



Gender and Sustainable Production:

Addressing gender gaps and social inequalities for improved agricultural supply chains



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Key messages

- Unsustainable and exploitative agricultural supply chains negatively affect the lives of millions of people through income and livelihood loss, cultural erosion and forcible displacement. Women and indigenous peoples often face specific and disproportionate impacts due to sociocultural discriminatory norms and gendered inequalities.
- Agricultural supply chains rely on the labour of plantation workers and smallholder farmers, including women's both paid and unpaid labour, to meet global demand for commodities, and irresponsible business practices in these supply chains take advantage of social inequalities for profit. Women and other commonly marginalised workers in these situations are often subject to human rights abuses, labour exploitation and discrimination in employment that severely impacts their health, safety and agency.
- Gender-responsive and inclusive interventions promoting sustainable production in agricultural supply chains contribute to improved business, conservation and livelihood outcomes while promoting women's economic empowerment and gender equality and protecting human rights.
- Voluntary sustainability standards and certifications are an important component for increasing sustainability of agricultural production, and they can be an avenue for progress on gender equality and human rights. However, improvement is needed at all levels to ensure gender and social inequalities are addressed and well-integrated in standards and business practices.

Women in agricultural supply chains

Agricultural supply chains represent significant sources of employment, income, and resources for people around the world, connecting consumers to small- and large-scale producers of important commodities, including palm oil, cocoa, beef, soy, coffee and many others. At the same time, sustainable agricultural production can contribute to biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability—as well as women's empowerment and gender equality [1]. In recent years, increased attention has exposed the negative social and environmental repercussions of unsustainable

and exploitative agricultural expansion, including deforestation, land grabbing, displacement, labour abuses and exploitation, revealing differentiated implications for women and men across supply chains [2,3]. While some actors have explored ways to address complementary goals of addressing these negative repercussions with realising sustainability and food security goals, there is still more that needs to be done to secure responsible and sustainable agricultural supply chains around the world.





Women—particularly indigenous women and women small-scale farmers—face multiple barriers along agricultural supply chains that affect their safety and livelihoods [3]. In local and indigenous communities affected by unsustainable agricultural expansion, women experience specific vulnerabilities and threats to livelihoods from displacement and loss of land [4]. Women workers and small-scale farmers in agricultural supply chains also face exploitation and discrimination and are often employed in informal or temporary working positions, limiting their access to income and benefits [5]. Deeply embedded sociocultural and gendered inequalities are exploited by businesses practices, reinforcing those inequalities but also impacting the ability of supply chains to effectively meet growing global demand [6].

International, national and local level actors and consumers are demanding that companies and states enhance commitments on human rights and environmental standards in agricultural supply chains. These priorities are enshrined in several international standards and mandates, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), guidance from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights [7,8]. Strengthening standards and practices in agricultural supply chains is essential to realise these goals: from respecting and acknowledging equitable rights to land and resources, to ensuring safe and decent working environments, to recognising the diverse contributions of people in meeting agricultural demand and strengthening their capacity to do so.



Supply chains “encompass the flow and storage of raw material, semi-finished and finished goods from point-of-origin to their final destination (i.e. consumption). In other words, a company’s supply chain includes every step in this process, from creating a good or service, to manufacturing it, transporting it to a point of sale, and then selling it.” [1]

Sustainable production is “the creation of goods and services using processes and systems that are:

- Non-polluting
- Conserving of energy and natural resources
- Economically viable
- Safe and healthful for workers, communities and consumers
- Socially and creatively rewarding for all working people

If production is sustainable, then the environment, employees, communities, and organizations—all benefit... The conceptual spark of sustainable production lies in valuing longer-term consequences and benefits over short-term profits” [9].

Impacts of unsustainable and exploitative agricultural expansion on local men and women

Rapid and unsustainable expansion of agricultural production to meet demands of global supply chains disrupt local ecological, social and economic systems.

Exploitative practices displace local communities and indigenous peoples from their land, ignore fair and safe labour practices to maximise profits, and deteriorate livelihoods and natural resources, all of which contribute to social and environmental stress and can increase gender-based violence (GBV) [4].

Women disproportionately bear the negative impacts of displacement and land loss from agricultural expansion.

In many communities, women lack formal land rights and rely on communal land to collect resources, such as water,

fuel and food. The loss of these lands to large-scale land investments has significant impacts on women who may not receive compensation, be considered in resettlement schemes or be included in decision making [2,10]. For example, in Indonesia, smallholder oil palm plots established under a resettlement scheme were officially registered to the husband's name, despite both husband and wife maintaining the plots. Because of this, only men were listed as members of official co-ops for smallholders, where farmers could communicate with the company, access credit and inputs and receive payment for crops [11].

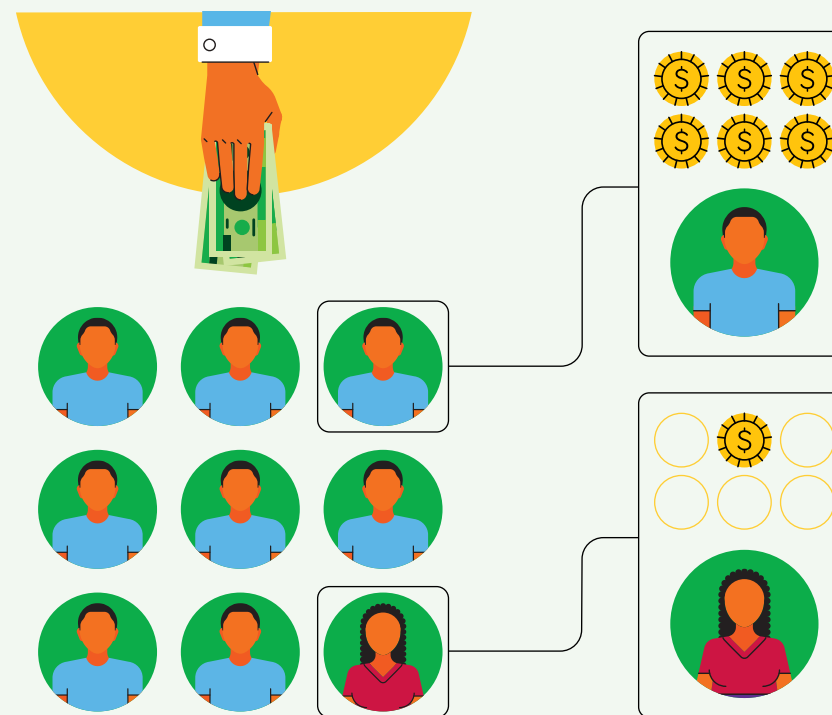
Indigenous communities face intersecting forms of legal and social discrimination, suffering displacement, exploitation and loss of livelihoods from agricultural expansion.

For example, the Guarani people of the Mato Grosso do Sul state in Brazil have been engaged in a decades long struggle to reclaim ancestral land after being displaced by large-scale agricultural development. Despite many of the injustices waged against the Guarani people violating the Brazilian Constitution and several UN Conventions, they continue to face deteriorating living conditions and violence from ranchers, farmers and the Brazilian government, and many women and men Guarani leaders have been killed as a result [12,13].

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) procedures are sometimes ignored or manipulated to serve agricultural expansion.

FPIC is internationally recognised as an important process in development to respect and protect indigenous peoples' rights to lands and territories. However, the process can be hampered by corruption at many levels, including companies falsely claiming they received consent but did not; processes that are not made accessible in local languages; or states approving licenses without proof of consent [14,15].

A study of large-scale land investment by a biofuel company in Tanzania and Mozambique found that women in Vilabwa village in Tanzania represented less than 15% of those receiving compensation for their loss of land. For women who did receive compensation, they received three to six times less money for their land compared to men [2].



Exploitation and discrimination in agricultural supply chain employment

Women tend to participate in parts of the supply chain with lower economic returns compared to men, and they are more likely to be in precarious working arrangements,

such as informal, part-time and seasonal work. These working conditions heighten uncertainty and limit access to training, benefits and protections offered to permanent workers, such as social security, insurance, safety equipment and overtime pay. In some cases, women do not receive pay separate from their husbands for their work in supply chains. For example, in the sugar cane industry in South America, a study found that women cleaned and cut sugar cane harvested by their husbands but did not receive individual payment for their work [16].

Social and cultural gender norms, responsibilities and inequalities shape dynamics that make women disproportionately vulnerable to labour exploitation,

including underpayment, withheld payments, physical and verbal abuse, and forced labour. Businesses exploit women's unequal position in society to maximise profits at the cost of women's health, safety and livelihoods [3]. An Oxfam report on working conditions in the seafood industry in Thailand and Indonesia reported that women peeling shrimp worked excessive hours, were paid below minimum wage, had restrictions on toilet breaks and faced verbal abuse and hazardous working conditions [17]. One study in Latin America and West Africa found that women were working in banana plantations for 14 hours a day without overtime pay, and pregnant women were exposed to toxic chemicals and could be dismissed without pay [16].

Certain chemicals and pesticides used on agricultural plantations have considerable impact on the environment and the health of workers.

Chemicals sprayed from planes or tractors can drift and impact surrounding communities, and exposure to these chemicals can impact respiratory, skin and reproductive health, with severe risks for pregnant women [18,19]. Women employed on agricultural plantations are less likely than men to receive proper training on chemical use and personal protective equipment, often because of informal or part-time work arrangements, leading to improper handling and increased exposure [20].

Women in the agricultural workforce experience different forms and risks of GBV and discrimination.

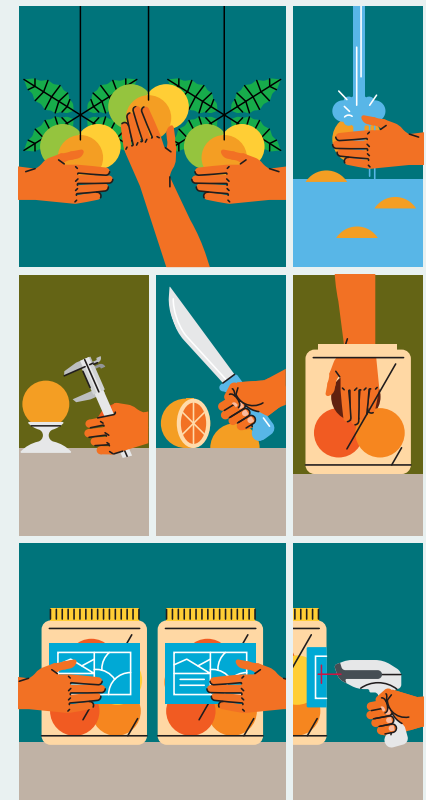
Sexual harassment and violence occur in plantations, fields, packing facilities and greenhouses, with perpetrators exploiting unequal power dynamics and situations where it is difficult for victims to report and seek justice [21]. In palm oil plantation in Central America, women have reported that plantation foremen exploit women by offering them work in exchange for sex [22]. In some cases, women may be discouraged from reporting instances for fear of losing work or due to cultural stigma surrounding sexual violence [23].

Women small-scale farmers face barriers that impact yields and limit their contributions to supply chains, affecting their livelihoods and overall stability of supply chains.

Women's agricultural productivity and yields are 20-30% lower than men's, because they do not have equal access to hired labour, land, quality seeds, equipment and technology, training and markets [5,24]. In Papua New Guinea, family coffee farms and income are mainly controlled by men, but women provide about 60% of labour required for coffee production. Despite their important contributions, women receive less than a third of the profits from

production and have limited access to information and trainings, representing less than 5% of farmers benefitting from extension services [24].

About 70-80% of the global workforce responsible for production and post-harvest tasks like picking, grading, chopping, mixing, packing, labelling and barcoding are women [23].



Sustainable production of agricultural commodities cannot be achieved without addressing gender and social inequalities

Sustainable production in agricultural supply chains and gender equality can be mutually supportive in meeting sustainability and human rights standards [25].

Numerous international guidelines and standards—including the SDGs and guidance from OECD and FAO on responsible agricultural supply chains—highlight the importance of gender equality, worker safety and sustainable agricultural production as globally agreed upon priorities in achieving a sustainable future [7]. These can be utilised to improve policies, practices and accountability mechanisms for gender equality and human rights in agricultural supply chains.

Additionally, gender-responsive approaches can enhance compliance with international mandates for responsible business, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights [8,26].

Closing gender gaps in access to training and information promotes women's roles and contributions in agricultural supply chains, increasing yields and productivity.

In Indonesia, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) worked with an international coffee trader, ECOM Agroindustrial Corp., to close knowledge gaps between women and men farmers in their supply chain by developing trainings for staff and suppliers. This resulted in a 131% increase in productivity for groups that trained both men and women, compared to a 95% increase for men-only groups [27].

Identifying gender gaps in agricultural labour forces can unlock opportunities for women's empowerment and improved livelihoods while also promoting better business practice and companies' bottom lines.

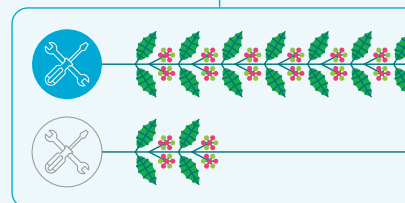
A recent report from the IFC emphasised the importance of addressing gender gaps as “[m]any of the labor, supply chain management, market access, or sustainability and performance challenges faced by agribusiness companies are,

on closer inspection, revealed to be challenges associated with hidden gender gaps” [5]. An agribusiness in the Solomon Islands, SolTuna, found opportunities to potentially increase annual revenue by USD 1.58 million after conducting a gender analysis to better understand concerns of women and men and address issues related to employee absenteeism and turnover [27].

Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSSs) and certifications in global agricultural supply chains can be strengthened to address both conservation and social benefits.

VSSs can provide important accountability mechanisms for fostering sustainable production, but evidence on the effectiveness of some standards and certifications on social benefits for women and men is mixed. One study found that plantations certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) in Indonesia performed no better than non-RSPO estates regarding to conservation and social benefits to communities [28]. However, while there seems to be some improvement in recent years with increased considerations to gender and indigenous peoples' rights in certifications, including the RSPO [29] and the Round Table on Responsible Soy Association (RTRS) [30], more research is needed to highlight how VSSs can contribute to women's empowerment and climate resilience [31].

In Ethiopia husband-and-wife coffee farmers jointly participated in training programmes on agronomy and finance management resulting in up to 140% increased crops yields [32].



Improved gender considerations in the Rainforest Alliance 2020 Certification Program

The Rainforest Alliance is an internationally recognised non-profit organisation committed to protecting forests, improving livelihoods of farmers and communities, promoting human rights and building adaptive capacity to climate change. An important part of meeting these commitments is the Rainforest Alliance Certification Program, which sets a long-term vision to increase sustainable production and promote responsible supply chains for millions of farmers and thousands of businesses. The updated 2020 Certification Program aims to enhance sustainability performance, including through improved recognition and commitment to gender equality. The new standard promotes several measures for enhancing gender equality in agricultural supply chains, including:

- Providing tools for farmers and companies to improve understanding of gender gaps and issues in operations;
- Supporting gender inclusive measures that promote equal rights and opportunities for workers of all genders;

- Requiring sex-disaggregated data collection for Certificate holders;
- Requiring Certificate holders to produce a written statement on commitments to gender equality that must be shared with workers and staff;
- Mandating that Certificate holders establish a focal point or committee dedicated to addressing gender equality, including in annual risk assessments, awareness raising efforts with staff and support in addressing cases of gender-based discrimination and workplace violence; and
- Implementing gender equality Smart Meters—an effort through which farms seeking Certification set self-identified improvement requirements to close gender gaps specific to the needs and context of their farm.

As stated in a brief about enhancing gender equality in the Certification Program, the Rainforest Alliance “aim[s] to help make farms and companies more gender inclusive so that all genders in agricultural supply chains have equal rights and opportunities” [33].

Integrating gender equality and women’s empowerment in the Rainforest Alliance Certification Program is an important step for raising awareness of gender gaps and issues in agricultural supply chains, holding businesses and farms accountable for taking action to close these gaps and elaborating on how VSSs and certifications can benefit have both conservation and social benefits. Other VSSs can learn from the Rainforest Alliance Certification update to address gender equality and women’s empowerment within other standards and certifications.

Read more about the Rainforest Alliance 2020 Certification Program [here](#).

Recommendations



Gender-responsive actions for CSOs, researchers and advocates:

Develop rigorous, in-depth, empirical data and research to understand gendered patterns of inequality and labour exploitation in global supply chains.

Data for how these issues affect women and men in different sociocultural contexts is lacking. Without understanding the root social, cultural, legal and economic causes of gendered vulnerability to labour exploitation, the design and effectiveness of ethical labour guidelines and initiatives are severely limited. Civil society, including researchers and advocates, can support sex-disaggregated data collection, gender-responsive and inclusive research and advocate for strengthened efforts by public and private actors for better environmental, social and human rights outcomes in agricultural supply chains [6,17].

Recognise, value and champion women's roles in driving growth and sustainability in agricultural supply chains and ensure guidance to public and private actors reflect this recognition.

This can include advocating for changes to sustainable certification processes to ensure social and conservation outcomes, promoting public-private partnerships for gender-inclusive and -responsive supply chains and developing and promoting research to build the case for gender integration across supply chains [31,34].

Lobby and advocate for strengthened action and progress on gender equality and human rights in standards, conventions and treaties for sustainable production.

This includes advocating for strict accountability mechanisms and compliance with existing standards and policies, including FPIC, the SDGs, the OECD-FAO guidance on responsible agricultural supply chains and UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights [3,7,8,31].

Gender-responsive actions for state governments:

Adhere to and implement FPIC to recognise the rights and agency of indigenous communities and mitigate risk for harm and displacement from unsustainable and exploitative agricultural expansion.

Immediate and stringent action is needed by governments to comply with and enforce FPIC procedures to protect rights and livelihoods over profits toward securing sustainable outcomes and human rights in sustainable production [14,15].

Address significant environmental and social risks in policies and accountability mechanisms in agricultural supply chains to contribute to meeting numerous, interconnected SDGs,

including poverty eradication, food security, gender equality, decent work and responsible consumption and production. Governments can champion and demonstrate these linkages in

policies and mechanisms to safeguard rights and livelihoods and foster progress toward meeting global priorities for a sustainable future [31].

Conduct a gender and social inclusion analysis in supply chains and integrate findings in national action plans and reports to international standards and UN Conventions.

For example, National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights represent a potential entry point to incorporate gender-responsiveness into national-level actions toward implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Doing so strengthens policy coherence between gender equality and private sector engagement and helps ensure that companies and states are contributing to gender equality and human rights in global supply chains [3,26,35].

Ensure corporations respect women's rights and fulfil their obligations under national and international gender and human rights standards,

including the OECD-FAO guidance on responsible agricultural supply chains. States should integrate a gender perspective in existing mandatory due diligence laws and those being drafted, including those concerning modern slavery and transparency in supply chains [3,7].

Gender-responsive actions for private sector actors:

Develop policies for sustainable sourcing of agricultural products that safeguard the rights of and improve livelihoods for local and indigenous women and men.

This can include developing and promoting trainings and resources for women and men farmers and workers along supply chains to enhance sustainable practices, economically empower women and meet mandates for sustainable certification. Importantly, this also incorporates adherence to gender and human rights standards in supply chains, including as outlined in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights [1,26,35].

Promote women's participation and involvement in agribusiness employment and management for better business and livelihood outcomes.




A study of five agribusiness companies found that gender balance in management stimulates innovation and adaptation to market and environmental changes. Additionally, improving women's formal employment in the production processes enhances overall product quality and business performance [25,36].

Commit to practices that adhere to gender-responsive human rights due diligence.

This means that businesses assess and address potential adverse impacts of activities on human rights, considering the differentiated impacts on diverse rightsholders, including women. This can include conducting a gender and social inclusion analysis, implementing safeguards and measures to prevent impacts on human rights, and assessing risk of GBV and discrimination in supply chains [3,10,26].
























Key resources

Publication Title	Entity	Synopsis	URL
We mean business: Protecting women's rights in global supply chains	ActionAid (2020)	This publication outlines the importance of integrating gender-responsive human rights due diligence in global supply chains. It includes the adverse impacts businesses can have on human rights, and how companies and states can integrate gender due diligence in laws, policies and practices.	[click here] 
Gender mainstreaming in global agricultural supply chains can accelerate good growth: What works and for whom?	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2019)	This knowledge product is intended to assist practitioners to mainstream gender in agricultural commodity supply chains and value chains to promote benefits for the environment and society. It includes practical tutorials and tools for fostering gender-responsive supply chains and outlines key performance indicators for gender mainstreaming.	[click here] 
Leveraging voluntary sustainability standards for gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture: A guide for development organizations based on the sustainable development goals	International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) (2019)	This guidebook provides recommendations on how voluntary standards can contribute to gender equality in agriculture and meeting the SDGs. The guidebook draws from extensive reviews of Fairtrade International, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), the Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified and Common Code for the Coffee Community (4Cs). It outlines actions for development organisations to take to enable household food security (SDG 2), increase women's rights to productive agricultural resources (SDG 1, 2, and 5), promote gender equality in education (SDG 4), increase recognition of unpaid and domestic work (SDG 5), promote women's decision making and empowerment (SDG 5 and 10), and promote decent work for women (SDG 8).	[click here] 

Publication Title	Entity	Synopsis	URL
Advancing Gender in the Environment: Cultivating a more equitable and inclusive TFA 2020	IUCN (2018)	This resource guide developed by IUCN under a partnership with USAID identifies key resources, risks, opportunities and best practices for integrating gender equity and inclusion in sustainable commodity production and sourcing. The case studies illustrate successful interventions by the partners of the Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA).	[click here] 
IDH Gender Toolkit	IDH – The Sustainable Trade Initiative (2017)	This toolkit provides case studies of addressing gender equality in different agricultural commodities and how doing so can positively impact business outcomes and women's empowerment. It outlines key steps to critically reflect on the role of gender in supply chains and interventions under development.	[click here] 
Operational guidelines for responsible land-based investment	USAID (2015)	This guide discusses the impact of land-based investments on communities and countries, and the risks for investors associated with unclear claims to land, lack of transparency and land-based conflict. The guide provides recommendations for best practices related to due diligence and land-based investments to reduce risk to projects, private sector and local communities, including women and indigenous peoples.	[click here] 

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This brief is part of a set of three tools on gender and environmental action elaborated by IUCN in the framework of Shared Resources Joint Solutions, a strategic partnership between IUCN NL, WWF NL and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

You can access the other tools [online](#).