



Facilitating women's economic empowerment through trade with voluntary sustainability standards

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Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) expressed an overarching objective of leaving no one behind. SDG 5 holds integral to all dimensions of inclusive sustainable development. Gender equality is a right and ensuring the rights of women and girls across all the SDGs will lay the foundations for a just and equitable society that works for all. By creating enabling conditions for women to fully participate in the economy and offer their diverse skills and abilities, it would not only address the constraints rooted in the existence of gendered social structures but also drive the economy to benefit all.

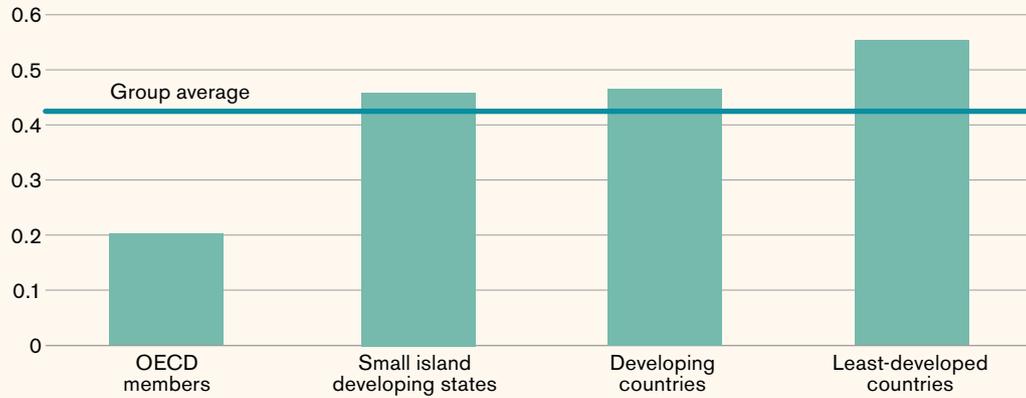
Voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) have been identified as a potential tool to realize women's economic empowerment, which is the ability of women to participate in, contribute to and benefit from the growth processes that recognizes their contributions to negotiate a fairer distribution of benefits. VSS may provide opportunities to bridge the gender gap through their non-discriminatory clauses, but the key is to realize that transformations go beyond market-based solutions. This chapter aims to dissect the potential contributions to which VSS can help empower women through impacts and provide some of the key priority areas where VSS can work for women.

Trade, gender equality and women's economic empowerment

Gender inequality: facts and figures

Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that is to be achieved by 2030. Gender equality features as a prominent and cross-cutting theme of the 2030 Agenda¹, and is key to realizing women's and girls' human rights and catalysing progress across all the SDGs (UN Women, 2018). In addition, empowering women and girls in all dimensions contributes to the achievement of other SDGs, including poverty reduction and improving the health and well-being of future generations.

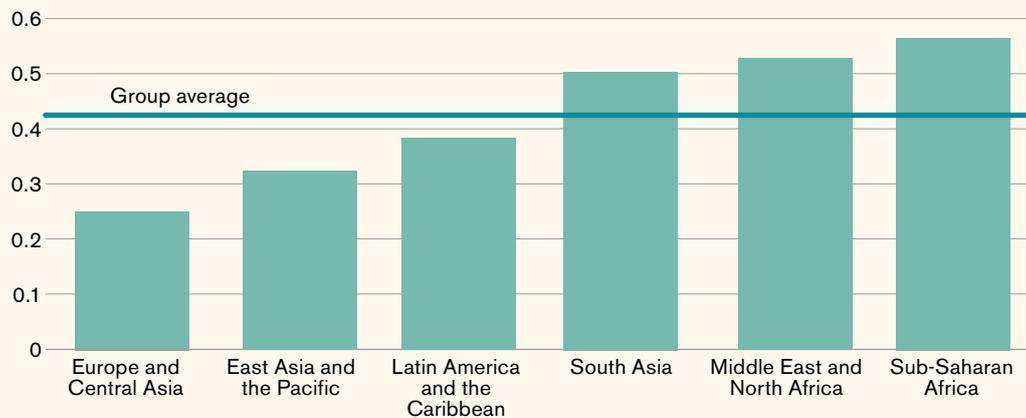
However, gender inequality remains prevalent all around the world. The case is particularly severe in some regions and countries, which becomes evident when examining the gender inequality index (GII) across both development status and regions.² When data are grouped by development status, it can be observed that developing countries, least-developed countries and small island developing states show higher levels of gender inequalities that surpass the group's average (see Figure 1). In addition, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia tend to show higher levels of gender inequality when compared to other regions (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Gender inequality index by development status, 2021

Source: Authors' calculations based on United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) data.

Note: OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

All around the world, and specifically in these regions, women and girls continue to be affected, struggling with job and livelihood losses, disrupted education, increased burdens of unpaid care work and domestic violence (UN Women, 2018). Over 100 million women aged 25-54 years with young children at home were out of the workforce globally in 2020, including more than 2 million who left the labour force owing to the increased pressures of unpaid care work.⁹

Figure 2: Gender inequality index by region, 2021

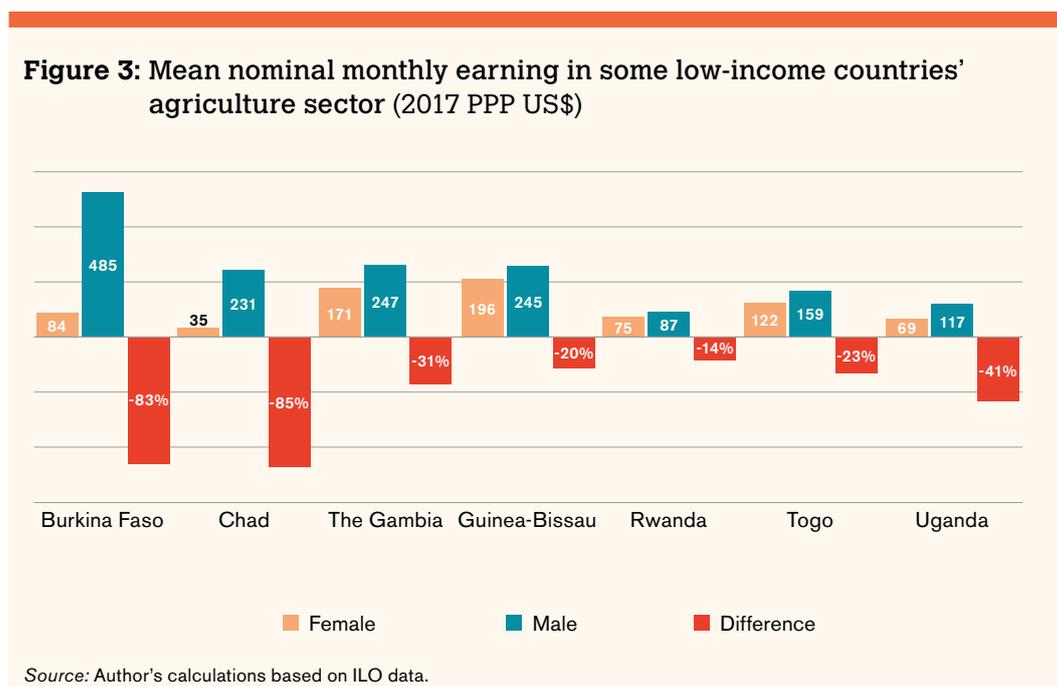
Source: Authors' calculations based on United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) data.

This chapter focuses on women's economic empowerment in the agriculture sector in developing countries. The agriculture sector, both in terms of employment and its interlinkages with the welfare opportunities, represents an important sector for women in developing countries. The World Bank Development Indicators reported that 64 per cent of women in low-income countries and 42 per cent in lower middle-income countries were employed in agriculture in 2019. 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 worked in agriculture, respectively.

Although women in low-income countries are mostly employed in agriculture, data are unfortunately sparsely available for all countries. For countries where data are available, it can be observed that women are paid less than men. Figure 3 shows the mean nominal monthly earning of male and female in the agricultural sector (2017 PPP US\$) for these countries. In all the seven countries that have 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. Moreover, although more women work in agriculture, the share of women who own land is considerably lower in low-income countries. Globally, women own an estimated 12.8 per cent of agricultural land (UN Women, 2018).

Trade and gender

International trade has often helped women participate in the labour force (UNCTAD, 2022), however, the positive effects of women's economic opportunities from international trade can materialize only if trade barriers are minimized. Technical trade regulations or standards due to their high compliance costs and the existence of gendered social structures can pose barriers to trade (UNCTAD, 2022). Access to resources (i.e. technical, productive



and financial), time and mobility constraints, lack of skills and expertise, are just a few of the potential supply-side constraints that women traders face when complying with these sort of non-tariff measures. These constraints are deeply rooted in the existence of gendered social structures and are specific to country or sector-specific contexts (UNCTAD, 2022). 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 (World Bank and WTO, 2020).

From a developing country perspective, the way trade affects women's participation as economic actors corresponds to the economy's trade liberalization. In the garment supply chain, for example, women workers make up at least three-quarters of the workforce.⁴ 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 section), and wages, in general, tend to be low, especially if the competitiveness of the sector is based on price efficiency – such as competitiveness based on price (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 unilateral trade liberalization. Mainstreaming gender in trade policy has significantly raised the profile of gender equality issues in trade discourse, and international standards, such as voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), can play an important role to realize this.

Against this background, it is essential to explore some tools that will enhance women's economic empowerment. This chapter thus focuses on VSS as one of the market-based tools that can facilitate women's economic empowerment. However, the cross-cutting issues that exist in certain societies, and the widely known unintended effects of VSS on trade, pose challenges that may aggravate the current issues against women. These issues include how certification may increase burden on women's time management and access to information due to childcare and other family priorities, limited access to land rights may undermine her exclusion from additional revenues from being certified, lack of financial literacy to consider certification benefits and limited access to information and community-related development, since it is restricted to landowners, typically men, and thus excluded from becoming members of producer cooperatives, which may inherently reinforce gender inequalities. It is thus important to address these challenges and capture priority areas where VSS schemes may immediately act upon.

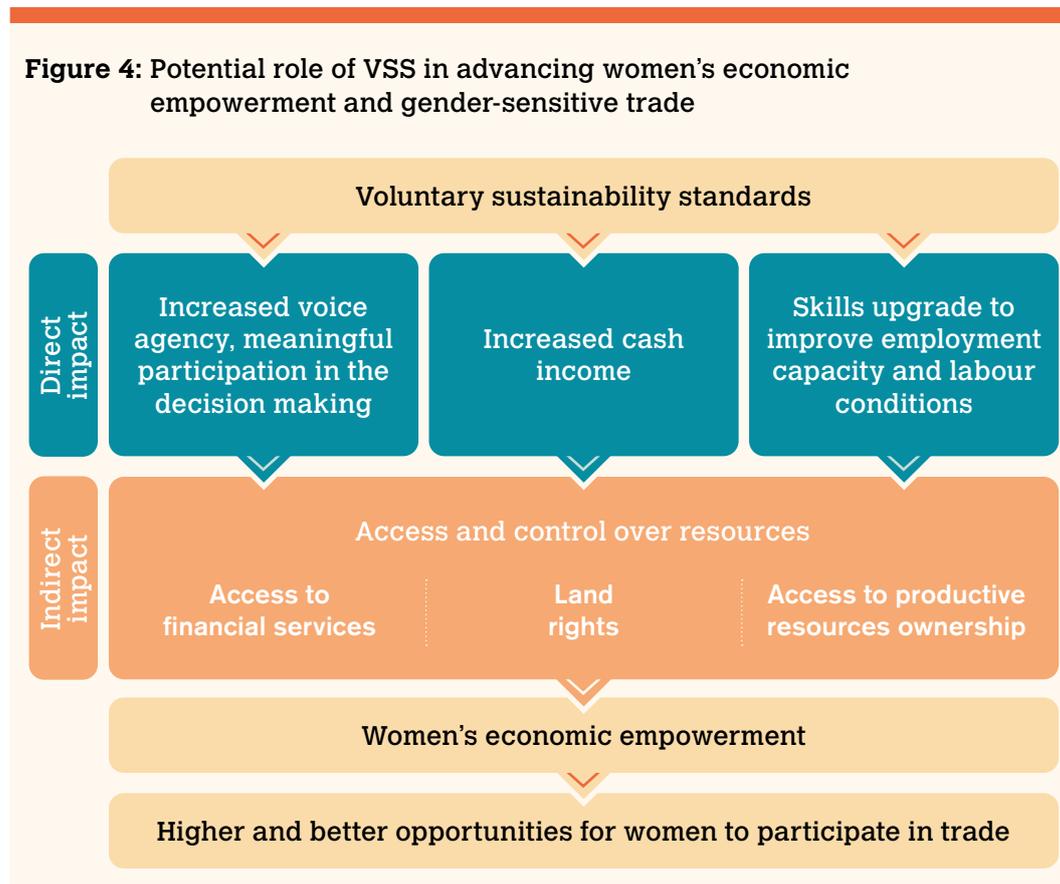
Role of VSS in women's economic empowerment and gender-sensitive trade

Women's economic empowerment is the ability of women to participate in, contribute to and benefit from the growth processes in such a way that allows the recognition of their contributions, respects their dignity, and makes it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of benefits for growth (OECD, 2011). Further, it is advocated that economic empowerment is essential to increase women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information (OECD, 2011). Women's economic empowerment is thus imperative to realize women's rights and gender equality.

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). VSS have proliferated in the past decade, becoming key components of global value chains and international trade.

Extant literature suggests that VSS can aid women’s economic empowerment and gender equality through: (i) effective standards that integrate into the certification criteria the elements of women’s economic empowerment and gender equality; and (ii) the outcomes that arise from applying VSS through specific activities and interventions by certifying bodies, producers as individuals and groups, and the organizations that work with and assist them (Sexsmith, 2019).

Based on the current state of play, Figure 4 highlights the potential role of VSS in advancing women’s economic empowerment, directly and indirectly. Directly, VSS can advance the women’s economic empowerment agenda through its policies on employment conditions and providing avenues for financial support. Indirectly, VSS supports better living conditions through access to financial services, land rights and access to productive resources ownership, among other things.



Higher trade opportunities for all: 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 global value chain participation. Sexsmith and Potts (2009) highlight three channels through which VSS can principally change value chain structures. First, by converting products to markets that have higher demand; 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 value chain actors, policymakers and other organizations. And third, by altering the rules of value chain involvement and participation, and the distribution of authority to make these rules.

VSS can be catalysts or barriers to trade. One body of 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 market access to foreign markets. Studies that confirmed the favourable impact of VSS on trade attributed to a demand enhancing effect, reduced information asymmetries and transaction costs, and higher productivity and lower input costs.

However, a second body of literature suggests that the expansion and increased influence of VSS have become an increasing concern for suppliers, particularly in low-income countries. If VSS are *de facto* mandatory for specific markets, small-scale producers mainly risk being excluded from export value chains due to high compliance costs and increasing monitoring costs (UNCTAD, 2008; Unnevehr, 2000). Masood and 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 to adopt standards (Müller and Theuvsen, 2015), and regulatory environment in developing countries (Marx and Wouters, 2014).

The main argument for VSS 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 the compliance costs outweigh transaction costs and foster trade, and vice versa.

Better trade opportunities for women through VSS gender-related clauses

The term “gender” refers to the social-constructed roles and behaviours of men and women, and the relations specifically in economic, social, cultural and political contexts (Randriamaro, 2005). Given the specific meanings, practices and consequences of certain gender norms, and relations driven by economic, geographical, political, social and cultural factors, trade-related tools such as VSS may come as “part and parcel” of the global trade development agenda.

“ VSS can advance the women’s economic empowerment agenda through its policies on employment conditions and providing avenues for financial support.

Although VSS are generally not designed with a focus on women or gender equality (Smith *et al.*, 2019), among those that do have some coverage of gender, there is considerable variation in how it is integrated into standards documents and in how this translates into practice.

The clauses that relate to gender, according to the International Trade Centre (ITC) Standards Map portal,⁵ include general non-discrimination requirements, as well as a number of other specific clauses and criteria such as (Smith *et al.*, 2019): (i) general principles addressing gender, including commitment to gender equality and disaggregation data; (ii) process requirements (gender policies, which could be overarching or specific human resource management policies; and gender impact and risk assessments, usually associated with the specific workplace and procurement activities and risks that are analysed in a gender-sensitive way); and (iii) specific criteria around women workers rights and protection from sexual harassment, which might include transparent grievance mechanisms and structures, membership and representation in unions and workers associations.

The fact that women play a key role in global trade and value chains, and especially the primary production of agri-food products (FAO, 2011), the impact of efforts to facilitate women build capacity to comply with trade-related tools such as VSS is important not only to ensure that women are not adversely impacted by VSS, but also for ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency that may come out of complying to VSS.

An inventory of evidence

Analysis of VSS supporting women's economic empowerment

A large part of the economic dependence of low-income and least-developed countries is on the textile and agri-food sectors, both of which are women-intensive. Reflecting on this, it is pertinent to examine the potential role that VSS can play in furthering women's economic empowerment in the agriculture sector. Prior research indicates that gender equality in employment conditions is well-addressed by VSS when it is missing in national regulations, and this can be advantageous for the women workers who are more than often disproportionately crowded into jobs with lower wages and poor working conditions (FAO, 2011; Sexsmith, 2019). According to the ITC Standards Map, 87 out of the 322 VSS included in the standards map have requirements that address violence and harassment, 48 have requirements that address gender-related economic opportunities and 77 that have requirements pertaining to women's health and safety.

Some VSS include gender equality in terms of wages and non-discrimination in their criteria requirements. Most VSS also try to incorporate the ILO Principles in their requirements which mandate having non-discriminatory practices. Bonsucro (2022), for example, mentions an indicator that the "operator ensures that workers do not suffer from discrimination". In addition, other agricultural VSS such as the Rainforest Alliance and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), known now as IFOAM Organics International, also require having policies that do not allow for discrimination in terms of recruiting people in the farm. Another example of actions taken by VSS is Fairtrade in the banana sector. It aims to address the issues related to the employment of women in the sector, as they are exposed to unfair labour practices. The producer organizations that are certified by Fairtrade have

a mandate to ensure equal employment rights among female and male employees which organizations must comply with (Fairtrade, 2018a).

VSS schemes' non-discriminatory policy and work conditions for women

Most VSS have now started putting in place gender policies that call for, among other things, women's workplace equity or women's equal opportunities for advancement (AgriLinks, 2018). Some VSS have also started recognizing the lack of female participation and have started including policies that encourage their participation via inclusion in, for example, stakeholder meetings (Sexsmith, 2019). In addition, VSS have also started adopting policies like maternity leave, flexibility for nursing mothers, and separate sanitation facilities for women that encourage their inclusion in the workplace. The Fairtrade international standard for smallholders, Fairtrade international standard for hired labour, and the Rainforest Alliance, for instance, mandate having the policy of maternity leave for women and separate worksite facilities for women.

Additionally, studies have reflected that VSS-certified farms have more occupational safety, such as in the case of organic certification, where there is a mandate not to use chemical pesticides (Giovannucci and Potts, 2008). Criteria like these also add advantages for pregnant female workers. Some VSS also include the requirements for policies that prohibit any form of sexual harassment in the workplace. In sectors that are more women-intensive, VSS have also initiated efforts like establishing childcare facilities, which provides more flexibility for women to work who are more than often the prime caregivers of the children.

VSS schemes may promote equality in wages and income for women

Most VSS call for providing a minimum wage to workers and some have even started mandating living wage. Research done on 25 VSS mentioned that 32 per cent of VSS mandate a living wage and 16 per cent rigorously support collective bargaining (Bennett, 2017). Although, no VSS (to date) specifically mention women in minimum wages and living wages requirements, the fact that they call for providing these to all employees irrespective of their background is indicative of the fact that if women are employed then they are also entitled to receive these wages. The Rainforest Alliance (2020), for example, mentions a requirement that "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." This aspect of wages is important in the light of women's economic empowerment because the agriculture sector has a significant employment of women, and women's wages in most areas are not on par with the wages of men. Furthermore, workers on a certified farm are made aware that they are entitled to a minimum living wage as per the requirements specified by the respective standard.

Participation in a VSS programme, in essence, is also expected to ensure better prices by guaranteeing that the certified products are sold at better market prices and have a wider market reach. The Participatory Guarantee System, for example, is being adopted rapidly and is a part of now widely recognized and accepted by IFOAM. It has benefited female farmers in Africa. Rehema Idd, 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" (SAT, 2018). These mainly arise due to the availability of more avenues for selling the certified product.

“ VSS have also initiated efforts like establishing childcare facilities, which provides more flexibility for women to work who are more than often the prime caregivers of the children.

There is research indicates there is a greater possibility to encourage women's participation in waged work in the plantation sector (Sexsmith, 2019). Some standards also encourage undertaking activities that enable women to be employed and earn their own incomes. For example, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO, 2020) calls for interventions like providing training for women to develop their careers in the palm oil sector.

VSS schemes' price premiums

A price premium is the additional compensation that is paid to the producers on top of the selling price of their produce (Marx *et al.*, 2022). This benefit is offered by some VSS in the agriculture sector and producers and producer organizations can decide how they want to use the money.⁶ Although there is a lack of gender-disaggregated data on the impact of VSS on incomes of farmers, it is indicated in some research articles that certified producers earn around 7 per cent more net income than the ones not certified – combined with an increase in productivity and benefit of price premiums (COSA, 2013). Price premiums thus provide an additional advantage and serve not only as incentives to participate in the VSS programme but also play a significant role in enabling better conditions for women. Extant research suggests the following main benefits of price premiums for women's economic empowerment:

- To aid gender-equality by improving general conditions, such as healthcare and access to water: The Fairtrade certified PRODECOOP coffee cooperative in Nicaragua has also been dedicating a specific amount of 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).
- To provide funding for women-led businesses: The Del Campo nut cooperative in Nicaragua, for example, uses its “Fairtrade Premium” to support women's emerging businesses (Fairtrade, 2019).

VSS schemes' community development on education and training

VSS also provide opportunities that enable indirect impacts for women's economic empowerment. This is mostly through the training they provide, opportunities for education and related support. The Rainforest Alliance, for example, is running a project to improve the economic conditions of women in communities across Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The project aims to provide training and seed investment to women, ensuring economic growth opportunities. This project's target is to train more than 3,700 women, establish at least 30 new business agreements, and distribute at least US\$ 1 million in seed capital financing for women (Rainforest Alliance, 2021). The focus areas of the project are:

- Integrating women into workforce: This is to be done through training and capacity building initiatives on key topics like business development, leadership, and human rights.

- Encouraging women entrepreneurs: The project will set up the 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.
- Enabling women 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.

VSS also provide training for women that helps them know more about the good agricultural practices and issues like finance, agricultural inputs, decision-making, leadership and gender equality. An example of that is the leadership school run by Fairtrade (Fairtrade, 2019).

Another example is IFOAM, which runs a training module on gender in organic agriculture (IFOAM, 2018). Both these programmes aim to provide training for women to develop their skills. The Better Cotton Initiative also provides training that in addition to aiding on topics such as harvesting techniques and raises awareness on issues connected to maternal and infant health.⁷

The Aid by Trade Foundation's Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) standard also provides training beyond cotton cultivation in Sub-Saharan Africa. CmiA runs the Community Cooperation Programme. It has set up clubs, supporting income-generating projects for women's groups and implementing gender equality measures within the cotton growing areas. A model for women's empowerment is the 500 women's clubs that have been set up in Zambia, each having an elected governing body (CmiA, 2019).

In relation to education, some VSS also focus on education of young girls. In India, the Rainforest Alliance has certified tea estates in the Havukal and Warwick regions. These ensure that children have free access to schools run by teachers whose salaries are paid by the government (Rainforest Alliance, 2015). Some standards such as Fairtrade International standard for hired labour and those of the IFOAM and the Rainforest Alliance even call for "equal educational opportunities" for women.

Training and education provided by these standard organizations are important as they provide opportunities for women to take partial or complete control of their business (e.g. via seed funding) and have an opinion of their own and have a voice in decision-making, as it allows them to gain more confidence and thereby express their opinions on family-related or farm-related issues. Women's economic empowerment benefits from arduously strengthening women's participation in training and increased education access, among other things, these objects can be fulfilled indirectly with the requirements of VSS certification schemes and additional activities that VSS undertakes.

VSS schemes' indirect ability for women to own land

Women in developing countries are sometimes denied their fundamental rights, and this is the case when it comes to land ownership, agency or decision-making, where male counterparts have a greater say. In terms of land ownership, which is among the most important household assets, it is often linked to a higher level of investment and productivity in agriculture. In most instances, women are disadvantaged in terms of land rights, and it is most often cited that it is

because of their lack to have a legal document that provides ownership proof (Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019).

While VSS might not have much role to play in this aspect, some of them have indirectly enabled women to own land. In Central America and Mexico, some studies have revealed that requirements of VSS, for example, farm owners to be present during audits for organic certification, have led to transfer of land rights to women from men who have migrated. Fairtrade's Growing Women in Coffee project in Kenya, for example, has encouraged the transfer of coffee bushes to women coffee farmers, of which 300 women from the Kabngetuny Cooperative received training on how to best manage their land and have good-agricultural practices. This led to them having an independent income for the first time.

Empirical literature reviews

Few quantitative studies have looked at the gender equality impact of VSS. Table 1 summarizes some of these studies and their outcomes. It illustrates the different results reached, where some studies argue that VSS has a positive impact on women's economic empowerment, while other indicates no change or negative impact.

Table 1: Overview of the empirical evidence on VSS impact on gender empowerment

Authors (year), research focus and place	Standards	Impact of VSS	Result and conclusion
<p>Meemken and Qaim (2017) Can private food standards promote gender equality in the small farm sector? Uganda</p>	<p>Fairtrade UTZ</p>	<p>Favourable</p>	<p>Standards and their certification programmes increase wealth in male-headed and female-headed households. They also improve access to agricultural extension for both male and female farmers.</p> <p>While in non-certified households, assets are predominantly owned by the male household head alone, in certified households most assets are jointly owned by the male head and his female spouse.</p> <p>Private standards cannot completely eliminate gender disparities, but the findings suggest that they can contribute towards this goal.</p>
<p>Chiputwa and Qaim (2016) Income and gender affect nutrition, and are both endogenous and influenced by certification. Uganda</p>	<p>Fairtrade Organic UTZ</p>	<p>Favourable</p>	<p>Estimates show that certification increases calorie and micronutrient consumption, mainly through higher incomes and improved gender equity.</p> <p>Sustainability standards can increase women's control over coffee revenues.</p>

Authors (year), research focus and place	Standards	Impact of VSS	Result and conclusion
<p>Loconto (2015) Can certified tea value chains deliver gender equality in Tanzania? Tanzania</p>	<p>Ethical Tea Partnership Fairtrade standards</p>	No effect	<p>Sustainability standards fail to challenge traditional gender roles and inequalities if men's dominance in farmer organizations and in cash crop marketing persists.</p> <p>Standards are not able to help in dealing with the threats of mechanization, an aging rural population and inadequate skills. Women will most likely suffer disproportionately given the inequities in knowledge of technical skills.</p>
<p>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</p>	Fair Trade	Negative	<p>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.</p>
<p>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</p>	Organic	Favourable (indirectly)	<p>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.</p>
<p>Bolwig (2012) How the costs and benefits of participation in organic certificates are distributed among men and women? Uganda</p>	Organic	Mixed effect	<p>The certification led to its improved food security as higher revenues from certified organic crops enhanced households' capacity to access food through the market.</p> <p>Women generally had much less control over the benefits from scheme participation than did men, while often carrying an equal or larger share of the labour and management burden.</p>

Authors (year), research focus and place	Standards	Impact of VSS	Result and conclusion
<p>Hutchens (2010) To what extent are women empowered through fair trade? Asia</p>	Fairtrade	Negative	<p>Fairtrade's "charity" approach to the craft sector reinforces traditional gender hierarchies.</p> <p>There is absence of a policy framework and institutional mechanisms that promote women's empowerment as a rights-based rather than a culture-based issue.</p>
<p>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</p>	Fairtrade Organic	No effect	<p>There exist still low female empowerment levels in certified cooperatives due to that, men continued to occupy all the leadership positions, and fewer women in these cooperatives had land titles.</p>
<p>Lyon et al. (2010) How will fairtrade–organic organizational and procedural norms affect women's insertion into the coffee value chain? Mesoamerica</p>	Fairtrade	Favourable	<p>Women's engagement in Fairtrade–organic coffee can improve access to organizations, property and income.</p> <p>However, the burden of complying with norms together with stagnant real prices excludes some women who might otherwise benefit from expanded participation.</p>
<p>Lyon (2008) Analyses the understudied gendered dimensions of fair-trade coffee networks and certification practices. Guatemala</p>	Fairtrade	No effect	<p>Fairtrade's network is falling far short of its goal to promote 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.</p>

Although some studies on the topic may not be listed, from the ten studies reviewed in this chapter (see Table 1), it is vital to say that more research is needed in this area. Table 1 asserts that the evidence of the gender equality and women empowerment impact of VSS is relatively weak and case-specific and confirms what Giroud and Huaman (2019) mentioned about the lack of evidence on the impact of VSS on gender equality. This is the case for many reasons, including: studies are few in number; they focus on few standards (mainly Fairtrade and organic), and with one exception, studies focus on one country, i.e., not carrying out a cross sectional analysis across countries and value chains.

Analyses of evidence on voluntary standards eliminating gender disparities

The evidence on VSS impact on women's economic empowerment is inconclusive; while the favourable evidence exceeds the negative one, there remains a big share of papers that indicate no effect of VSS on women's economic empowerment (30 per cent; see Figure 5).

The ten studies focused on five variables through which VSS can potentially impact women's economic empowerment: cash income; access to non-financial resources; employment; voice, agency and participation in decision-making; and control over revenues and benefits (see Table 2).

Figure 5: Summary on the empirical evidence of the impact of VSS on women's economic empowerment

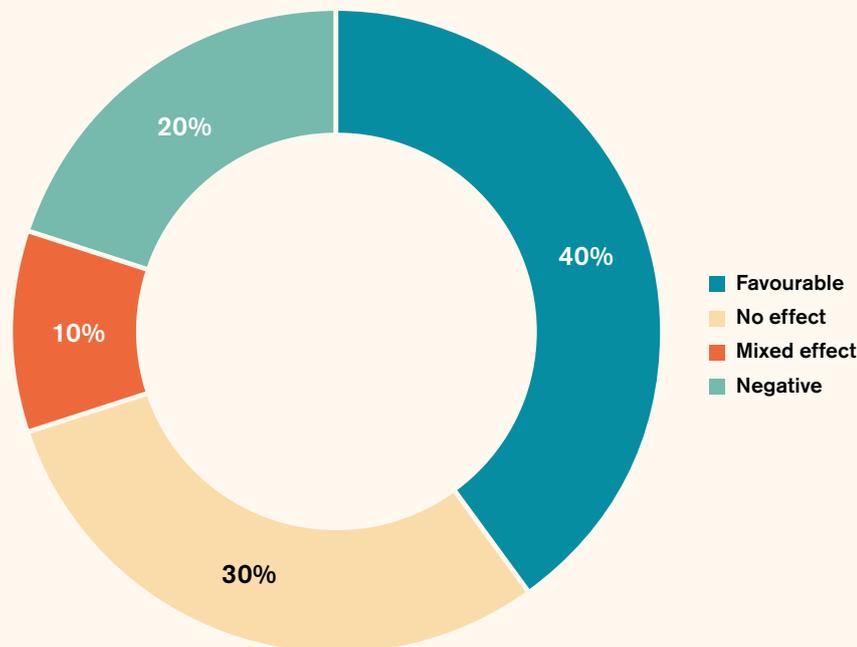


Table 2: The summary of each paper in terms of studied variables, result regarding each variable and overall result.

Study	Cash income	Access to non-financial resources	Employment	Voice, agency and participation in decision-making	Control of revenues and benefits	Overall impact
Meemken and Qaim (2017)	↑	↑				Positive
Chiputwa and Qaim (2016)	↑	↑			↑	Positive
Loconto (2015)			→			No effect
Sen (2014)	↓					Negative
Kloos and Renaud (2014)				↑		Positive
Bolwig (2012)		↑			↓	Mixed effect
Hutchens (2010)	Looked at (i) VSS approach and (ii) institutional mechanism					Negative
Bacon (2010)				→		No effect
Lyon <i>et al.</i> (2010)	↑	↑				Positive
Lyon (2008)				→		No effect

↑ Positive ↓ Negative → No effect

Cash income

Four studies investigated the impact of VSS on cash income. Three studies, namely Meemken and Qaim (2017), Chiputwa and Qaim (2016) and Lyon *et al.* (2010) found that VSS led to increased income for women specifically. On the contrary, one study (Sen, 2014) found that VSS had a negative impact on income.

Sen (2014) explained the negative impact of VSS on women's income by the fact that women have less access to VSS and thus the certification can work as a major impediment to their options for earning cash and supplementing their family income.

Employment

Loconto (2015) looked at whether certified-tea value chains deliver gender equality in Tanzania. It was concluded that standards are not able to help in dealing with the threats of mechanization, an aging rural population and inadequate skills. Women will most likely suffer disproportionately given the inequities in knowledge of technical skills.

Access to non-financial resources

Four studies, namely Meemken and Qaim (2017), Chiputwa and Qaim (2016), Bolwig (2012) and Lyon *et al.* (2010), explored the impact of VSS on accessing non-financial resources, namely access to agricultural extension (one study), and access to organization and property (one study) and food security (two studies). All have confirmed positive impacts of VSS on access to financial resources. That is, the first one found that VSS contribute to access to agriculture extension for both females and males. The second one confirmed that VSS do have a positive impact on women's access to organization and property. While the latter two studies showed that VSS contribute to increased calorie and micronutrient consumption

Control over revenues and benefits

Two studies looked at the impact of VSS on women's control over resources (Bolwig, 2012; Chiputwa and Qaim, 2016). The result is inconclusive, as two studies suggested that VSS contributes positively to women's control over resources, while the other suggested the opposite and highlighted gender relations as being a critical factor for women's welfare outcomes.

Voice, agency and participation in decision-making

Three studies investigated the impact of VSS on voice, agency and participation in decision-making – Kloos and Renaud (2014), Bacon (2010) and Lyon (2008). Two-third of the studies confirmed that VSS have not contributed to female empowerment in terms of participation in leadership positions and voting and democratic participation.

Other indirect impacts of VSS on women's economic empowerment

Kloos and Renaud (2014) found that VSS 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.

Hutchens (2010) and Lyon *et al.* (2010) revealed that VSS unintentionally reinforce the gendered barriers within their studied communities.

From the above, it can be concluded that private standards cannot completely eliminate gender disparities, but the findings suggest that they can contribute towards this goal.

“ VSS provide opportunities to bridge the gender gap through multiple mechanisms, such as requirements for equality in jobs and wages.

Empirical evidence contributing to the negative results of VSS on women's economic empowerment

Given that some studies have shown that VSS had sometimes led to negative results on women's economic empowerment and its dimensions, we have dived more into these studies and analysed the reasons behind these conclusions:

Sen (2014), who studied women organic tea producers in rural Darjeeling, India, found that despite smallholder women's entrepreneurial ventures, they were seen as housewives, not capable of organized business ventures and hence were denied fair trade resources as they were inspected by a male inspector from Delhi. Despite its aim of creating a better alternative to neoliberal trade and development, fair trade relies on technical interventions resembling the liberal methods of conventional development practice. For example, certification involves checklist-style, top-down, bureaucratic procedures for monitoring and inspecting farms and farming techniques, for examining on-farm labour relations, for tracking the use of Fairtrade premiums by farming communities, and for implementing empowerment directives from Fairtrade inspectors.

Bolwig (2012) and Lyon *et al.* (2010) found that gender relations were a critical factor for women's welfare outcomes. Bolwig (2012) mentioned that women generally had much less control over the benefits from scheme participation than did men, while often carrying an equal or larger share of the labour and management burden.

Hutchens (2010) and Sen (2014) showed that certification reinforces the traditional gender hierarchies.

Charting the way forward: priority areas to make VSS work for women

From the discussions presented in this chapter, it is evident that there still exists a considerable gender-related gap in the agriculture sector, especially in developing countries, which leads to a missed economic opportunity and thus, a need to leverage the existing tools that can foster women's economic empowerment. While the report highlights that VSS are one such tool, it also recognizes that VSS come with challenges and the impacts of their adoption are rather mixed.

VSS, on one hand, provide opportunities to bridge the gender gap in agriculture sector through their multiple mechanisms, for example, their requirements for equality in jobs and wages. It is key to realize that transformation of current practices and existing situations go above and beyond market-based tools like VSS, and that VSS are just one part of the solution. Some of the priority areas where VSS can work for women are listed below.

Fostering transparency with data governance

There is a need to embed data collection practices, as this will play a vital role as reference point and management framework for sustainable and responsible practices in supply chains and policymakers.

Especially for women, many developing countries do not have gender segregated data and do not always register different types of employment, making it impossible to analyse the number of, and the extent to which women have been affected (ITUC, 2011). Women have diverse and multifaceted roles in agricultural work, including as subsistence agricultural producers, workers for out-grower schemes and waged agricultural workers (FAO, 2011; Sexsmith, 2019).

Furthermore, data on women participating in standards-setting and implementation are still almost completely lacking, as is a robust methodology for collecting it.⁸ Inadequate attention to gender in VSS could be related to a lack of representation of women in VSS regulatory processes, including agenda-setting and development of standards, policies and strategies.

Such under-reporting or the lack of data in general can make the deployment of VSS difficult to assess how much change these VSS schemes have brought about for women and the companies they work for, whether the incentives for companies are sufficiently large to enable the schemes to scale up. Data governance represent an important innovation in the VSS model from a gender perspective.

Facilitating information sharing and trainings for women that takes into account their limited time and restricted mobility

There is a need to innovate the way information is being transferred to women and provide flexibility in the trainings that do not undermine women's role as a caregiver.

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). Further to the compliance to meet the certification's crop quality and environmental sustainability criteria, rural women's labour is also characterized by multiple and simultaneous activities including household, childcare, farming and minding stock, among other things. Such competing demands make women's time very limited and many of these chores are typically unpaid and unrecognized, thus making certification criteria to meet an additional burden on women. This largely affects their quality of life and decision-making, reduces their time and mobility to attend extension services and trainings, and prevents them from taking full advantage of economic opportunities through engagement in income-generating activities.

“ There is a need to innovate the way information is being transferred to women and provide flexibility in the trainings that do not undermine women's role as a caregiver.

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

Improving access to land rights for women

There is a need for land coalition reform through certification schemes.

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. By such unequal terms, women are often excluded from services (inputs, financial and technical) and organizations through which VSS are implemented. Furthermore, women often do not receive the additional revenues from certified sales, nor do they belong as members to producer cooperatives as often because membership is restricted to landholders. Thus, it is not surprising that women have less interest in certifications, and may even be completely unaware of its benefits as the information are normally left to the landowners to decide.

Lessons can be learned from the land certification scheme in Ethiopia which requires at least one female member on the land administration committees and land certificates include maps and pictures of the husband and wife. In a pilot initiative with the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Tajikistan, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) supported the establishment of 16 District Task Forces (DTFs) on land-related issues in three provinces. The task forces provided legal advice on land rights, and rural women could also attend classes on leadership skills, cooperative formation, farm management and community activism. From 2003 to 2008, the staff of the DTFs provided legal advice and practical assistance to approximately 14,000 rural women and men and conducted around 500 meetings and consultations in villages. As a result, the proportion of farms registered to women rose from 2 per cent in 2002 to 14 per cent in 2008. District-level governments are now funding the work of the DTFs through their own budgets.⁹

Fostering financial literacy to empower women

There is a need to develop financial literacy for women as an anchor to make informed decisions and take effective measures.

One thing we can learn from the COVID-19 pandemic is the importance of savings and investments, thus it is essential to become financially literate despite gender, age, place and lifestyle, among other things.

However, for many (rural) women in developing countries, the main constraint in accessing financial services is the high illiteracy levels of rural populations which results

in a lack of financial literacy and limited access to information on financial products and services (Isaac, 2014). The illiteracy of rural women is limiting their benefits from financial services, 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 resource and finance, and restrictions on their mobility. These issues are linked to the wider macroeconomic dimensions, where institutional policy is critical.

Lifting the unwritten barriers for women to participate in community development

There is a need to amplify the role of women in community development through certification schemes.

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 to gain access to finances and resources, to their limited access to land rights, all of which play a big role to allow women to be contributors to community development. If these are out of reach, then the whole idea to relegate women's leadership for community development is far-fetched.

By creating the conditions for women to participate in the community more fully in the community and contribute their diverse skills, passions and abilities, we should not only address equal rights and discrimination but also enhance the opportunities for women, and their families, to make meaningful connections, engage in the local economy and ultimately thrive for the benefit of all.

The FAO estimates that the gains in agriculture production alone could lift 100-150 million people out of hunger (FAO, 2011). Furthermore, in a full potential scenario in which women play an identical role in labour markets to men, as much as US\$ 28 trillion, or 26 per cent could be added to the global annual GDP in 2025.

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

Accelerating women's economic empowerment to strengthen food security

There is a need to attribute the role of women empowerment as prerequisites for food security – building resilience and decreasing vulnerabilities to cope with inflation and pandemic.

“ 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.

Rural women play an essential role in food security – availability, accessibility, utilization and stability. 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 chapter, 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.

Therefore, a requirement in the fight against hunger and poverty is to promote women's economic empowerment.

However, it has been noted that VSS may inherently incentivize cultivation for 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 cash crops. Thus, the unequal gender-related land tenures could be further exacerbated by certification, resulting in women losing their access to land for subsistence food production, giving way to the cultivation of cash crops (Sexsmith, 2019). This adversity can completely undermine household food security.

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

Opportunities can be created for women to take the helm of changes within the agriculture sector, such as the production of new crops, new technologies and new markets. It is not a question of carrying out traditional agriculture but rather that women should have access to knowledge and technology which enables them to achieve greater performance in their tasks. It is essential to study those avenues which may allow the empowerment of women through acquiring greater protagonists in social and economic relations.

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Endnotes

1. For more information, see <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.
2. The GII is a composite measure reflecting inequality between women and men and is denoted in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and labour. The GII was introduced in the 2010 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
3. See <https://ilostat.ilo.org/over-2-million-moms-left-the-labour-force-in-2020-according-to-new-global-estimates>.
4. See https://gbv.itcilo.org/index.php/briefing/show_paragraph/id/40.html.
5. See <https://standardsmap.org/en/home>.
6. For examples on the price premium, see <https://www.fairtrade.net/impact/fairtrade-premium-spending-by-sdg> and <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>.
7. See <https://stories.bettercotton.org/bci-farmer-results--2018-2019>.
8. See <https://unece.org/trade/wp6/gender-responsive-standards>.
9. See the guide on increasing women's access to land at <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/47566053.pdf>.