

# INVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURE

## Policy Brief #5

# How to Improve Gender Equality in Agriculture

Kathleen Sexsmith, Carin Smaller and William Speller  
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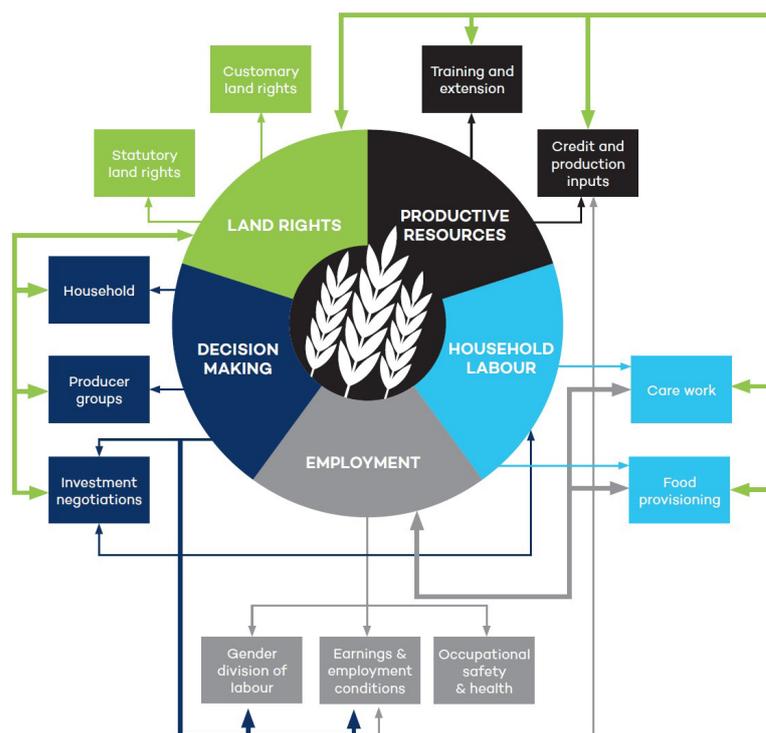
## Introduction

Women and men have not benefited equally from the increased trade of agricultural commodities and the rise of foreign investment in agriculture. Gender inequalities in agriculture persist in the 21st century, and tend to be exacerbated by trade and foreign investment. Two broad agendas have emerged in response to global calls for more sustainable trade and more responsible investment in agriculture. The first, largely targeted at the private sector, are represented by the array of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), such as fair trade labels. The second, largely targeted at governments, are the multitude of guidelines on responsible investment in agriculture, such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGTs). In this policy brief, we explore how global standards and guidelines contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment, and whether more can be done through these instruments to improve the situation of women in agriculture.

## Why Do Gender Inequalities in Agriculture Persist?

There are five dimensions to gender inequality in agriculture: land rights, productive resources, unpaid work, employment and decision making (Sexsmith, 2017).

First, women are less likely to hold statutory **land rights**, and, when they do own land, their plots are often relatively small. Foreign investors in land tend to reinforce such inequality by dealing with those who do have formal rights to land—men. They also tend to cut off women’s access to common lands for household needs, and to exacerbate the patriarchal land rights that underpin many **customary** land rights systems.



**Figure 1: Five-dimensional framework for gender inequalities in agriculture**



Second, gender discrimination in **credit** markets makes it more difficult for women farmers to acquire labour-saving and innovative **production inputs**. This can impede women's participation in outgrower schemes, although some investors facilitate credit access. Women face access barriers to **extension** services, which creates a knowledge gap that prevents them from benefiting equitably from new innovations.

Third, women's household labour burden can be improved by social development initiatives, but unfortunately their needs are rarely considered by investors, often resulting in **unpaid work**. Investments that provide access to labour-saving technologies can reduce women's labour burden in contract farming, but in agro-processing and plantation agriculture, female waged labourers face longer working hours. Increased incomes under foreign investments can help women to ensure their household is food secure, but the conversion of subsistence to export crops can create new food security risks.

Fourth, investment projects have tended to reproduce gender divisions of labour that relegate women to temporary, insecure **employment**. Contract farming schemes can raise women's earnings, but women have been largely left out of these opportunities. Plantation type agro-export operations can create new paid employment opportunities, although employment conditions including remuneration are often poor. Moreover, crowding women into field- and packing house-level employment can expose them to physically arduous work and to sexual harassment. Yet, compliance with labour standards and certifications has improved working conditions, including safety and health conditions.

Fifth, where investment projects have raised women's earning power, they have sometimes helped to shift cultural constraints on women's **decision-making** power within the household. However, investment projects have rarely improved women's under-representation in producer cooperatives or worker groups, including in internal decision making and dispute-resolution bodies, which remain male-dominated. Large-scale investment projects have a poor track record of including women's voices in consultations and negotiations, relying instead on the opinions of male elites.

## Can Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Principles for Responsible Investment Improve Gender Equality?

Investors and policy-makers can choose from two sets of voluntary sustainability performance criteria and guidelines to monitor how investment projects are addressing these gender inequalities: voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) and responsible investment frameworks (RIFs).

### Voluntary Sustainability Standards

VSSs are typically adopted by producer organizations and by companies that produce commodities for import and export. Since the 1990s, they have grown to achieve an extensive global reach: the 17 major VSSs today have a global trade value of USD 31.6 billion (Potts et al., 2014). The five studied here are among the mostly widely adopted: [Common Code for the Coffee Community \(4Cs\)](#): Fairtrade Standards for [Small Producers](#) and for [Hired Labor](#); [IFOAM Standard & Best Practice Guideline for Agriculture and Value Chains](#); the [Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Network Standard](#); and the [UTZ Certified Codes of Conduct for Group Certification](#) and for [Individual Certification](#).

### Responsible Investment Frameworks

RIFs are voluntary guidelines and principles to promote responsible investment in agriculture among government actors, private sector investors, international organizations and civil society. They emerged after the 2008 food price crisis, as policy-makers and financial actors sought to reduce the potentially negative impacts of rising foreign investment in land (Smaller, 2014). The five RIFs studied here have had the most influence on policy: the [FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests](#); the [FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD & World Bank Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investments](#); the [FAO Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems](#); the [African Union Guiding Principles on Large-Scale Land-Based Investments \(LSLBIs\) in Africa](#); and the [International Finance Corporation \(IFC\) Performance Standards](#).

## Do VSSs and RIFs Take Gender Into Account?

An analysis of the certification criteria of VSS initiatives and the principles of RIFs reveals these two types of voluntary sustainability tools have different content regarding gender. There is also significant variability in the extent to which gender issues are covered within the two groups. Overall, the RIFs are stronger than the VSSs on gender, but important gaps remain. Since both sets of tools go beyond content to include aspects of implementation, there is extensive scope for actors implementing either set to enhance the application of the gender equality aspects of the tools in their activities.



**Table 1. Gender Analysis of VSS Criteria and RIF Principles**

Gender Inequalities in Agriculture	Voluntary Sustainability Standards	Responsible Investment Frameworks
Land Rights	<p><u>No references to gender inequality in access to land.</u></p> <p><i>Only Fairtrade for Hired Labor requires alignment with the gender-mainstreamed FAO VGGT.</i></p>	<p><u>Extremely strong gender dimension in relation to land rights.</u></p> <p><i>All protect women's statutory and customary land rights. But only the VGGTs acknowledge the potential conflict with customary land dispute resolution.</i></p>
Productive Resources	<p><u>A few references to improve women's access to credit, production inputs and training and extension.</u></p> <p><i>Gender discrimination in access to credit and to production inputs is nowhere addressed.</i></p>	<p><u>Scattered references to access to productive resources.</u></p> <p><i>Scarce references to women's specific needs, sometimes in the context of resettlement assistance.</i></p>
Household Labour	<p><u>No reference to women's domestic labour burden.</u></p> <p><i>The division of agricultural and domestic labour at the individual household level presents a significant challenge to evaluate through certification criteria, because it is determined by local culture and gender norms.</i></p>	<p><u>Some aspects of women's domestic labour burden are covered.</u></p> <p><i>Food security and overall well-being are well-covered, though usually in gender-neutral language.</i></p>
Employment	<p><u>Strong guidance on gender equality related to earnings and employment.</u></p> <p><i>Labour rights for irregular workers—often women—and women's safety and health needs are well-covered. Gender non-discrimination and women's equal workplace advancement opportunities are mentioned frequently.</i></p>	<p><u>Inadequate attention to employment, particularly the gender division of labour.</u></p> <p><i>All refer to gender equality when generating paid employment, but only one requires equal opportunity for occupational advancement.</i></p>
Decision Making	<p><u>Limited mention of gender-equitable representation in decision making.</u></p> <p><i>Women's participation in decision making is not explicitly mentioned.</i></p>	<p><u>Strong and detailed guidance on the involvement of women in decision making.</u></p> <p><i>Women's participation in both the consultation and negotiation phases of investments tends to be well-addressed.</i></p>



## Lessons From the Field: What can we learn?

The sustainability standards and responsible investment principles do not by themselves dictate gender outcomes on the ground. Rather, given the strong influence of social norms on gender inequalities, it is the way these tools are implemented—and the social contexts that they encounter—that determine whether they can make a positive difference in addressing gender inequality and empowering women. The following summarizes the on-the-ground evidence of the success of VSSs on contributing to gender equality. The introduction of RIFs is so recent that it is too early to assess their gender impacts. Instead, the below provides lessons for RIFs from the experience of the VSSs.

### Land Rights

Land tenure is crucial for gaining access to the economic benefits of certification, but women are often excluded because they have fewer statutory land rights than men (Hanson et al., 2012). VSSs have only benefited women's formal land rights in specific circumstances, such as contexts where there are high rates of male migration (Lyon, Bezaury, & Mutersbaugh, 2010), and in some women-only certification projects (KIT, Agri-ProFocus, & IIRR, 2012). In so far as VSSs are used as a form of land privatization, certification can be detrimental to women's access to common or customary land.

**Lessons for RIFs on Land Rights:** Investors, and those implementing RIFs, must enforce their already strong principles on providing for women's statutory land rights. Any privatization or land titling activities should not prevent women from accessing essential resources on common or customary land.

### Productive Resources

Certification has in some instances helped women gain access to credit and production inputs, for example through pre-financing in the Fair Trade system. Women who gain registration as producers through certification often see an increase in their access to inputs and information about production techniques (Riisgaard et al., 2009). However, VSS initiatives have sometimes wrongly assumed that technology and training activities are equally available to women and men, or that new knowledge will be passed along to women by husbands and families.

**Lessons for RIFs on Productive Resources:** Investors in outgrower schemes should collaborate with women to identify cultural and economic barriers to their access to productive resources, including to training and information on production techniques.

### Household Labour

Reducing the time women spend on care work and food provisioning requires access to labour-saving technologies. VSS initiatives have helped women gain access to such technologies by supporting new income-generating activities. Nevertheless, the ability to gain access to such benefits is sometimes dependent on husbands' permission (Kasente, 2012). Certification often contributes to household food and nutrition security by boosting incomes and promoting inter-cropping, provided that subsistence crops are not shifted into production for export.

**Lessons for RIFs on Household Labour:** Investors, in consultation with local civil society groups, should support the creation of women's groups that develop strategies for alleviating their heavy work burden. They should work with women to plan any changes to cropping patterns to prevent negative impacts on household nutrition.





## Employment

Certification schemes among smallholder farmers affect the distribution and intensity of work due to additional environmental and quality requirements. This has exacerbated women's workload and reinforced the gender division of labour by placing them in low-skilled positions (see Verstappen, Hanson, & McLaughlin 2012). In plantation agriculture, the results are similar. These effects are mitigated when active efforts are made to include women in processing and marketing processes (KIT et al., 2012), supported by training. Certification has created higher earnings for both female smallholder and waged agricultural workers, and improved safety and health conditions at work.



**Lessons for RIFs on Employment:** Investors must become familiar with the gender division of labour in the local context, and specifically with women's needs for further training in production, leadership, marketing and other skills to ensure equal opportunities for workplace promotion and advancement. Some investors have successfully implemented employment schemes focussed on improving women's integration into the workforce, including at senior levels.

## Decision Making

The VSSs are silent about gendered social norms in the household, but have significant impacts on informal household decision-making structures through shifts in the economic activities of women and men. Participation in VSSs can improve gender equality within the household, for example because women become more involved in community activities (Bacon, 2010). However, this finding is not consistent across contexts; moreover, certification may not be an appropriate tool for addressing unequal household relations. Certification has rarely promoted women's involvement in decision-making roles in cooperatives and producer groups (Smith, 2013), although increased confidence gained through trainings on the certified production process (Farnworth & Hutchings, 2009) and on economic and management concerns (Utting-Chamorro, 2005) have had a positive effect.

**Lessons on Decision Making:** Investors must develop strategies to promote women's authority within cooperatives and producer groups and in negotiating with investors. Women should be involved in consultations, grievance mechanisms, community engagement strategies and all other mechanisms through which investors interact with local communities. Some investors have successfully established a specific Gender Liaison Committee to deal with issues of women's empowerment across the organization. To free up the time for their participation, support should be provided to help with childcare and other household tasks.



## Recommendations

### General Lessons for All Stakeholders

1. **Focus on implementation and practice.** Even the best-developed principles must be accompanied by capacity-development activities to enable compliance. They must also be able to adapt during on-the-ground engagement if unintended consequences arise during implementation.
2. **Adopt a gender-equity approach.** Contributing to gender equality should be considered part of the “social contract” associated with foreign investments in agriculture—much in the same way as recognition of existing land rights and community participation are now broadly accepted as key principles for fair and equitable investments.
3. **Engage women as partners in developing and implementing investment principles.** From the outset, RIFs should work with women as key stakeholders in the outcome of the investment, and include them in efforts to implement and monitor their impacts at every stage. These projects should be conceptualized as being implemented with, as much as for, women.
4. **Account for local gender norms.** Gender inequalities vary across and within regions and communities, with implications for the outcomes of RIFs for women. To mitigate any negative unintended consequences, implementation strategies should be developed with local women and researchers familiar with the cultural context regarding gender norms.

### Recommendations for Investors

- a. Develop and adopt—with partners along the value chain—an explicit gender strategy for the empowerment of women.
- b. Embed gender commitments in contracts with host government, customers and suppliers.
- c. Ensure female participation in community consultations (equal to men, if possible) and any other stakeholder groups with which you engage. Conduct additional women-only consultations.
- d. Provide for women’s needs in community development agreements, as determined through these consultations.
- e. Ensure participation of women in local farmer or employee training programs; do not assume the knowledge is passed from participant men to non-participant women.
- f. Monitor gender impacts on an ongoing basis. Adapt business models and plans as required to be more inclusive and gender-sensitive, and report on progress annually.

### Recommendations for Host Governments

- a. Prioritize inclusive and gender-transformative outcomes in agricultural development strategies.
- b. Request a gender statement from prospective investors, which should include an explanation of how the project will generate opportunities for women.
- c. Work with investors and independent researchers to devise a gender impact assessment study.
- d. Gather gender-disaggregated data before, during and after the implementation of the investment project. Include local women in the research process.
- e. Hold investors accountable for adherence to gender commitments made.

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### Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue, Suite 325  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3B 0T4

**Tel:** +1 (204) 958-7700

**Website:** [www.iisd.org](http://www.iisd.org)

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### Geneva Office

International Environment House 2  
9 chemin de Balexert, 1219 Châtelaine  
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