aid (2010) has shown that total agricultural outputs in Africa could increase by up to 20 per cent if women's access to agricultural inputs was equal to that of men.

Given this, it is important to explore the potential role of VSS as instruments to advance WEE in the agriculture sector. Gender equality in employment conditions is well-addressed by VSSs for hired workers (Sexsmith, 2019). Standards usually improve employment conditions when they are absent from national regulation, for example by requiring compliance with equal wage criteria in order to receive certification. This can be particularly beneficial to women workers, who are disproportionately crowded into casual and temporary jobs, where lower wages and precarious conditions are more common (FAO, 2011; Sexsmith, 2019). Table 2 provides some examples of criteria requirements of selected VSS that mandate gender equality in terms of wages and non-discrimination.

While Table 2 specifies some VSS requirements, it must be noted that these are not indicative of the actual impact or outcome that VSS have but rather that they provide an insight into the work that VSS aim to do. The Fairtrade standard, for example, has taken action to address the conditions of employment of women in the banana sector, who are often vulnerable to certain labour practices. Fairtrade certified banana producers are mandated to ensure equal employment rights among female and male employees. However, there have been challenges in the implementation of this standard and there is a need for stakeholders in the banana sector – trade unions, companies, government agencies and NGOs – to work together to overcome these. Thus, while the objective of Fairtrade is certainly to benefit female workers, more efforts are needed to maximise the impact of the Fairtrade standard (Fairtrade, 2018a).

In addition to fostering equality in living wages, VSS also tend to further Women's Economic Empowerment through the provision of price-premiums. Price-premiums are an incentive to participate in the certification program (Dietz et.al, 2019). Premiums provided by certification bodies are integral in benefitting women, enabling changes to decision making and governance structures in certified producer organizations and improving economic opportunities (Oya et.al.,2017). The Del Campo nut cooperative in Nicaragua, for example, uses its Fairtrade Premium to support women's emerging businesses (Fairtrade, 2019). Premiums are also being used to further the gender equality agenda. The Fairtrade certified PRODECOOP coffee cooperative in Nicaragua has also been dedicating a specific amount of its Fairtrade Premium towards implementing their gender equality programme. The cooperative encourages an equal distribution of work and resources for men and women and raises awareness of women's rights throughout coffee-growing communities (Fairtrade, 2018b).

Further, an alternative and complementary tool to third-party certification, known as Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)<sup>5</sup> is being adopted rapidly and is now widely recognized and accepted by The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). It has benefitted female farmers in Africa. Rehema Idd, a Member of Twikinde Group, a women's group based in Diovuva Kenge village in Morogoro, for example, reported that, "In addition to the benefits for the environment and health, there are advantages in the price received by the producer" (Sustainable Agriculture Tanzania, 2018). These price advantages mostly arise due to the availability of more avenues for selling the certified product.

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<sup>5</sup> "Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange." For more information, see: <https://www.ifoam.bio/our-work/how/standards-certification/participatory-guarantee-systems>

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS (VSS)  
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**Table 2 Compilation of VSS requirements that mandate gender wage equality and non-discrimination**

Standard name	Standard version	Requirement	Reference / resource
Better Cotton Initiative	Version 2.1	<p>"Equal wages are paid to workers who perform the same job, irrespective of gender" (Core Indicator 6.5.1).</p> <p>AND</p> <p>"There is no evidence of any policy, practice or customary rule that results in the payment of unequal wages on the basis of gender to workers who perform the same job" (Core Indicator 6.5.2).</p>	<a href="https://bettercotton.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Better-Cotton-Principles-Criteria-V2.1.pdf">https://bettercotton.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Better-Cotton-Principles-Criteria-V2.1.pdf</a>
Cotton Made in Africa (CmiA)	Volume 4	"The Managing Entity ensures that all employees and workers enjoy fair conditions of employment with regard to wages and contracts" (Criteria 5.9)	<a href="https://cottonmadeinafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/CMIA_Standard_ENG.pdf">https://cottonmadeinafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/CMIA_Standard_ENG.pdf</a>
Fairtrade Standard for Small-scale Producer Organizations	version: 03.04.2019_v2.5	"You and your members do not discriminate or tolerate discrimination on the basis of race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, age, HIV/AIDS status, religion, political opinion, membership of unions or other workers' representative bodies, national extraction or social origin in recruitment, promotion, access to training, remuneration, allocation of work, termination of employment, retirement or other activities" (Core requirement 3.3.1).	<a href="https://files.fairtrade.net/standards/SPO_EN.pdf">https://files.fairtrade.net/standards/SPO_EN.pdf</a>
Forest Stewardship Council – Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship	V5-2	"The Organization shall promote gender equality in employment practices, training opportunities, awarding of contracts, processes of engagement and management activities" (Criteria 2.2).	<a href="https://fsc.org/en/document-centre/documents/resource/392">https://fsc.org/en/document-centre/documents/resource/392</a>
ProTerra	Version 4.1	"All workers and applicants shall have equal employment opportunities, equal opportunities, and equal treatment on the job. No discrimination shall be tolerated including: any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation. Any distinction, exclusion or preference in respect of a particular job based on the inherent requirements thereof shall not be deemed to be discrimination" (Core indicator 2.4.1).	<a href="https://www.proterrafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ProTerra-Standard-V4.1_EN.pdf">https://www.proterrafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ProTerra-Standard-V4.1_EN.pdf</a>
Rainforest Alliance – Farm requirements	v 1.1	"Work of equal value is remunerated with equal pay without discrimination e.g. on gender or type of worker, ethnicity, age, colour, religion, political opinion, nationality, social origin or others" (Core requirement 5.3.8).	<a href="https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Sustainable-Agriculture-Standard-Farm-Requirements_Rainforest-Alliance.pdf">https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Sustainable-Agriculture-Standard-Farm-Requirements_Rainforest-Alliance.pdf</a>

### 3.2.2 The role of VSS in enabling skills upgrading

As mentioned in Chapter 2, another pathway for achieving WEE could be indirectly through skills upgrading – providing women with the right tools, education, training and any other form of support that can be leveraged to gain WEE.

VSS foster WEE through initiatives like tailor-made trainings. An example of outreach and training activities is the leadership school run by Fairtrade. As part of their Gender Strategy, the Fairtrade Network of Asia & Pacific Producers launched a new gender leadership school. The school focuses on business skills which can be a powerful tool for women, providing practical training in finance, negotiation and group decision-making, as well as creating awareness of gender equality. In addition, the school also trains men, helping them better understand the challenges women face. This school follows a number of initiatives across the Fairtrade regions to strengthen women's position and support them in taking on leadership roles. In June 2018, for example, 22 cocoa farmers (19 women and three men) from Côte d'Ivoire successfully graduated from the school. Many of these women have since been elected to committee positions, developed Women's Committees within their cooperatives and initiated projects to improve their income, such as savings groups and diversification projects (Fairtrade, 2019).

#### Box 2. Case-in-point - Supporting women to thrive economically in Mesoamerica (Rainforest Alliance, 2021b)

Rainforest Alliance is running a project (2020-2025) to address systemic inequalities and help women thrive economically. The project targets some of the most at-risk, marginalized women in communities across Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, who suffer, among other challenges, from or are at risk of forms of violence, trafficking and forced labour.

The project aims to provide training, technical assistance, enterprise development and seed investments to women to ensure that economic growth opportunities are available to them. The project's target is to train more than 3700 women, establish at least 30 new business agreements, and distribute at least US \$1,000,000 in seed capital financing for women. The focus areas of the project are:

- The integration of women into the workforce: This is to be done through trainings and capacity building programmes on key topics like business development, leadership and human rights.
- Encourage women entrepreneurs: The project will set up a Women's Entrepreneurship Fund to provide seed funding to women-owned or led businesses, and help women succeed in starting or strengthening their enterprises such as producing and selling homemade chocolate or selling eggs from local hens.
- Ensure women are enabled in the economy: The project will establish Women's Leadership Alliances. This will be key for providing support to women and linking them with cooperatives, business associations, entrepreneurial support groups and women's groups.

Another example of VSS providing support is an IFOAM organization which runs a 'Training Module on Gender in Organic Agriculture'. It details the main gender issues for small-scale farmers in organic agriculture in tropical regions. It takes into account the differences in relevant gender issues between Asia, Africa and Latin America, and also between different communities within the continents. The module also contains advice for trainers on how to achieve high participation rates of women in the training course (IFOAM, 2018).

Better cotton Initiative (BCI) also provides trainings to foster women's empowerment. These include helping them learn about more efficient harvesting techniques, raising their awareness of the importance of equal pay through special role play sketches for radio and television, raising awareness of issues connected to maternal and infant health and increasingly focusing on economic empowerment. In 2018-19, 39 per cent of the farmers and farm workers who received training in Mali were women (BCI, 2020).

**Box 3. Improving the conditions of women through education, training and better living conditions**

WEE goes beyond increasing women's income. One example of VSS going beyond the wage improvement is of The Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF). Through its Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) standard, it aims to further the personal development of women by ensuring equality in terms of access to resources and opportunities. Apart from the already existing requirements in the CmiA standard, CmiA provides training courses in sustainable cotton cultivation. These courses are specifically modified to address the needs of female participants. In addition, female trainers are appointed as lead farmers in order to strengthen their role within the training groups (CmiA, 2021a, 2021b).

CmiA also runs the Community Cooperation Programme (CCCP) in which, along with its partners, it aims to support female farmers beyond the domain of cotton cultivation in Sub-Saharan Africa. CmiA operates extensively in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is common that female cotton farmers do most of the work in the field and at home, but often do not possess the same rights and position as men. In light of this, CmiA had been an avid advocate of women's rights and their position in society as well as in business together with its local partners, CmiA certified cotton companies. It has set up women's clubs, supported income-generating projects for women's groups and implemented gender equality measures within cotton growing areas. CmiA also encourages the introduction of positions for gender officers, who help start income-generating activities, within CmiA certified cotton companies (CmiA, 2019). Overall, CmiA has formed 70 women's clubs and started 5 women's projects.

Through CCCP, focus is also being set on improving the health and education of women in the concerned communities. In most regions where CmiA operates, traditionally, it has been the role of women and girls to collect water for the family. More often than not, they need to walk long distances and carry heavy loads. In order to address this issue, CmiA has focussed on building wells. In the country of Côte d'Ivoire in western Africa, for example, the CIDT – a partner cotton company – has built a water pump in the Toden (Mankono) village (CmiA, 2021b).

### **3.2.3 Synthesizing VSS contributions to WEE**

Extending from Section 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 in raising the possibilities for VSS to address gender gap wages and income as well as skills upgrading, this section provides a synthesis of its positive externalities through the role of VSS in furthering WEE.



Table 3 VSS and synthesis of evidence

Objectives that can further WEE	Potential role of VSS in furthering the WEE agenda	Synthesis of evidence
Better employment conditions	VSS include non-discriminatory employment practices in their criteria requirements	<p>Many VSS now follow ILO principles and include mandatory compliance with the clause for adopting non-discriminatory practices among their own principles and criteria requirements. For example, agricultural VSS like Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade international standard and IFOAM organic international have requirements for non-discrimination when recruiting workers. Although, most of the times these policies extend beyond discrimination based solely on gender, they do highlight the importance of men and women getting equal opportunities in terms of employment. Further, some standards also promote the uptake of activities that enable women to be employed and earn their own incomes. RSPO, for example, mentions that it promotes incentives, like trainings, to help women develop their careers in the palm oil sector (RSPO, 2020). In general, research indicates that in plantation agriculture, has the capacity to influence women's participation in waged work (Sexsmith, 2019). These requirements on equality in wages and activities to improve income can benefit women workers who, as mentioned in previous chapters, are often deprived of rightful wages and employment benefits.</p>
	Many agricultural VSS also include a separate gender non-discrimination policy	<p>VSS have also started establishing separate gender policies. The principles of Fairtrade International and Rainforest Alliance, for instance, include a gender non-discrimination policy addressing women's workplace equity or women's equal opportunities for advancement (AgriLinks, 2018). This is, however, more prevalent among the longer-running and older VSS initiatives. Additionally, some VSS, like RSPO, recognize the lack of female participation and have started including policies for encouraging initiatives that support gender equality and the inclusion of women in stakeholder engagement. In a study done by IISD on the seven leading standards in the agriculture sector, it was reported that all of them mentioned a gender non-discrimination policy (Sexsmith, 2019).</p> <p>Additionally, many/all standards have also made efforts to incorporate requirements/ recommendations for the inclusion of policies at work that allow for better working conditions for women. Most often, this includes critical aspects like allowance of maternity leave, breaks and flexibility for nursing mothers and separation of worksite sanitation or rest facilities for women and men. Fairtrade international standard for small holders, Fairtrade international standard for hired labour and Rainforest Alliance, for instance, mandate providing maternity leave for women and having separate worksite facilities for women.</p> <p>Studies have also reflected that certified farms are four times more likely to have occupational safety and health policies than non-certified farms (Giovannucci and Potts, 2008). In the case of organic certification for example, the use of harmful chemicals is eliminated and that is a positive advancement for pregnant women workers. In addition, VSS also include requirements for policies that prohibit any form of sexual harassment in the workplace.</p>

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Objectives that can further WEE	Potential role of VSS in furthering the WEE agenda	Synthesis of evidence
		<p>Additionally, VSS, especially in sectors where there are more women workers, like tea, have initiated the establishment of childcare facilities in the workplace and access to childcare for workers. Given that women are the primary care givers in the household, working in the fields can become tougher for them. In this light, an important initiative that has been taken up by many VSS is the inclusion of requirements for access to childcare for workers.</p> <p>Given the data analyses presented in Chapter 2, it is crucial that these efforts are made. They might be small steps, but they do ensure that at least some attention is being paid to making working conditions more conducive to female workers in the agriculture sector.</p>
Providing financial support	Many VSS mention that workers should have the right to a living wage irrespective of gender	<p>Almost all agricultural VSS mandate the right to a living wage for all workers. Although none of the VSS specifically mention gender in their living wage requirements, it follows that if women workers are employed, they should have the same right to living wage as men. A study done on 25 VSSs noted that 32 per cent of VSS mandate a living wage and 16 per cent rigorously support collective bargaining, indicating a long road of work ahead for VSSs (Bennett, 2017). Indeed living wage inclusion is important to consider in WEE as we noticed from data presented in Chapter 2 that even though the agriculture sector employs many women, they are not paid at par with their male counterparts or are even denied basic wages. What is imperative in this context is that the workers should know that they are working for a certified farm and have the right to a living wage.</p>
	VSS offer benefits from price premiums	<p>Price premiums are an extra amount of money paid to farmers on top of the selling price. Many VSS offer the benefit of price premiums. These price premiums can then be used for a multitude of purposes. In the case of Fairtrade, for example, we illustrated in Section 3.3 how the premium is being used to support women's emerging businesses in Nicaragua. This extra income is an important resource for encouraging and promoting more gender equality programmes and is being used by communities to develop schools and provide other development opportunities.</p>
Increasing decision-making power	Many VSS include policies to promote education, training and prevent child labour	<p>It has been discussed that in many developing countries, women enjoy fewer rights than men, be it in terms of land ownership, agency or decision making. This stems from multiple causes. WEE is benefitted by arduously strengthening women's participation in training, increasing education access, etc., which can be done indirectly with the requirements of VSS certification schemes and the additional activities that VSS undertake.</p> <p>Many standards also propagate the agenda of education for children, although none specifically focus on girls' education. In India for example, Rainforest Alliance certified tea estates in Havukal and Warwick ensure that children have free access to a school run by teachers whose salaries are paid by the government (Rainforest Alliance, 2015). Standards like CmiA also work on community development through various projects like CCCP and focus on establishing better school conditions, like separate toilets and dormitories, to encourage girls' education. In addition, it must be noted that some standards like Fairtrade international for hired labour, IFOAM and Rainforest Alliance even call for 'Equal educational opportunities for women'.</p>

CHAPTER 3. VSS AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Objectives that can further WEE	Potential role of VSS in furthering the WEE agenda	Synthesis of evidence
		<p>Apart from the focus on education, many standards run multiple training programmes that allow women to take control of businesses by providing them opportunities, seed-funding and other necessary resources, and thus enabling them to have partial or complete control over decisions. These are crucial steps in order to accelerate the independence of women. In addition, such trainings are fundamental for women to gain more confidence to express their opinions on family-related or farm-related issues.</p> <p>The trainings and education that VSS provide are also imperative for increasing the voice of women and their decision-making role. For example, in Punjab, Pakistan, many female cotton workers traditionally work on their family's cotton farm, sowing seeds, weeding the fields and picking cotton. Despite their engagement, they are not treated equally to men and rarely participate in business decisions, with little say in how the farm's profits are spent. A tree-nursery project was developed in Punjab's Rahim Yar Khan District, involving around 7000 women. With funding from the Better Cotton Growth and Innovation Fund, WWF-Pakistan provided women with training, seeds, tools and the equipment necessary to set up their own businesses, allowing them to run small tree nurseries on their land (BCI, n.d.).</p>
	Some VSS include provisions promoting women's land rights	<p>Securing land tenure is often one of the most important household assets for supporting agricultural production and providing food security and nutrition in rural developing countries. Additionally, securing land tenure is often associated with higher levels of investment and productivity in agriculture. In many instances, women are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to land rights. One of the reasons for this is that women are less likely than men to have legal documents proving ownership of their plots or to have their names on the land ownership document.</p> <p>VSS have attempted in some instances to enable women to gain ownership of land and/or resources. For example, Fairtrade's Growing Women in Coffee project in Kenya encouraged the transfer of coffee bushes to women coffee farmers. As a result, three hundred women from Kabngetuny Cooperative received training on good agricultural practices and have increased the yield and quality of their coffee. This enabled them to earn an independent income for the first time (Fairtrade, n.d.). Additionally, studies from Mexico and Central America have reported that the requirement that farm owners be present during audits for organic certification has led to men who have migrated transferring land titles to their spouses (Smith, 2020).</p>

### 3.3 LINKING VSS TO THE GLOBAL AGENDA – SDG 5: GENDER EQUALITY<sup>6</sup>

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda brought to focus the key issues the world is dealing with, especially in light of the fact that the growth model currently adopted by the world is extremely unsustainable (UNEP, 2021). The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets within these goals address the multiple complex challenges that the world faces and point out the crucial need to work towards enabling better environmental, social and economic conditions. Formed as a result of one of the most inclusive proceedings undertaken by the United Nations, taking into consideration inputs from all segments of society and all nations across the globe (Busco et al., 2018), the SDGs reaffirm the notion that sustainability is needed in all three pillars of development and calls on all actors to take action.

Amongst these goals, SDG 5: Gender equality is, as the name suggests, specifically dedicated to addressing issues concerning equality between men and women. The global targets set for SDG 5 focus on ending all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices faced by women and girls; recognizing and valuing unpaid domestic work; ensuring equal opportunities for leadership at all levels; giving women equal rights to economic resources; using technology to promote gender equality; and ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health.<sup>7</sup>

SDG 5 is also an overarching goal, as it in one way or another relates to most other goals, like SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, SDG 4: Quality Education, and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries; all of which also indirectly present opportunities for empowering women across the globe. Gender issues are thus intricately woven into the whole SDG agenda.

As mentioned in Section 3.2, most VSS by virtue of their design have incorporated some aspect of promoting gender equality into their criteria and principal requirements. In a mapping done on the 270 standards present in the ITC Standards Map, 136 standards show linkages with SDG 5 (Bissinger et al., 2020). In the report, there is considered to be a link to SDG 5 when one or more of the criteria specified in the VSS' requirements can contribute to furthering the targets under SDG 5.

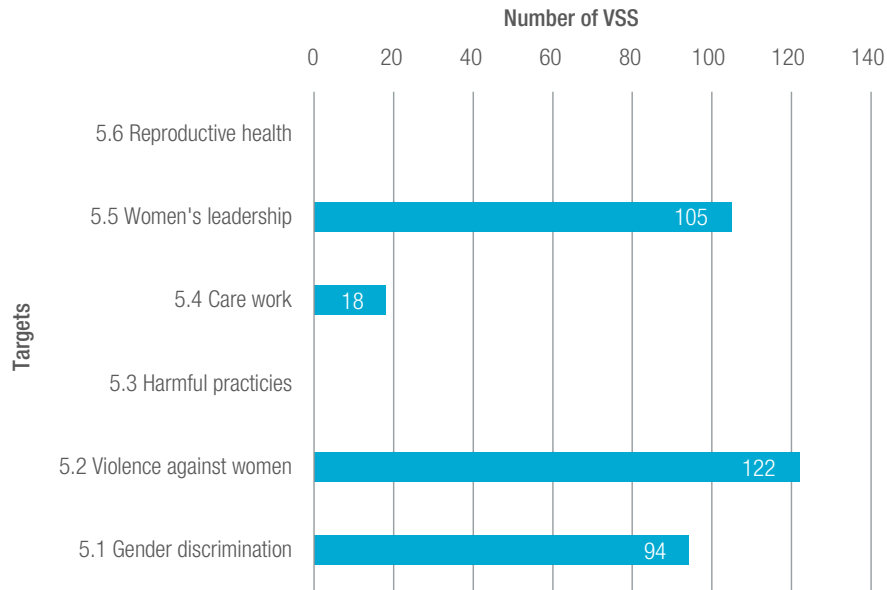
Out of the 6 targets under SDG 5, the report indicates that the VSS cover four targets (Figure 6). Amongst these, the maximum linkage is evident between VSS and target 5.2 (Violence against women) with 122 VSS addressing this issue. Following closely is target 5.5 (Women's leadership) with linkages to 105 VSS. From the perspective of a developing country's economy and in light of the issues mentioned in Chapter 2, it is very encouraging to notice a high linkage with this target as it focusses on women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The report notes that 94 VSS link to target 5.1 (gender discrimination) which supports the possible contribution VSS can make to ending all forms of discrimination. Only 18 VSS link to target 5.4 (care work). The report notes that target 5.3 on ending harmful practices like child marriage and target 5.6 on sexual and reproductive health are not covered by VSS, but this is because they lie beyond the scope of VSS. Furthermore, even though all targets under SDG 5 were studied, the report points out that issues like gender disparities in education, literacy and numeracy are beyond the scope of VSS requirements.

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<sup>6</sup> This section highlights the (potential) contribution of VSS to gender equality, specifically with regards to the targets mentioned under the SDG 5, contained within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on SDG 5: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

Figure 6 SDG 5 targets – relations to voluntary standards



Source: Authors' own illustration using data provided in Bissinger et al., 2020, p15

Women still face multiple challenges and suffer from discrimination in areas like wages, care work, employment opportunities and education. In its 2019 review of progress, the United Nations noted that although progress was being made on eliminating violence against women and girls, there was insufficient progress being made on the structural issues at the root of gender inequality, such as legal discrimination, unfair social norms and attitudes, decision-making on sexual and reproductive issues and low levels of political participation, which are undermining the ability to achieve SDG 5 (ISEAL and BSR, 2020). It is worth acknowledging that VSS, through their principles and criteria requirements, are making an effort towards addressing these issues. However, the impact that these efforts are having still needs to be assessed.

## CHAPTER 4. ANALYSES OF EVIDENCE

The previous chapter highlighted the inclusion of requirements relating to gender in many prominent VSS and the potential role VSS could play in WEE. In theory, the strong linkages between VSS requirements and some targets of SDG 5 Gender Equality show that VSS can play a promising role in advancing this target. In practice though, this might not be the case. To investigate the actual role VSS play in WEE, we consider findings and evidence from previous work on VSS in this chapter. We start first with the descriptive evidence that assessed the perception of VSS in gender equality. We then dive into the empirical evidence that can be found in the literature. Based on this, we provide an analysis of the strengths of VSS for promoting WEE, as well as the challenges they face.

### 4.1 DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE

#### 4.1.1. UNCTAD's Fostering Green Exports Project: case studies from the Philippines and Vanuatu

Under the project "Fostering green exports through VSS",<sup>8</sup> UNCTAD conducted an analysis of the conditions necessary for the adoption of VSS to benefit small producers and MSMEs, particularly in LDCs. It also identified key factors likely to create an environment which enables the meeting of objectives held by the various actors involved in VSS adoption: sustained income growth for smallholder producers, better access to international markets for exporters and the attainment of sustainable development objectives for governments.

UNCTAD worked with three participating countries to help them build their capacity for adopting VSS for their production of green exports: sustainable coconut oil for Vanuatu and Philippines (the); and organic coffee for Lao People's Democratic Republic.

In the three countries, different value chain actors, including farmers, processor, brokers and institutions among others, were interviewed on their perception of the certification process. The sections below describe the interviewee's views on the issue in relation to gender equality.

#### Philippines (the)

In the Philippines, a total of 102 respondents were interviewed, 41 per cent of whom were women. Respondents were asked first to identify the level of gender equality in their farms. The figure below shows the responses of farmers and workers (UNCTAD, 2020a).

On gender equality, including the contributions of the farms and firms to women's level of employment, participation in supervision/decision-making and level of income, at least 55 per cent of the farmers and 40 per cent of the workers perceived their farms to be contributing to gender equality. Participation in supervision and/or decision-making seemed to be highly unequal with more men being involved. Also, a significant percentage of farmers and farm workers highlighted that the income of women remains lower than that of men.

Based on Figure 8, workers and farmers either do not know whether the certification can promote gender equality or are mostly neutral on the issue. For example, only 20 per cent of workers and 4 per cent of farmers think that certified producers provide women equal opportunities for work.

The big share of respondents who answered with "I don't know" indicates a knowledge gap with regards to the role of certification in gender equality and socioeconomic sustainability. Those at the back end of the coconut oil value chain in the Philippines, i.e. farmers and workers, need capacity building activities and knowledge sharing programmes to help them to at least understand the idea behind sustainability standards.<sup>9</sup>

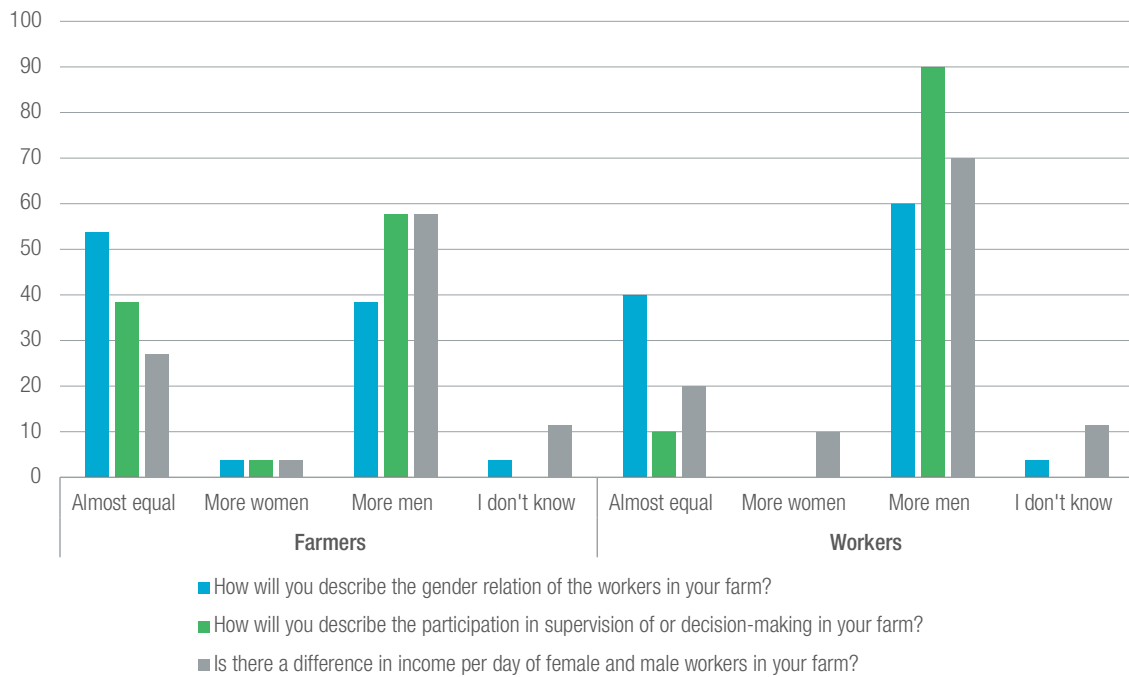
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<sup>8</sup> For more information please check <https://unctad.org/project/fostering-green-exports-through-voluntary-sustainability-standards-developing-countries>.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that these questions aimed to assess how much the workers know about the role of certifications (i.e perception) not actual impact on ground.



**Figure 7** Level of gender equality in farms of coconut oil: value chain in the Philippines



Source: UNCTAD (2020a).

**Figure 8** VSS contribution to gender equality in the sustainable coconut oil: value chain in the Philippines



Source: UNCTAD (2020a).

## Vanuatu

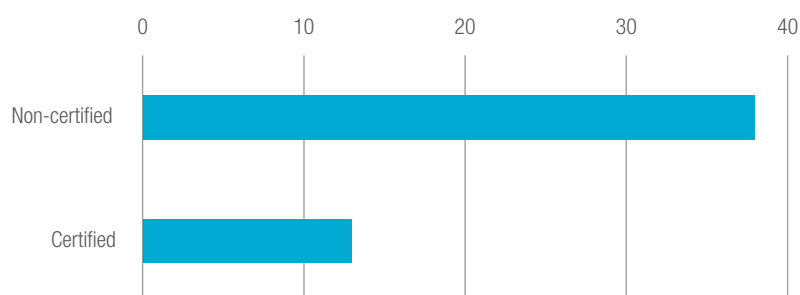
In Vanuatu, women accounted for 31 per cent of total producers/processors surveyed or interviewed. Among the non-certified respondents, 34 per cent were female (24 out of 71) and 19 per cent of the certified respondents were female (3 out of 16) (UNCTAD, 2020b).

The study included several approaches to increasing gender diversity in the responses collected. The survey questionnaire included questions to identify the gender of respondents, and to measure the perceptions of women's and men's roles within the value chain. Field research team leaders selected a variety of locations and times of day to provide a diverse gender mix of respondents.

In Vanuatu, women form a large part of the workforce in coconut growth and processing. Around a quarter of the respondents noted that women were found in management or supervisory positions in their operations. Within the current socioeconomic context in Vanuatu, this is a significant gender representation at the decision-making level in a productive activity. Improving women's access to training and information could further contribute to their economic empowerment within the coconut sector. When asked about agricultural training completed in the last 12 months, only 3 of the 24 female respondents who took the survey had attended any type of training. This accounts for 3 per cent of the total 87 survey respondents, compared to 22 per cent of respondents that were male and had attended some form of training.

Respondents were asked their opinion on whether certification could help increase work opportunities for women and whether it could allow more women to find meaningful work in agriculture. In addition, they were questioned on whether certifications contribute to aspects of gender equality.

**Figure 9 Does organic certification contribute to aspects of gender equality (% of not sure responses)**



As Figure 9 shows, only 13 per cent of certified producers and 38 per cent of non-certified producers are not sure whether organic certification can contribute to gender equality. This indicates that respondents, and mostly certified ones, consider certification as a means to contribute to gender equality. This also confirms the existence of a knowledge gap on VSS and their role and confirms what was found in the case of Philippines (the).

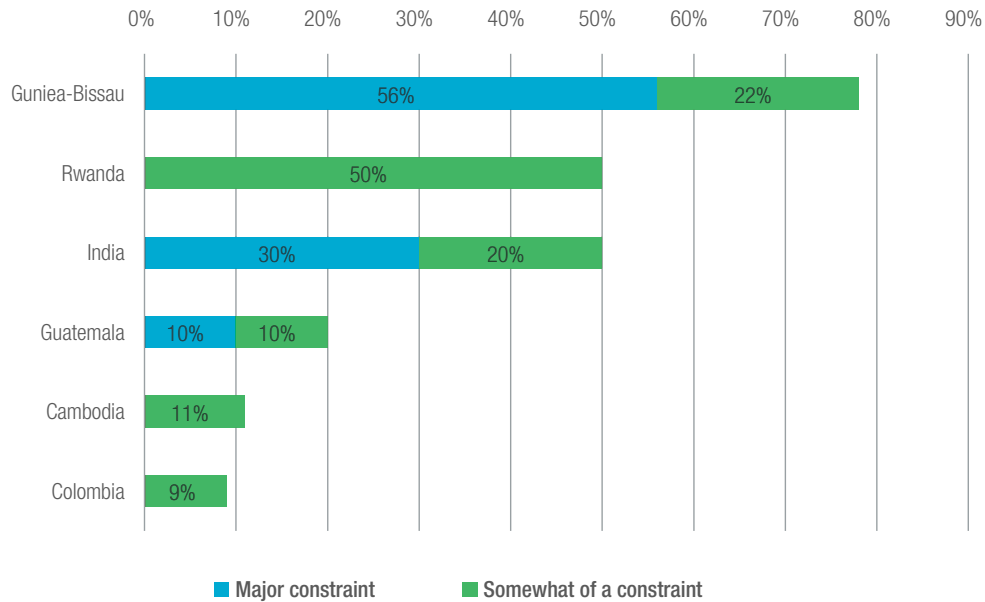
### 4.1.2 Understanding smallholder farmer access to VSS-compliant markets

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and UNCTAD launched a report in 2021 that examines the potential of VSS in the agriculture sector to reduce poverty. This report includes a chapter on understanding smallholder farmers' access to VSS-compliant markets.

The report draws on results from field studies and interviews with stakeholders from developing and least developed countries. The field study is based on information from interviews and surveys with the main actors in the six countries' value chains. This includes producers/producer organizations, governments, VSS/certification bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), financial service providers, and buyers. 57 actors working with the following six commodities were interviewed: Rwanda: coffee, Guinea-Bissau: cashew nuts, Guatemala: bananas, Colombia: avocados, Cambodia: rice, and India: cotton.

In investigating the social constraints to VSS compliant markets, the interviewees were asked whether the lack of opportunities for women is considered a constraint for VSS compliant markets, Figure 10 presents their responses.

**Figure 10 Is the lack of opportunities for women considered a constraint for VSS compliant markets**



Source: IISD (2021).

It can be seen from the figure above that while in some countries which lack opportunities for women this is specified as a significant constraint, in others it is not. Given the result of Guinea-Bissau and Rwanda, it can be stated that the poorer the country, the more a lack of opportunities for women is considered a constraint to VSS markets. It is important to note that the underrepresentation of women in the interviews may mean that the constraint was identified as less of a limitation than it may actually be.

In terms of VSS themselves, a few respondents said that a part of VSS compliance is the participation of women and that several VSS criteria address equal rights and employment opportunities for women. However, far more respondents mentioned buyer and NGO projects aimed at empowering women and promoting greater gender equality (IISD, 2021).<sup>10</sup>

## 4.2 EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Few quantitative studies have looked at the gender equality impacts of VSS. Table 4 summarizes some of these studies and their outcomes. It illustrates that different conclusions were reached. Some studies argue that VSS have a positive impact on WEE, others indicate that there is no change or even that VSS have a negative impact on WEE.

Although some studies on the topic may not be listed, from the 11 studies we reviewed, it is clear to see that more research is needed in this area. The table above asserts that the evidence of the impact of VSS on gender equality and women’s empowerment is relatively weak and case-specific and confirms what Giroud and Huaman (2019) mentioned on the lack of evidence on the impact of VSS on gender equality. This is the case for many reasons, including:

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2021-12/ssi-initiatives-review-standards-poverty-reduction.pdf#page=90>

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- Studies are few in number
- Studies focus on only a few standards (mainly Fair trade and Organic).
- With one exception, studies focus on one country, i.e. do not carry out a cross-sectional analysis across countries and value chains

**Table 4. Overview of the empirical evidence on the impact of VSS on gender empowerment**

<b>Authors and year</b>	<b>Research assumption/question</b>	<b>Case study</b>	<b>Standards</b>	<b>Impact of VSS</b>	<b>Result and conclusion</b>
Eva-Marie and Matin (2017) (Meemken and Qaim, 2017)	Can private food standards promote gender equality in the small farm sector?	Uganda	Fair Trade and UTZ	Favourable	Standards and their certification programmes increase wealth in male-headed and female-headed households. They also improve access to agricultural extensions for both male and female farmers.  Private standards cannot completely eliminate gender disparities, but the findings suggest that they can contribute to this goal.
Chiputwa and Qaim (2016)	Income and gender affect nutrition, and are both endogenous and influenced by certification.	Uganda	Fair Trade, Organic, and UTZ	Favourable	Estimates show that certification increases calorie and micronutrient consumption, mainly through higher incomes and improved gender equity.  Sustainability standards can increase women's control over coffee revenues.
Loconto (2015)	Can certified tea value chains deliver gender equality in Tanzania?	United Republic of Tanzania	ETP and Fairtrade standards	No effect	Sustainability standards fail to challenge traditional gender roles and inequalities, if men's dominance in farmer organizations and in cash crop marketing persists.
Sen (2014)	The ways in which women's collective agency can emerge within market-based production systems and how poor women farmers navigate inequities.	India	Fair Trade	Negative	Women in the cooperative did not perceive market-based trade as a problem; it was the gendered barriers within their community, unintentionally strengthened by fair trade initiatives that they regarded as the major impediment to their options for earning cash and supplementing their family income.
Kloos and Renaud (2014)	How Organic certification constitutes a suitable adaptation strategy in north-west Benin to make rural households more resilient to the increased likelihood of flooding, high-intensity rainfall or droughts.	Benin	Organic	Favourable (Indirectly)	Organic certification indirectly contributed to empowering women. Conventionally, cotton is cultivated with high rates of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, the application of which is locally perceived as a male task. However, the use of chemical inputs is prohibited in certified Organic production, making women's involvement more socially acceptable.
Bonnan-White et al. (2013)	The role of motivation and perception on women's participation in Palestinian Fair Trade projects	State of Palestine	Fair Trade	N/A	There is a lack of detailed information/knowledge most women have about how the global Fair trade market has the potential to increase recruitment and retention rates.

## CHAPTER 4. ANALYSES OF EVIDENCE

Authors and year	Research assumption/question	Case study	Standards	Impact of VSS	Result and conclusion
Bolwig (2012)	How the costs and benefits of participation in organic certificates are distributed among men and women.	Uganda	Organic	Negative	Women generally had much less control over the benefits from scheme participation than men did, while often carrying an equal or larger share of the labour and management burden.
Hutchens (2010)	To what extent are women empowered through Fair Trade?	WFTO-Asia	Fair Trade	No effect/ Negative	Fair Trade's 'charity' approach to the craft sector, reinforces traditional gender hierarchies.  There is an absence of a policy framework and institutional mechanisms that promote women's empowerment as a rights-based rather than a culture-based issue.
Bacon (2010)	Did male and female members of cooperatives selling certified Fair Trade and organic coffee feel more empowered than others lacking these network connections? What were the drivers of empowerment?	Nicaragua	Fair Trade and Organic	No effect	There were low female empowerment levels even in certified cooperatives due to the fact that men continued to occupy all the leadership positions and fewer women in this cooperative had land titles.
Lyon et al. (2010)	How will fairtrade–organic organizational and procedural norms affect women's insertion into the coffee 'value-chain'?	Mesoamerica	Fair Trade	Favourable	Women's engagement in fairtrade–organic coffee can improve access to organizations, property and income.  However, the burden of complying with norms together with stagnant real prices excludes some women who might otherwise benefit from expanded participation.
Lyon (2008)	Analyzes the understudied gendered dimensions of fair-trade coffee networks and certification practices.	Guatemala	Fair- Trade	No effect	The Fair-trade network is falling far short of its goal of promoting gender equity, particularly in three important realms: voting and democratic participation, the promotion of non-agricultural income generating programmes and support for female coffee producers.

Source: Authors' literature review.

### 4.3 CONSIDERING GENDER-GAPS IN VSS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

#### Gender data gaps and under-reporting of women's agricultural activities

Many developing countries do not have gender disaggregated data and do not always register different types of employment, making it impossible to analyse the extent to which women have been affected (ITUC, 2011). Women have diverse and multi-faceted roles in agricultural work, including as subsistence agricultural producers, workers for out-grower schemes and waged agricultural workers (Sexsmith, 2019; FAO, 2011). However, data on women's agricultural workforce participation may underestimate their actual agricultural work because women typically under-report their own agricultural activities and because some of their agricultural work is not officially counted as such (Sexsmith, 2019; Doss et al., 2018). Further, many women work as contributing family workers in the farms owned by their families, which would typically posit as under-reporting.

Furthermore, data on women participating in standards-setting and implementation is still almost completely lacking, as is a robust methodology for collecting this data (UNECE, 2019). Inadequate attention to gender in VSS could be related to a lack of representation of women in VSS regulatory processes, including agenda-setting and the development of standards, policies, and strategies.

Such under-reporting and the lack of data in general can make it difficult to assess how much change these VSS schemes have brought about for women and the companies they work for, and whether the incentives for companies are sufficiently large to enable the schemes to scale up

Thus, there is a need to establish data collection practices, as these data will play a vital role as a reference point and management framework for sustainable and responsible practices in supply chains.

### **Certification may affect women's time management and access to information**

Certification requires additional tasks to improve product quality and environmental management, and a number of studies have shown that, on smallholder farms, this additional labour is often provided by women (Sexsmith, 2019). In addition to the work needed to meet the certification's crop quality and environmental sustainability criteria, rural women's labour is also characterized by multiple and simultaneous activities including management of the household, childcare, farming and minding stock, etc. Such competing demands make women's time very limited and much of these chores are typically unpaid and unrecognized, thus making certification criteria to meet an additional burden on women. This affects their quality of life and their decision-making ability, reduces their time and mobility needed to attend extension services and trainings and prevents them from taking full advantage of economic opportunities through engagement in income generating activities.

Furthermore, extension and technical support are more likely to reach men than women as information on the use and upkeep of agricultural technologies is provided by agricultural extension agents, who are typically men, and may not recognize the work women engage in, or be able to effectively communicate with women. Sometimes extension advice is offered to men with the assumption that the information is passed on (FAO, 2016). As a matter of fact, women often rely on men for information about certifications. This also puts them at an inferior position when it comes to understanding the certification processes, costs and benefits.

### **Child-labour versus family farm activities**

Family farm culture and traditions can make it difficult to distinguish between children's participation in light work activities and child labour. Participating in some farm activities can give children the opportunity to develop skills and a sense of belonging to the community. However, it becomes a problem when farm tasks interfere with schooling or they are hazardous in nature. While there has been positive evidence of certification schemes fostering children's school participation, the way to establish acceptable children's participation in family farms remains unclear. Poverty and inequalities are the main drivers of child labour in agriculture.<sup>11</sup> However other factors include limited access to quality education, weak infrastructure, lack of social protection, low revenues from crops, inadequate technology or practices, the lack of resources for paid adult labour, climate and other vulnerabilities, weak empowerment of women and traditional attitudes towards children's full time participation in agricultural activities.

Certification typically prohibits child labour and can therefore render it more difficult for women with young children to perform agricultural work on their own fields or for a wage. This means that if standards do not address how women can bring their children with them to work, this may undermine women's ability to participate in agricultural work (Sexsmith, 2019).

Furthermore, the prohibition of child labour alone is not sufficient to improve schooling outcomes, rather there is need for increasing awareness and investments in local social development, and additional measures are needed to ensure child schooling. Many of these measures can be implemented by the certification schemes

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<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/stories/eradicate-child-labour-we-must-focus-our-attention-agriculture\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/stories/eradicate-child-labour-we-must-focus-our-attention-agriculture_en)

where governmental measures are absent, but certification schemes alone cannot fully eliminate child labour and improve schooling outcomes. There is therefore a risk of farmers avoiding certification entirely in order to keep children in farms for maximum productivity.

### Limited access to land rights

Women's unequal rights to land are not a specific focal area of certification schemes. Among certified farmers, women still have lower rates of land ownership and farm less productive land than men (COSA, 2013). In many cases, women's rights to land remain mediated by men under certification. Women are often excluded from services (inputs, financial, and technical) and organisations through which VSS are implemented by such unequal terms. Furthermore, women often do not receive the additional revenues from certified sales, nor are they members of producer cooperatives as frequently because membership is restricted to landholders. Thus, it is not surprising that women have lesser interest in certifications and may even be completely unaware of its benefits, since it is normally left to landowners to decide.

### Lacking financial literacy

The main constraint in accessing financial services is the high illiteracy levels of rural populations and the resulting lack of financial literacy and limited access to information on financial products and services (World Bank, 2014). The illiteracy of rural women limits the benefits from financial services they can access, as all financial procedures such as instructions, rules, contracts, statements, cheques, and letters are always communicated in written form (Murray and Boros, 2002).

This sets structural issues when it comes to VSS. The opportunities related to VSS are often impeded by women's lower levels of education, limited access to resources and finance and restrictions on their mobility. This often leaves women de facto excluded from VSS as the latter are more likely to work with first-tier organizations, where employment is more formal. These issues are linked to wider macroeconomic dimensions where institutional policy is critical.

### Limited contribution to community development

The points mentioned above have directly and indirectly contributed to women's absence in community development activities. From the issue of battling against time, where women perform multiple duties, to their illiteracy preventing them from gaining access to finances and resources and their limited access to land rights, women face a number of challenges which play a big role in making it difficult for women to be contributors to community development. If these challenges cannot be addressed, then the whole idea of increasing women's leadership for community development is far-fetched.

The FAO estimates that the gains in agriculture production from women's empowerment. Their increased involvement alone could lift 100-150 million people out of hunger (FAO, 2011). Furthermore, in a scenario in which women play an identical role in labour markets as men, as much as US\$ 28 Trillion, or 26 per cent, could be added to the global annual GDP in 2025.<sup>12</sup>

Given that women often do not own the land that is certified and membership is restricted to landowners, they are often excluded from becoming members of producer cooperatives. Therefore, if specific outreach to women is not undertaken, certification schemes can inadvertently reinforce gender inequalities in the access to information and community-related development programmes (Sexsmith, 2019).

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>



### Undermining food security

Abolishing gender-specific barriers in agriculture would not only empower women to achieve their highest economic potential but could also alleviate food insecurity. As mentioned earlier in this paper, if women had the same access to resources and education as men, agricultural production would be able to lift millions of people out of hunger. These income earnings would enable women to spend more money on health care and education for their children, investments that could produce long-term positive results for farm families and their neighbours.

However, it has been noted that VSS may inherently incentivize the cultivation of cash crops, mostly to be exported. Women are typically responsible for subsistence agriculture, which contributes to household food security, while men tend to dominate the cultivation of cash crops. Thus, the gender inequality of land tenures could be further exacerbated by certification, resulting in women losing their access to land for subsistence food production and giving way to the cultivation of cash crops (Sexsmith, 2019). This could completely undermine household food security.

For this reason, certification should also be studied for domestic food security needs beyond economic value, especially for countries that are particularly suffering from food shortages.

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## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The compilation of evidence and data presented in this report proves that the many gender-related gaps identified in the agriculture sector in developing countries often lead to a missed economic opportunity. While VSS are promising tools in strengthening WEE in the agricultural value chains in developing countries, they also come with some challenges and there is mixed evidence on the impact they have on WEE on the ground.

While VSS are able to fill the gap on measures to normalize gender equality that are absent within the public domain, the transformation of current practices goes beyond the capacity of such market-driven tools alone. Furthermore, issues regarding the lack of segregated gender data and overall public absence are still the bigger problems because certification alone cannot meet the larger economic targets. Many of the case studies in this report have been retrieved from the VSS schemes itself, unless otherwise mentioned. This is largely because of the few independent studies available in this domain.

Analyzing the available evidence on VSS and WEE shows that further methodological approaches to best collect the needed data and assess the impacts of VSS intervention on the ground are fundamental. The strengths and challenges highlighted in this chapter were also useful in identifying where and how VSS can be improved on gender-related issues and how they can be best leveraged to foster WEE.

Against this background, it is fundamental to consider some of the plausible factors which support the conclusion that VSS can in many ways foster Women's Economic Empowerment. The strengths identified in this paper have proven that VSS can do so, but the challenges require further refinement. Many of the challenges faced also require the engagement of relevant stakeholders beyond the standards-setting environment. The roles that can be played by the public sector, international organizations, non-profit organizations and even the academic community can contribute to the positive outcome of VSS in nurturing developing countries towards gender-equality for economic growth.

With the observations collated throughout this report, the following recommendations have been identified for VSS organizations, policymakers, development organizations and relevant stakeholders:

### For employment and training

- Our analysis showed that most of those at the back-end of the value chains (farmers and workers) are not aware of the role of certifications in socioeconomic sustainability and women's empowerment. It is vital to provide them with knowledge on the functionalities of VSS and their requirements. Standards organizations, international organizations, donors, NGOs and governments have a vital role to play in organizing and facilitating knowledge sharing and information exchange activities for farmers and smallholders in developing countries.
- It is important to promote the adoption of VSS which enable better working conditions for women and enable equal employment opportunities.
- Standard organizations, international institutes, donors, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders should undertake knowledge dissemination activities to make farmers and workers aware of the role of certification in enabling socioeconomic sustainability and women's empowerment.
- It is vital to conduct trainings and provide technical support to raise awareness on gender equality in general, and women's economic empowerment in particular.
- The local context and situation of target communities must be taken into account while designing these training and capacity building activities, specifically to focus on what economic empowerment means for local women's communities.

- To increase the participation of women it might be fruitful to encourage having female trainers for capacity building/training programs, especially where male-female interaction is culturally not yet acceptable.
- It can be helpful to provide training particularly for women to educate them about production and commercial aspects related to agriculture.

### For access to resources

- It is important to provide financial support to smallholder women and women's cooperatives to adopt and utilize VSS since the cost of certification is one of the major barriers in VSS uptake
- It is important to provide access to agricultural resources, like high-quality seeds, to women.
- We recommend to promote women's right to own land and ensure that these are more stable in nature in order to ensure that women have access to other associated benefits like price-premiums. Policymakers can assist women in having access to financial services and credit loans by encouraging financial institutions to open aid-programmes dedicated to women i.e to start business, buy necessary inputs, education, skills trainings etc.

### For decision-making power

- Standards can include women as partners in designing and implementing VSS, as well as assigning women as essential beneficiaries of VSS outcomes.
- Governments and NGOs can support the establishment of women's producer organizations. This would strengthen the voice of women within the value chain and would contribute to reducing power imbalances.

### For data governance, research and impact

- While VSS are certainly reporting on the multiple initiatives they are undertaking to support WEE, it is imperative to consider more robust and evidence-based reporting on the impacts of those initiatives.
- It would be helpful to support and encourage gender related studies and gather gender related data. With regards to the impact of VSS, it is necessary to gather data before, during and after the implementation of a VSS.
- It is important to increase transparency in terms of data availability on standards in order to help researchers and the international community conduct empirical research and assess the impact of VSS on WEE.
- Standards organizations should work together, with the support of NGOs, donors and international organizations, to establish common best practices of collecting and organizing data or offer assistance to create a systematic data bank for their scheme owners/country partners, as well as a user-friendly portal for the standards takers (i.e. companies/producers/auditors) to provide inputs.
- Given that the evidence of the gender equality impact of VSS is limited and case specific it is important to establish research collaborations where interested researchers from all over the world follow a similar methodology in data gathering and analysis. Hence, it would be helpful to utilize the same set of questionnaires and interview questions (that can be repurposed for different country settings and VSS schemes) in a way that enables merging these data into one model/analysis to arrive at conclusive derivations.

### On standards design

- Last but not least, it is essential to adapt standards to the local context in producing countries. This will make the standard more relevant and acceptable in these countries, which will eventually lead to them being more accessible to farmers, and especially women.

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