



SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT
VALUE CHAINS SERIES

Gender Equality

SSI REPORT



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Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains: Gender Equality

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Executive Summary

Gender inequality remains a sustainability challenge in global agricultural value chains. Women contribute substantially to agricultural production yet continue to face barriers in access to land, finance, training, leadership positions, decent work, and decision-making power. This report, the second in the Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains series from the International Institute for Sustainable Development, explores how voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) and private sector companies address women's economic empowerment (WEE) in global agricultural value chains, and how their approaches can be combined to advance broader sustainability and resilience objectives.

Using the same four-phase framework as the first report in this series (Plan/Prepare, Respond, Recover, and Adapt), this report assesses the role of selected VSSs (Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, Better Cotton Initiative, and the African Organisation for Standardisation) and private sector companies across five commodities (coffee, cocoa, cotton, tea, and flowers) in supporting WEE. The framework offers a way to understand how these actors engage with gender-related risks by (a) planning and preparing to identify and prevent gender inequalities through risk assessments and gender policies before harm or exclusion occurs; (b) responding with timely corrective action to harms and rights violations that drive women's economic exclusion; (c) recovering by restoring women's economic positions, participation, and assets following exclusion or harm; and (d) adapting by embedding long-term structural changes (to land rights, governance, market relationships, and control over income) that prevent exclusion from recurring. Evidence is drawn from VSS standard documents, a benchmark of 21 International Trade Centre Standards Map gender indicators, desk research on private sector practice across five commodities, and interviews with private sector actors.

Key Findings

1. Plan/Prepare and Respond (prevention and immediate action) are the most consistently covered, but they remain focused on compliance.

Across the VSSs examined, non-discrimination requirements and equal rights provisions are now widely embedded in certification systems, and all four standards include criteria addressing gender-based discrimination. Better Cotton Initiative and Rainforest Alliance go further, requiring gender-responsive risk assessments and the collection of sex-disaggregated data. However, coverage of gender-specific rights at work—including maternity protection, breastfeeding accommodations, and protections for seasonal, migrant, and informal workers, who are disproportionately women—is uneven across standards. Private sector actors are similarly adopting institutional commitments such as the UN Women's Empowerment Principles, integrating gender into risk analysis tools, and implementing targeted initiatives on issues such as gender-based violence; however, these measures often remain diagnostic, with limited linkages to corrective action or sourcing decisions.



2. Recover and Adapt (restoration and long-term transformation) show great potential but remain unevenly developed and limited in scale.

Among the VSSs examined, Recover and Adapt measures (including grievance mechanisms, gender committees, capacity building, and advocacy) are less common than prevention-oriented requirements, and access to remedy following harm or rights violations is largely underdeveloped beyond the establishment of grievance mechanisms. Private sector actors are supporting recovery and adaptation through financial inclusion initiatives such as Village Savings and Loan Associations, leadership and entrepreneurship training, and, in a smaller number of cases (particularly small and medium-sized enterprises), business model innovations that embed women's participation directly into ownership structures, sourcing relationships, and value distribution. These approaches demonstrate strong potential, but training and capacity building alone do not automatically change the conditions that limit WEE.

3. The enabling environment is the weakest link.

Requirements addressing care-related policies and upgrading the wages and status of work traditionally performed by women are the least covered categories across the VSSs examined. This points to a structural gap between non-discrimination, which is widely addressed, and the transformative changes—in land tenure, governance, market access, and control over income—needed to deliver genuine economic empowerment.

4. No single actor or instrument can deliver WEE alone—and women producers themselves are central actors in this process, not passive recipients.

Certification can set expectations and provide assurance where gender-related requirements are audited and enforced, but VSSs do not have the mandate or capacity to directly connect women producers to markets, finance, or land rights. Private sector initiatives, most often delivered through partnerships with non-governmental organizations such as CARE International, TechnoServe, and Oxfam, are an important complement to addressing some of these gaps. There is a distinction between buyers who have decoupled sustainability platforms and those that build direct, accountable sourcing relationships with women producers as their business model.

A smart mix of complementary actions is needed to simultaneously address immediate risks, restore opportunities, strengthen women's agency, and create enabling conditions for long-term inclusion and leadership. In practice, this requires concrete shifts in gender-based discrimination, women's access to decent work and equal remuneration, grievance systems that are safe to use and lead to enforceable outcomes, and women in leadership positions with decision-making power.



Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 The Concept of Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains	1
1.2 Gender Equality and WEE	1
1.3 SRVC Framework	1
1.4 Report Objectives	4
1.5 Methodology	5
1.6 Research Limitations	6
2.0 Why WEE in Global Agricultural Value Chains Matters	8
2.1 Trends, Drivers, and Progress	8
2.2 Promoting WEE in Agriculture: Initiatives and commitments	9
3.0 VSS Approaches to Addressing WEE	11
3.1 Plan/Prepare and Respond	13
3.2 Recover and Adapt	17
4.0 Private Sector Approaches to Addressing WEE	25
4.1 Plan/Prepare and Respond	25
4.2 Recover and Adapt	28
5.0 A Smart Mix of Solutions to Advance SRVCs	33
6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations	35
6.1 Key Takeaways	35
6.2 Recommendations	37
References	39



List of Figures

Figure 1. Framework: Building SRVCs	3
Figure 2. Distribution of globally certified agricultural area by standard (2023)	11
Figure 3. Minimum harvested area certified by agricultural commodity (2023).....	12

List of Tables

Table 1. The SRVC framework and stages used in this report.....	4
Table 2. VSSs assessed in the report	12
Table 3. VSSs' requirement coverage related to Plan/Prepare and Respond.....	14
Table 4. VSSs' requirement coverage related to Recover and Adapt	18
Table 5. How VSSs go beyond compliance requirements	23
Table 6. Private sector practices and initiatives.....	32



Abbreviations and Acronyms

ARSO	African Organisation for Standardisation
BCI	Better Cotton Initiative
E&S	environmental and social
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
ITC	International Trade Centre
SME	small or medium-sized enterprise
SRVC	sustainable and resilient value chains
WEE	women's economic empowerment
WEP	UN Women's Empowerment Principle
WTO	World Trade Organization
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
VSS	voluntary sustainability standard
VSSSO	voluntary sustainability standard-setting organization



1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Concept of Sustainable and Resilient Value Chains

Global value chains play a central role in shaping economic, environmental, and social outcomes in an interconnected global economy. Food and agricultural supply chains face increasing scrutiny because of associated sustainability risks, including biodiversity loss, climate change, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. As these challenges intensify, there is growing urgency to transform global value chains so that they support resilience and sustainability rather than contribute to existing risks.

This report is the second in a series on sustainable and resilient value chains (SRVC), which aims to support value chain actors in identifying, preventing, addressing, and transforming sustainability risks while generating positive outcomes for people and the planet. The series is based on the premise that addressing complex sustainability challenges requires a complementary combination of strong public policy and legal frameworks alongside effective market-based approaches that support producers. When these measures are aligned, value chains can evolve toward greater sustainability and resilience, rather than shifting risks to other actors or geographies. The series focuses on how voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) and private sector interventions can be leveraged to support risk management. Each publication addresses a specific sustainability challenge, providing actionable insights for policy-makers and practitioners. The first report in the series focused on deforestation; this second report focuses on gender equality and women's economic empowerment (WEE) in agricultural value chains.

1.2 Gender Equality and WEE

In this report on gender equality and WEE in value chains, we distinguish between gender inequality as the root cause, women's economic exclusion as the value chain risk, and WEE as the desired outcome. Gendered harms and rights violations—such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and unequal remuneration—as well as barriers to resources and opportunities, contribute to women's economic exclusion and undermine the sustainability and resilience of value chains. WEE refers to women's ability to access and control resources and to exercise agency and choice in how they use and benefit from them (Kabeer, 2012; UN Women, 2024). Accordingly, the report examines how VSSs and private sector actors can both address the gender-related harms and rights violations that drive exclusion and actively promote women's economic inclusion and empowerment through greater participation in markets, producer organizations, leadership roles, and decision-making processes.

1.3 SRVC Framework

The SRVC series draws on a growing body of evidence demonstrating that sustainability and resilience are mutually reinforcing dimensions of value chains. Research indicates that sustainable supply chains generate long-term economic, environmental, and social value (Ahi



& Searcy, 2013; Carter & Rogers, 2008; Cotta et al., 2022), while resilience enables supply chains to maintain and adapt these outcomes in the face of shocks, disruptions, and changing conditions (Ambulkar et al., 2015; Cotta et al., 2022). At the same time, the literature suggests that the integration of sustainability and resilience in supply chain research remains relatively recent and underdeveloped (Fahimnia et al., 2019; Negri et al., 2021). Strengthening the integration of these concepts offers a pathway for repositioning value chains as mechanisms for systemic change. This is increasingly relevant as global policy and regulatory landscapes evolve toward greater accountability and risk management, with emerging regulations and trade frameworks placing heightened demands on transparent, robust supply chain governance.

The **SRVC framework** (Figure 1) is used in this series and to analyze how VSSs and private sector companies can support and complement their current actions to address gender equality through WEE while building SRVCs. The framework has four stages:

1. **Plan/Prepare:** Assessing, diagnosing, and determining possible interventions to prevent sustainability risks before they occur through risk assessments, strategic planning, and early interventions.

Example: Using systematic risk assessments and policy design to anticipate and diagnose gender inequalities before they deepen or are further perpetuated.

2. **Respond:** Taking timely corrective action in response to direct harm and rights violations that lead to women's economic exclusion. The responses are immediate after the event has happened or when it is suspected to have happened.

Example: Enforcing clear consequences (such as removing certification status) if serious gender-related harms, including sexual and gender-based violence, harassment, or discrimination, are identified and not adequately addressed.

3. **Recover:** Implementing restorative measures to address harms, not only by repairing and compensating for harms but also by adopting structures and processes that help ensure no future harm, thus "building back better."

Example: Implementing restorative measures that compensate for past exclusion and rehabilitate women's economic standing through compensation and grievance mechanisms.

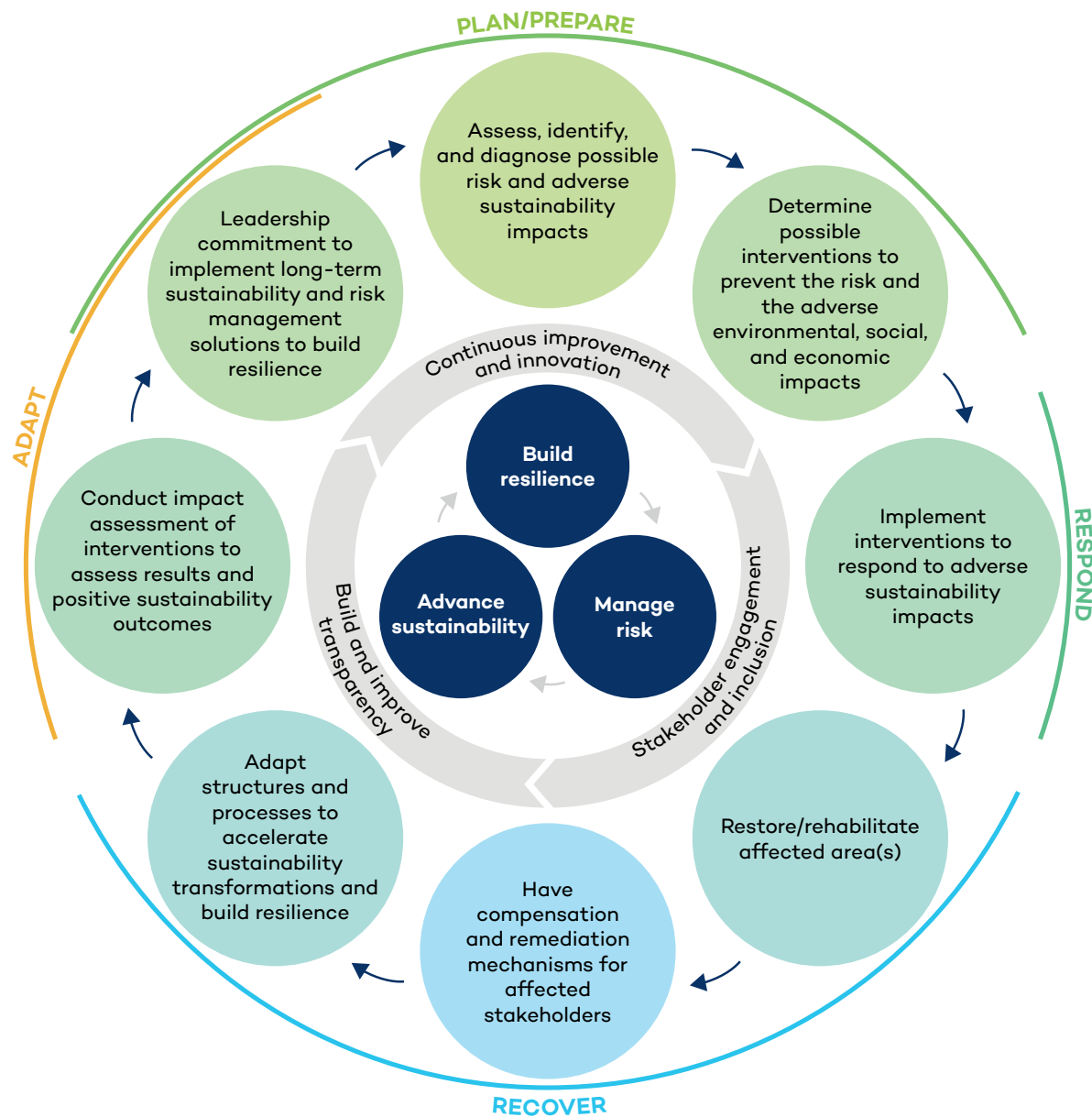
4. **Adapt:** Embedding long-term structural transformations that prevent women's economic exclusion from recurring and building resilient supply chains where women's empowerment is institutionalized rather than dependent on temporary projects.

Example: Using lessons from monitoring and evaluation to revise procurement policies, membership criteria, leadership structures, grievance mechanisms, and service delivery models to address persistent barriers to women's participation and economic empowerment.

Practices and measures to address both harms and rights violations and women's economic exclusion often span multiple stages of this framework, as companies and value chain stakeholders may combine preventive, responsive, and restorative actions, depending

on context and timing. Actions in one stage can also enable or evolve into the next; for instance, recovery efforts most often create the foundation for longer-term adaptation and transformation.

Figure 1. Framework: Building SRVCs



Source: Verma et al., 2025.



1.4 Report Objectives

This report focuses on WEE as the second thematic risk area in which to apply the SRVC framework. It focuses on women in the agricultural sector, particularly in the production stage.

The report applies the SRVC framework's four stages (see Table 1) and an exploratory methodology to identify and illustrate innovative and promising approaches that VSSs and private companies have applied to address the economic empowerment of women producers and advance SRVCs. The report provides recommendations to improve these practices and better address gender inequalities and promote WEE.

Table 1. The SRVC framework and stages used in this report

Step	When	Purpose
1. Plan/Prepare	Before a harm or economic exclusion occurs	Anticipatory Identify and mitigate gender-specific harms or rights violations and economic exclusion before they are locked into value chain structures.
2. Respond	During/immediately after a harm/rights violation or exclusion	Reactive Address harms/violations of women producers' rights and their economic exclusion through timely targeted action.
3. Recover	After a harm/rights violation or exclusion has occurred (ex-post)	Restorative Address protection, remedy, and safety and rebuild women producers' economic position, assets, and participation.
4. Adapt	Before and after (both ex-ante and ex-post); ongoing	Transformative Build long-term resilience and redesign systems and norms to prevent recurring harm/rights violations and exclusion and build long-term agency for women producers.

Source: Authors.

This report is organized into four sections. This introduction provides an overview of the SRVC framework. Section 2 unpacks WEE in the context of global agricultural value chains, outlining key trends, drivers, and challenges related to women's economic exclusion. Section 3 examines the role of VSSs in addressing WEE, highlighting both VSS requirements and good practices beyond requirements. Section 4 explores the role of private sector actors in advancing sustainable and resilient value chains by leveraging and showcasing innovative approaches, from partnerships to direct work with women farmers, and tools aligned with



the SRVC framework. Section 5 provides an integrated analysis of how VSSs and private sector measures can be combined in a smart mix of solutions to address gender inequalities and promote WEE. Section 6 presents conclusions and recommendations, offering practical guidance for VSS organizations and private sector actors to promote WEE.

1.5 Methodology

This report uses the SRVC framework (Table 1) to assess how VSSs and private sector companies address WEE at the production level of agricultural value chains. It structures the analysis around the following four stages: Plan/Prepare, Respond, Recover, and Adapt.

1.5.1 Methodology for Section 2 (VSSs)

The VSS section employed a mixed-methods approach, combining (i) systematic benchmarking of VSS requirements against 21 indicators from the International Trade Centre (ITC) Standards Map, a global database and benchmarking tool for voluntary sustainability standards (International Trade Centre, n.d.), and (ii) mapping practices that go beyond standards requirements and that VSS are implementing to address gender inequality in agricultural value chains and directly contribute to WEE outcomes.

Four VSSs were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across standard type, commodity focus, and geographic origin:

- Fairtrade International and Rainforest Alliance were selected as two of the most widely recognized and adopted international multi-commodity standards, providing baseline understanding of mainstream VSS approaches to gender.
- Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) was selected to provide commodity-specific depth, representing sector-focused standards that may have different gender integration approaches than multi-commodity schemes.
- African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO) was selected to represent regional standards development, offering a perspective on how continental or regional bodies address gender considerations distinct from international standards.

For each standard, publicly available documentation was systematically reviewed, including producer certification requirements, standards manuals, and gender-specific guidance documents and toolkits. Each of the 21 ITC gender indicators, accompanied by their definitions and guidance, was coded as Covered, Partially Covered, or Not Covered, with supporting evidence drawn from specific clauses and sections. Beyond-requirements practices were identified through VSS websites, annual reports, published case studies, and news releases.

All identified practices (beyond requirements) were subsequently analyzed through the lens of the SRVC framework phases. This discussion enabled an assessment of whether VSS approaches are weighted toward reactive risk mitigation versus transformative systemic change.



1.5.2 Methodology for Section 3 (the Private Sector)

The private sector section employed systematic mapping and content analysis to characterize buyer companies' approaches to gender equality and WEE in their supply chains, as well as how they complement or extend VSS certification requirements. The research focused on five commodities: coffee, tea, cotton, cocoa, and flowers. These commodities were selected to provide cross-commodity coverage while acknowledging that coffee and Fairtrade are overrepresented in existing gender and sustainability literature. The commodity selection, therefore, deliberately sought to draw evidence from actors working across a wider range of agricultural value chains.

Companies were identified through multiple complementary search pathways: VSS certification databases (companies listed as certified buyers or supply chain partners on Fairtrade International, the Rainforest Alliance, and BCI); industry and sector associations (e.g., specialty coffee associations, tea trade associations, and textile industry groups); geographically targeted searches combining producing country location with commodity terms (e.g., "Rwanda coffee exporters," "Swedish tea buyers"); sustainability directories, including the B Corporation registry and UN Global Compact participants list; and snowball sampling from partnerships mentioned in other companies' documentation. To be included, companies were required to have direct sourcing relationships with at least one of the five target commodities from women producers or women-led organizations and to have publicly documented gender-related initiatives, commitments, or programs that were operational during the research period (2023–2024). Companies whose gender engagement was limited to certification compliance alone (no direct farmer engagement) were excluded, as were companies working exclusively with women factory workers rather than women farmer producers and retailers or brands without direct sourcing relationships with origin countries.

For each included company, a structured data extraction template captured company characteristics (small or medium-sized enterprise [SME] or large buyer, headquarters location, commodity/commodities sourced, geographic sourcing regions); VSS certification (Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, BCI, etc.); gender-equality initiatives (description and objective, scope, scale); commitments and targets (formal gender-equality commitments or policies, quantified targets, public pledges, accountability); implementation approaches; partnerships and collaborations; and monitoring and results. Findings were organized using the SRVC framework phases and WEE dimensions, enabling comparative assessment across company size, commodity, and type of gender engagement.

1.6 Research Limitations

While this report highlights a range of practices addressing gender inequality and supporting WEE in agricultural supply chains, there are a few limitations to keep in mind that apply to both the VSS benchmarking and the private sector mapping. The analysis is entirely based on documented requirements, publicly available information, and, in the case of some private sector actors, interviews. Actual implementation and effectiveness at the farm or cooperative level were not directly assessed. In addition, VSSs' documents represent minimum requirements, and producer-level compliance and outcomes would require separate



evaluation. Similarly, private sector actor initiatives would also require further verification. All the requirements from VSSs and the practices mapped from the private sector continue to evolve, and therefore, this analysis represents a snapshot at the time of research. Finally, the beyond-requirements practices may vary by geography, producer type, VSS, or buyer organizational capacity.



2.0 Why WEE in Global Agricultural Value Chains Matters

2.1 Trends, Drivers, and Progress

WEE is both an end in itself and a critical enabler of SRVCs. As defined by UN Women (2024), WEE encompasses women's equal participation in and benefit from decent work; access to markets and control over resources, time, and economic decisions; and increased voice, agency, and meaningful participation in economic decision making at all levels. In this report, we use an operationalized version of that definition recognizing that agency and control, not just access, are what determine whether economic inclusion translates into genuine economic empowerment (Kabeer, 2012; UN Women, 2024).

Women play a central role in agrifood systems: globally, around 36% of women's employment is in agrifood systems, rising to over 66% across much of sub-Saharan Africa and 71% in Southeast Asia. This makes them indispensable contributors to global food security and supply chain stability (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2023). Despite this critical role, women farmers and agricultural workers face systematic exclusion from formal markets; limited access to productive resources, including land, credit, and technology; and significant barriers to participation in decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods and communities (Doss, 2018; FAO, 2023; Quisumbing et al., 2021). Those that are able to sell to export markets face constraints that prevent them from doing so on terms equitable to those that men can access; for example, less access to education and training, lower control over resources, less decision-making power over household income, and time constraints due to a triple burden of productive, domestic, and community responsibilities (Quisumbing et al., 2021).

Women's unequal access to markets and unequal terms of participation create significant vulnerabilities for supply security, quality consistency, and sustainable production practices. The gender gap in land productivity between women- and men-managed farms of equivalent size is estimated at 24%, driven not by differences in ability but by unequal access to inputs, extension services, and productive assets (FAO, 2023). Evidence suggests that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20%–30%, raising total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5%–4% (UN Women, n.d.). Addressing inequalities can improve the efficiency, innovation potential, and resilience of agricultural supply chains.

Approaches that address the underlying causes of gender inequality can be cost effective and high impact. The FAO estimates that if half of small-scale producers benefited from interventions focused on women's empowerment, it would raise the incomes of an additional 58 million people and strengthen the resilience of an additional 235 million (FAO, 2023).

While overall, women producers continue to face inequalities, there is evidence of progress on some levels. Over the past decade, national policy frameworks have increasingly addressed structural barriers to women's economic participation in agrifood systems, including unequal



access to land, inputs, services, finance, and digital technology. In East Africa and Latin America, national policies and budgets are also increasingly reflecting commitments to produce gender-responsive outcomes for women (FAO, 2023). On land access specifically, the share of women among landowners increased in 10 of 18 countries for which trend data are available, with substantial improvements recorded in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia (FAO, 2023).

2.2 Promoting WEE in Agriculture: Initiatives and commitments

As agricultural commodities move through global value chains, women producers' economic empowerment is shaped not only by production-side barriers, but also by how markets are organized, how buyer requirements are set, how certification systems operate, and how sourcing decisions create or limit opportunities. Efforts have been made at the global, institutional, and industry levels to address WEE in agricultural value chains. At the global policy level, these include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment; the 2010 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and the UN Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), a joint initiative of the UN Global Compact and UN Women that has attracted over 12,000 companies that have signed to commit to gender equality in the workplace, marketplace, and community (UN Women & UN Global Compact, 2026) (this number reflects many sectors, including agri-food).

At the trade level, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has increasingly focused on mainstreaming gender. The 2017 Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment (endorsed by 127 WTO members and observers) committed signatories to making trade and development policies more gender-responsive, removing barriers to WEE, and increasing women's participation in trade (WTO, n.d.-a). This was followed by the establishment of the WTO Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender in 2020, which has the objective of sharing best practices on removing barriers to women's participation in global trade (WTO, n.d.-b).

Closer to the agricultural production level, VSS-setting organizations and private sector buyers influence overproduction conditions, market access, and sourcing relationships. Voluntary sustainability standards-setting organizations (VSSOs) can require certain production practices, influence traceability systems, determine price premiums, and condition access to buyers and export markets. As such, they represent important levers for embedding gender-equality objectives into the day-to-day functioning of value chains. At the industry level, VSS bodies, including Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, and BCI, have developed sector-specific gender strategies, while initiatives like the International Women's Coffee Alliance's network, with chapters in more than 36 countries, connect women producers to committed buyers. In addition, initiatives and frameworks targeting private sector action have emerged, including gender-lens investing criteria developed by impact investors such as Root Capital (Root Capital, 2024).

Many voluntary sustainability systems and private sector entities recognize the importance of supporting WEE objectives, both as a fundamental human right and as critical to building



SRVCs. VSS can be catalysts for trade by providing a competitive advantage to complying producers, ensuring sustainable production practices, and facilitating access to export markets (Section 3). Private sector actors are starting to use their purchasing power and supply chain relationships to extend market opportunities to women producers, funding capacity-building programs for them, and creating preferential market access for women-led organizations (Section 4).

Taken together, interventions from these actors can help build more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient value chains that recognize and leverage women's essential contributions to global food systems and agricultural sustainability. This report focuses specifically on these interventions as they operate at the agricultural production level (among women farmers, smallholders, and hired farm workers). The following sections unpack these approaches in more detail, examining how VSS requirements and beyond-requirement practices are being applied, what private sector actors are doing in practice, and how a smarter combination of these instruments could more systematically connect women economic inclusion strategies to the sourcing decisions and market incentives that make sense and are sustainable in the long term for women producers.



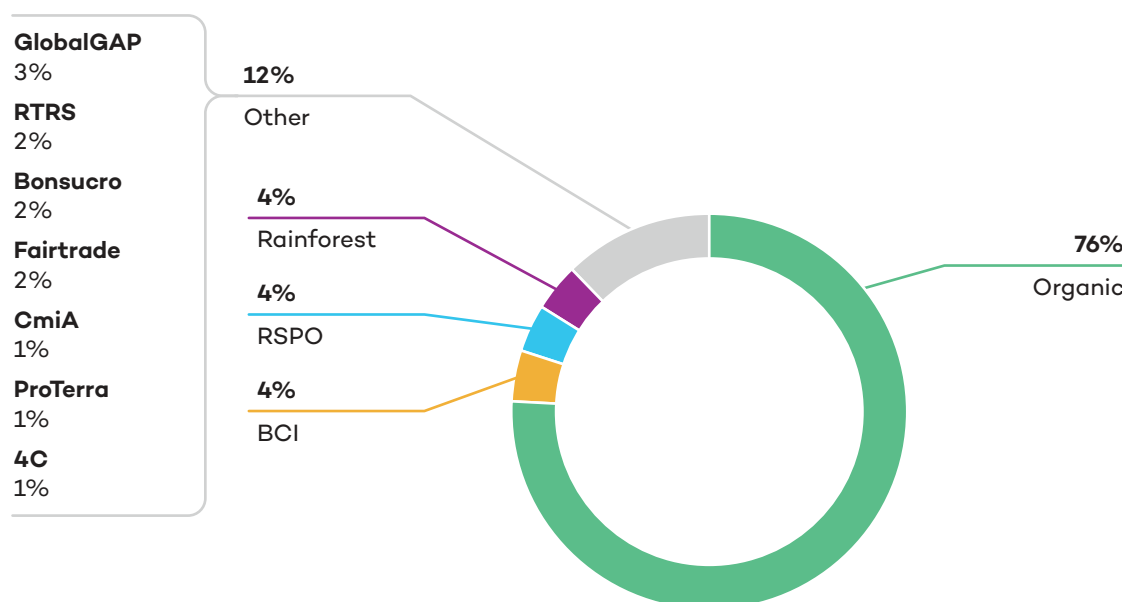
3.0 VSS Approaches to Addressing WEE

VSSs 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, land-use planning, and others. (United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards, 2026)

Most VSSs also provide support systems to help producers meet those requirements and advance sustainable production and consumption of agricultural commodities via training, capacity building, and other supporting measures (Bermúdez & Sarmiento, 2023).

Figure 2. Distribution of globally certified agricultural area by standard (2023)



Note: CmiA: Cotton Made in Africa; RTRS = Round Table on Responsible Soy; RSPO = Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil.

Source: Authors, based on Kemper et al., 2025.

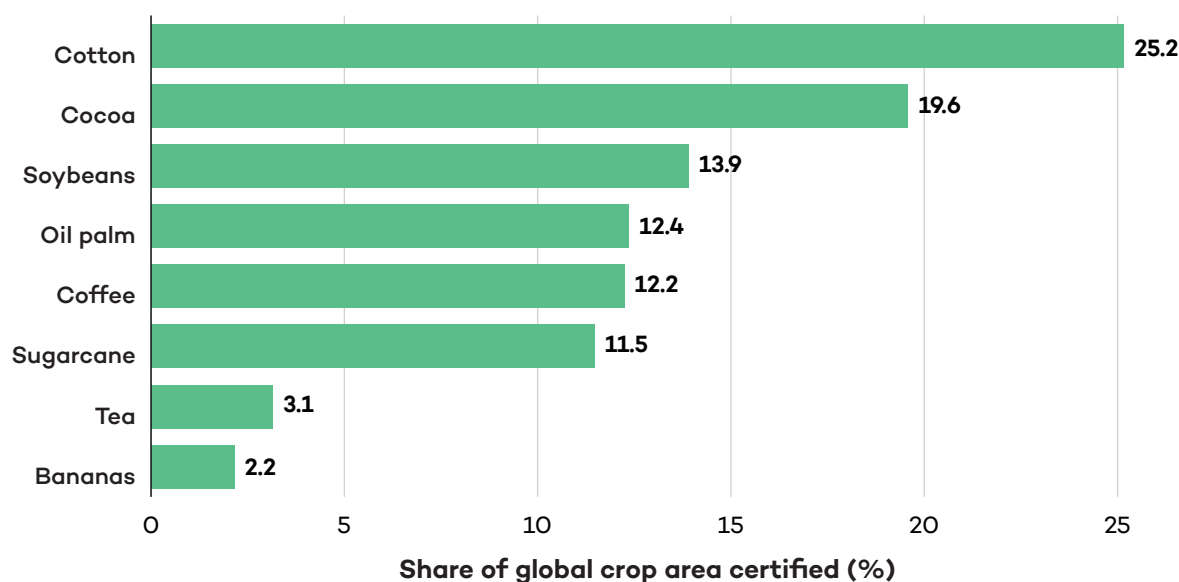
VSSs operate at the intersection of market incentives, certification requirements, and producer engagement, positioning them to not only promote sustainable agricultural practices but also more equitable social systems. VSSs are increasingly incorporating and mainstreaming gender equality into their activities: from introducing gender-focused requirements for producers to innovating and introducing initiatives such as additional guidance documents, tools, and training that can support producers not only to comply with the gender-focused requirements but also understand why it is important. The evidence on whether these initiatives translate into meaningful gains for women is mixed, and the pathway from standard compliance to genuine WEE is not automatic (Sexsmith, 2019; Smith et al., 2019).

This section of the report analyzes how the requirements of selected VSSs (Table 2) operating in agriculture align with the SRVC framework (Figure 1). It also highlights what they do



beyond compliance requirements to address WEE. Our sample includes both international schemes (Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade International, and BCI) and a regional standard (ARSO). The selected VSSs operate across agricultural commodities.

Figure 3. Minimum harvested area certified by agricultural commodity (2023)



Source: Authors, based on Kemper et al., 2025.

Table 2. VSSs assessed in the report

Standard	Key agricultural commodities	Standard document referenced
Rainforest Alliance	Coffee, cocoa, tea, bananas, palm oil, coconut oil, fruits, nuts, herbs, spices, and flowers	<i>Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard Farm Requirements (A-1-S-B-F Version 1.4)</i> (Rainforest Alliance, 2024) <i>Guidance F: Gender Equality</i> (Version 1) (Rainforest Alliance, 2020)
Fairtrade International	Coffee, cocoa, bananas, flowers, tea, sugar, cotton, nuts, oils, spices, fresh fruits, vegetables, rice, and wine	<i>Fairtrade Standard for Small-scale Producer Organizations (03.04.2019_v2.9)</i> (Fairtrade International, 2024) <i>Gender Equity in Fairtrade Standards</i> (Fairtrade International, n.d.)
BCI	Cotton	<i>Principles and Criteria – Version 1.3 – March 2025</i> (Better Cotton, 2025a) <i>Decent Work Strategy: A Roadmap to 2030</i> (Better Cotton, 2025b)
ARSO	Maize, wheat, tea, coffee, cocoa, bananas, coconuts, aquaculture (tilapia, catfish), and beef	<i>Agriculture—Sustainability and eco-labelling—Requirements (ARS/AES 01:2014(E))</i> (ARSO, 2014)

Source: Authors.



3.1 Plan/Prepare and Respond

3.1.1 VSS Requirements

The Plan/Prepare and Respond phases of the SRVC framework focus on measures that identify, prevent, and address gender inequalities within value chains. Plan/Prepare measures encompass the identification and prevention of gender-based risks through risk assessments, gender policies, and non-discrimination requirements embedded in the certification standards documents (Table 3). Respond measures aim to address harms as they occur or are detected through targeted protections for women producers. Table 3 maps each scheme's requirements against the SRVC Plan/Prepare and Respond indicators.

Across the selected VSSs, Plan/Prepare and Respond measures are among the most common approaches used to address gender inequalities and primarily focus on preventing harm and protecting women's rights within value chains. These measures tend to fall under the following categories:

- non-discrimination and equal rights for all genders
- gender-responsive risk assessment and planning
- gender-specific rights at work.

In terms of preventing gender-based discrimination and rights violations that contribute to women's economic exclusion, all four VSSs have criteria related to non-discrimination and equal rights based on gender. ARSO, for example, requires that there is no discrimination based on gender in wages, working conditions, and social benefits for workers (ARSO, 2014, p. 16). BCI's Criterion 5.6 prohibits discrimination across the entire employment life cycle (hiring, compensation, training, promotion, and termination) and explicitly includes gender identity and sex as protected characteristics (Better Cotton, 2025a, p. 75).

The gender-responsive risk assessment and planning category assesses whether standards require producer organizations to identify and address gender-specific risks, develop gender policies, and integrate gender considerations into their broader environmental and social impact assessments.

BCI and Rainforest Alliance are both fully covered across the three indicators. BCI's monitoring plan (Requirement 1.1.2) explicitly incorporates gender-disaggregated data collection (Better Cotton, 2025a, p. 16). Rainforest Alliance has developed a Farm Risk Assessment and a Supply Chain Risk Assessment tool that includes specific gender-equality questions that help systematize gender analysis in the certification process (Rainforest Alliance, 2025a). This additional feature makes gender analysis a systematic element of the certification process for producers.

**Table 3.** VSSs' requirement coverage related to Plan/Prepare and Respond

Category	Indicator	ARSO	BCI	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance
Non-discrimination and equal rights	Criteria recognizing non-discrimination based on gender	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gender-responsive risk assessment and planning	Criteria on whether the scheme includes a general principle respecting equal rights for men and women	–	✓	✓	✓
	Criteria promoting gender-equality policies and good practices	✗	✓	✓	✓
	Criteria requiring gender-related impacts and risks to be assessed in production activities	–	✓	–	✓
Gender-specific rights at work	Criteria relating to women's rights at work	–	✓	✓	✓
	Criteria relating to equal remuneration	✓	✓	✓	–
	Criteria on women workers' entitlement to breaks (e.g. meals/breastfeeding breaks)	–	✓	✗	✓
	Criteria on maternity protection	–	✗	✗	✓
	Criteria on scope of women workers' rights and benefits applicable equally to all types of women workers (full-time, seasonal, part-time, migrants, coming from minority groups, etc.)	–	✓	–	✓
	Criteria relating to sexual exploitation/harassment	✓	✓	✓	–

Covered
 Partly covered
 Not covered

Note: Indicators are drawn from the ITC Standards Map (ITC, n.d.); language has been adapted for clarity while preserving the original meaning.

Source: Authors.

Fairtrade International does not explicitly require organizations to include gender-related risks in their risk assessment. Instead, gender-related considerations are addressed through a separate gender policy requirement, which is mandatory for small-scale producer



organizations. This policy must be developed and implemented with the involvement of women (Fairtrade International, 2024, p. 58). ARSO, on the other hand, does not require a gender policy, and the rest of the indicators are partially covered. The risk assessment and social management system requirements do not explicitly mention gender considerations or require sex-disaggregated data (ARSO, 2014, p. 9). The standard's general environmental and social management framework provides a foundation upon which gender-sensitive provisions could be built.

To prevent rights violations and gender-based discrimination that can contribute to women's economic exclusion, some VSSs also include requirements on gender-related labour rights and workplace protections. These include maternity protection, breastfeeding breaks, equal remuneration, and preventing sexual exploitation and harassment, and they extend to different types of women workers (permanent, temporary, migrant workers). When it comes to gender-specific rights at work, there is noticeably uneven coverage across VSSs. All the VSSs require equal pay, either by having a specific requirement on equal remuneration (ARSO and Rainforest Alliance) or explicitly covering payment parity for work of equal value under non-discrimination requirements (BCI and Fairtrade International). Maternity protection is less covered, with only Rainforest Alliance requiring both maternity and breastfeeding breaks, Fairtrade International requiring maternity leave for hired labour, ARSO referencing national law, and BCI making no explicit provision for maternity leave.

The VSSs' approaches to sexual harassment and gender-based violence also vary, with Fairtrade International and BCI having clear definitions and zero tolerance for gender-based violence requirements, and ARSO prohibiting sexual harassment through labour rights provisions. Rainforest Alliance does not address gender-based violence through its main standards document but rather through its Gender Risk Assessment Tool and gender person/committee's remediation role. When it comes to ensuring all types of women workers have these rights, BCI explicitly extends its decent work expectations to family members and seasonal, temporary, migrant, and subcontracted workers. Rainforest Alliance requires written contracts for workers employed for more than three consecutive months. Fairtrade International's employment contract provisions apply only to permanent workers, which misses seasonal and informal workers, typically women.

These findings point to clear opportunities. VSSs can strengthen their prevention and response approaches by moving toward more systematic identification, assessment, and management of gender-specific risks. This includes requiring gender-responsive risk assessments, gender policies, and the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data to inform decision making and monitor progress. VSSs can also strengthen protections for women workers by expanding coverage of maternity rights, breastfeeding accommodations, and prevention and remediation measures for sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Finally, VSSs can improve inclusiveness by ensuring that labour protections and gender-related requirements apply consistently to all categories of workers, including seasonal, temporary, migrant, subcontracted, and informal workers, who are often disproportionately women. Together, these measures would help VSSs move toward more proactively addressing gender inequalities in value chains.



3.1.2 Beyond Requirements

Beyond their requirements, VSSOs are also developing dedicated gender strategies and risk management tools that help identify and respond to women's lived realities. In 2022, ISEAL found that most of its members were promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, within but also beyond their standards (Morgan, 2023).

Developing Dedicated Gender Strategies

In recent years, VSSOs have developed gender strategies that set explicit commitments, assign institutional responsibility, and embed gender equality as a cross-cutting priority.

For example, BCI adopted its Gender Strategy 2019–2021 to mainstream gender concerns, needs, and interests across BCI's policies, partnerships, and programs at three levels: the sustainable cotton community, the farm, and the organization (BCI, 2020). The strategy is a tool for BCI to plan for and address gender issues by setting concrete commitments, such as reaching 1 million women in cotton by 2030, ensuring 25% of field staff are women, and promoting equal farm decision making (BCI, 2020). The Rainforest Alliance's 2022 position paper, *Everyone on Board: Promoting Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men, Girls and Boys*, aims to guide the organization toward a more gender-transformative approach across their interventions: certification requirements, landscape management, supply chain services, and advocacy (Rainforest Alliance, 2022). ISEAL, a global membership organization for VSS bodies, has created a toolkit and good practices to help guide sustainability systems to develop gender strategies (Morgan et al., 2024).

Dedicated gender strategies can help VSSOs establish a clear vision, institutional accountability, and measurable objectives for gender equality and women's empowerment. They can also provide an important mechanism for mainstreaming gender considerations across standards, capacity-building activities, partnerships, and organizational operations. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on their implementation. Without adequate resources, staff capacity, monitoring systems, and leadership commitment, gender strategies risk remaining aspirational documents rather than drivers of change. Furthermore, while many strategies focus on increasing women's participation and access to opportunities, fewer explicitly address the structural norms, power relations, and unequal decision-making processes that underpin gender inequalities in value chains.

Adopting Risk-Based Gender Assessment Tools

Risk assessments focused on gender can help identify gender-related risks and barriers to women's participation in the value chain. In some cases, VSSs embed risk-based monitoring directly into their production and criteria framework, as we saw in the case of BCI above. In other cases, VSSs have developed gender risk assessment tools that give certificate holders structured frameworks for identifying and addressing gender-specific gaps in their operations. The Rainforest Alliance's In-depth Risk Assessment Tool, introduced alongside its 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Standard, requires certificate holders to appoint a gender person or committee responsible for the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of gender-equality measures, gender-specific gaps, and harms and violations (Rainforest Alliance, 2025a). The tool mandates the collection of sex-disaggregated data; identifies gaps in women's and men's



access to inputs, resources, and opportunities; and links findings to a remediation protocol for cases of gender-based violence and discrimination. The tool frames gender equality as a continuous improvement process rather than a binary pass-or-fail audit outcome.

Risk-based gender assessment tools offer a more systematic approach to identifying gender inequalities than traditional compliance audits alone. By requiring the collection of sex-disaggregated data and analysis of gender-specific risks, they can help reveal barriers that might otherwise remain invisible, including unequal access to resources, services, training, and decision-making opportunities. They also support continuous improvement by enabling organizations to track progress over time and tailor interventions to local contexts. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on the quality of the data collected, the willingness and capacity to act on findings, and the availability of resources to implement corrective measures.

There is also a risk that assessments become a procedural exercise if they are not linked to meaningful accountability mechanisms, capacity-building support, and actions that address the underlying causes of gender inequality.

3.2 Recover and Adapt

3.2.1 VSS Requirements

The Recover and Adapt phases of the SRVC framework focus on measures that address the impacts of gender-based discrimination and economic exclusion and support long-term structural change within value chains. Recover measures seek to restore opportunities, participation, and economic well-being following instances of exclusion or harm, while Adapt measures focus on embedding systems, capacities, and institutional arrangements that reduce the likelihood of future inequalities and strengthen resilience over time. Within VSSs, these measures are reflected through requirements that promote women's representation, strengthen gender-responsive management systems, build leadership and capacity, and create enabling environments for women's participation and empowerment (Table 4). Table 4 maps each scheme's requirements against the SRVC Recover and Adapt indicators.

Across the selected VSSs, Recover and Adapt measures are unevenly covered, with enabling environment being least covered, particularly around access to remedy post-harms and rights violations and accountability. Where present, they tend to fall under the following categories:

- women's representation
- gender-responsive management systems
- capacity building and leadership
- enabling environments for women's participation and empowerment.

**Table 4.** VSSs' requirement coverage related to Recover and Adapt

Category	Indicator	ARSO	BCI	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance
Women's representation	Criteria on factoring gender equity considerations in stakeholder engagement process	✗	✓	–	–
	Criteria on the grievance committee being gender balanced in its composition	–	✓	–	✓
Gender-responsive management systems	Criteria on management systems practices to monitor, evaluate, and remediate gender-specific issues	–	✓	✓	–
	Criteria on organizational capacity for continuous improvement of environmental and social management requiring gender expertise	✗	✓	✗	–
Capacity building and leadership	Criteria related to women workers' access to training programs	–	✓	–	–
	Criteria on incentives for women to develop their careers (e.g., specific training)	–	✓	✓	–
	Criteria on ensuring participation of women/minorities in management	–	✓	✓	–
	Criteria for assessment of women workers performance (for promotion, trainings)	–	✓	✓	–
Enabling environment	Criteria on upgrading the status of and wages for traditional areas of women's work	✗	✓	✗	✗
	Criteria on care-related policies to increase women's participation in the labour force	✗	✓	–	✓
	Criteria on women's access to health and safety services	–	✓	✓	✓

Covered
 Partly covered
 Not covered

Note: Indicators are drawn from the ITC Standards Map (ITC, n.d.); language has been adapted for clarity while preserving the original meaning.

Source: Authors.



Several VSSs address women's representation in stakeholder engagement and grievance mechanisms. They do so in different ways; while BCI explicitly requires consultation to be inclusive and representative of women and for grievance mechanisms to have a gender-sensitive resolution process, the Rainforest Alliance has a gender person/committee required to play a role in remediation of gender-based violence and discrimination cases and a gender-sensitive grievance mechanism, requiring at least a person of each gender. Fairtrade International involves women in developing and implementing the gender policy but is not explicit in how or to what extent women should be involved. ARSO does not have a requirement for gender equity in stakeholder engagement and does not explicitly require gender-balanced membership or gender-sensitive processes. This is an important gap; for instance, in communities where social norms deter women from raising grievances through traditional, exclusive mechanisms, a gender-neutral process is, in practice, inaccessible to them.

Effective grievance mechanisms at the production level should ensure, at a minimum, that women can safely access reporting channels (accounting for barriers such as social norms, retaliation risks, limited literacy, and restricted mobility that may prevent women from using standard processes). Processes themselves should be gender sensitive in design: this includes ensuring that complaints related to gender-based violence and discrimination are handled by trained personnel, that confidentiality is protected, and that clear remediation pathways exist for these categories of harm. Power imbalances between workers and supervisors, or between smallholder farmers and buyers, further complicate access and must be explicitly addressed in mechanism design. Where these conditions are absent, grievance mechanisms risk functioning as formal compliance tools that are structurally unavailable to the women they are intended to serve.

Some VSSs have requirements that support gender-responsive management systems. BCI requires gender expertise to be embedded in organizational capacity (Better Cotton, 2025a, p. 25), meaning that a gender lead or committee must consult with women, raise awareness with management about local gender dynamics, and develop responsive measures. Fairtrade International requires a gender policy and monitoring of its implementation, but the contents are open for interpretation by the producer organization. Rainforest Alliance's Gender in-depth Risk Assessment Tool recommends the appointment of a gender person or committee with relevant knowledge, but this is advice rather than a core certification requirement. ARSO does not have a requirement for gender expertise within the producer's organization (ARSO, 2014).

Capacity building and leadership development are critical to the Adapt stage, and all of the VSSs address them in some way, though many only partially. For example, BCI requires all training activities to be inclusive and equally accessible, including to women, and requires consultation of women to develop responsive measures to improve their access. Fairtrade International requires that women receive training and capacity building to empower them. Gender policies are required, but the topics they cover are not, which can allow for focus on priority areas for that context or may result in the exclusion of some topics. Rainforest Alliance has a supplementary non-binding guidance document (*Guidance F: Gender Equality*) that is available to support producers on how to implement the requirements (Rainforest Alliance, 2020). ARSO is partially covered across all indicators, with a recurring limitation:



the language used to describe equal access provisions does not include how trainings can be more accessible or actively promote women's participation. Furthermore, career development programs explicitly exclude family farms and small-scale operators (ARSO, 2014, p. 16), in which most of the women workforce operates (49% compared with only 17% men) (FAO, 2023).

An enabling environment is the structural conditions that shape women's ability to participate in agricultural value chains: care-related workplace policies, health and safety provisions tailored to women, and the upgrading of the economic status of work traditionally performed by women. This is the category with the least coverage across all standards (except for BCI) and where the gap between non-discrimination and transformative gender equality is most visible. Nonetheless, these more structural approaches to gender equality may extend beyond the role or sphere of influence of VSS systems and the reason why it is important to combine them with the initiatives from other actors, including government-led policies for an enabling environment and private sector actions.

There is uneven coverage when it comes to care-related workplace protection policies. BCI includes these within its sustainable livelihoods consultation requirements rather than explicit care-related policy provisions. Rainforest Alliance covers parental leave and breastfeeding arrangements (Rainforest Alliance, 2025b, p. 29), and Fairtrade International focuses on maternity leave but recommends breastfeeding to be a topic included in producers' gender policies. ARSO only has maternity leave as a requirement.

In terms of women's health and safety, Rainforest Alliance and BCI both cover women-specific health and safety provisions. BCI requires that "specific consideration should be given to the personal sanitation needs of women, particularly during menstruation, pregnancy or while nursing. Women should have access to a clean, functional and gender-segregated space (ideally, lockable) to ensure privacy and reduce risks of harassment or assault." (Better Cotton, 2025, p. 78). Rainforest Alliance explicitly requires workplace arrangements for pregnant and nursing workers, including flexible scheduling and worksite modifications. Fairtrade International addresses this through its non-discrimination provisions, confirming equivalent access to health and safety protections. ARSO has a general health and safety policy requirement (ARSO, 2014, p. 14) but does not explicitly require that it address women workers' specific needs.

BCI seems to address wages and recognition of work traditionally performed by women most directly, although largely through its inclusive training and livelihoods provisions. This suggests a systemic gap across the VSS landscape: the devaluation of women's labour in agriculture is a structural driver of gender inequality, and certification frameworks have not yet engaged with it directly.

3.2.2 Beyond Requirements

The Recover and Adapt phases aim to transform the structures and norms that generate inequality in the first place. In this section, we examine how the selected VSSOs are going beyond their certification requirements through pilot projects, capacity-building programs, gender committees, and advocacy.



Piloting and Testing Implementation at the Farm Level

Field-level piloting is one way that VSSSOs are testing how gender-related requirements, tools, and systems function in real-world contexts. They generate learning that can inform the refinement and scaling of more effective gender-responsive approaches.

The Rainforest Alliance implemented pilots for coffee (Ethiopia), tea (Malawi), and cocoa farmers (Ghana), training farmers on human rights issues, including gender equality. These pilots included both men and women farmer group members and workers. A key finding from the Ghana pilot was that farmers were more open to discussing sensitive issues such as gender-based violence within families when they knew their farmer group would support them to address the issue rather than simply penalize them.

Such pilots can surface gender-related harms and potentially enable recovery processes that would otherwise remain invisible to auditors (Rainforest Alliance, 2022). However, pilot approaches are inherently limited in scale, duration, and consistency. There is a risk that learning remains isolated if it is not systematically integrated into certification systems. A key opportunity lies in strengthening the institutionalization of pilot findings. VSSSOs could embed lessons from pilots into certification requirements, auditor training, and producer support systems to ensure that recovery-oriented learning contributes directly to Adapt-phase system change.

Training and Capacity Building

Capacity building and leadership development initiatives primarily contribute to the Adapt phase by strengthening women's agency, skills, and long-term participation in decision making.

Fairtrade International's Women's Schools of Leadership are among the most established examples. The schools aim to increase women's participation in producer organizations, their representation in leadership roles, and their influence over decision making. The design of the schools integrates both practical skill-building and norm-changing components and welcomes participation from men as well as women. The curriculum covers personal development, gender awareness (including masculinities), leadership skills, strategic negotiation, project and financial management, and entrepreneurship. In Côte d'Ivoire, the program runs over 9 months and includes training, mentoring, and coaching, with graduates expected to disseminate learning to the thousands of women in their respective communities. Globally, approximately 1,100 participants from 18 countries have graduated and have, in turn, offered training to thousands of community members (Fairtrade International, n.d.). In Africa, consistent rights training has contributed to a significant increase in the number of women in leadership positions across certified organizations (Fairtrade International, n.d.). The Rainforest Alliance's Women's Economic Empowerment in Mesoamerica Initiative and CARE International Partnership also combine skills development with efforts to address structural barriers and engage broader community actors, including men and boys (Rainforest Alliance, 2022).

These initiatives demonstrate strong Adapt potential by building leadership capacity and contributing to norm change over time. The multiplier model used by Fairtrade International further extends the impact beyond direct participants into broader community systems.



The Women's Access, Equity and Empowerment assessment of Fairtrade International's Gender Strategy 2016–2020 found that among certified producer organizations, 99% of coffee farmers, 98% of banana farmers, and 96% of cocoa farmers expressed support for equal roles in education, household decision making, and employment, suggesting that sustained engagement can shift attitudes. However, capacity-building interventions face challenges; they often reach relatively small numbers of participants compared to the scale of global value chains, and their impact depends on whether institutional barriers to leadership advancement are simultaneously addressed. Without corresponding changes in governance structures, trained women may still face barriers to exercising influence. Women leaders may face significant costs for taking on such roles, including household tension, increased labour burdens, and exposure to harassment (Morgan & Zaremba 2023).

An important opportunity is to better integrate leadership training with formal decision-making pathways within producer organizations. Linking participation in training programs to governance reform, quotas, or leadership pipelines could strengthen the translation of individual capacity into institutional change. The leadership initiative must also strive to create an enabling environment in which leadership is perceived as safe, beneficial, and genuinely empowering.

Establishing Gender Committees

Gender committees provide a channel for identifying and responding to ongoing gender-related barriers, discrimination, and harms within producer organizations and help embed gender equality within their governance structure. Across Fairtrade International, BCI, and the Rainforest Alliance, gender committees (or equivalent gender focal structures) are used to promote women's participation, support training uptake, improve gender data collection, and oversee the implementation of gender-related actions at the producers' organizational level.

For example, Fairtrade Africa has supported the establishment of gender committees on each of Kenya's certified flower farms (Fairtrade Risk Map, 2026; Kiura & Langat, 2023). This creates an ongoing organizational function dedicated to gender equity rather than a time-limited training intervention and generates the data infrastructure needed to track change over time. While the Rainforest Alliance's 2020 *Sustainable Agriculture Standard* requires certificate holders to appoint a gender committee, the VSSSO provides further guidance on implementation in *Guidance F: Gender Equality* and through the Rainforest Alliance's Gender in-depth Risk Assessment Tool, a binding risk-identification tool paired with non-binding guidance for implementation detail.

By embedding responsibility within producer organizations, this measure aims to make gender equality an ongoing governance function on top of complying with the requirements. However, the effectiveness of gender committees may be limited by a lack of formal authority, decision-making power, or dedicated resources, limiting their ability to influence structural outcomes. There is also a risk that they become symbolic or procedural rather than transformative. The key opportunity lies in strengthening their mandate and institutional positioning. This includes ensuring women's representation, access to decision-making processes, linking committees to management structures, and providing resources and technical support. When properly resourced and empowered, gender committees can become an important mechanism for institutionalizing gender equality.



Conducting Research, Advocating, and Closing the Feedback Loop

The Recover and Adapt phases ultimately require not only internal organizational change but external advocacy to shift the policy and market environment in which producer organizations operate. The Rainforest Alliance’s four-pillar approach explicitly includes advocacy as a strategic intervention alongside certification and programmatic work, recognizing that changing formal rules and social norms require engagement far beyond the boundaries of the certification relationship. Fairtrade International actively engages producer organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, and companies to elevate the voices and experiences of farmers and workers. An ongoing research project (2024–2025) is investigating the specific barriers faced by women farmers in terms of land rights, access to credit, and training, as well as the advocacy actions that can be undertaken to address them (Fairtrade Risk Map, 2026).

This research-to-advocacy mechanism plays an important role in influencing the debate and drawing public attention to barriers to women’s participation and economic inclusion in value chains (Morgan & Zaremba, 2023), with some going so far as to say it is a normative obligation (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2018). The challenge is that VSS advocacy’s influence is often indirect and dependent on external actors, limiting its ability to drive immediate structural change. There is also variability in how systematically research findings are integrated into standard-setting and operational reform. A key opportunity is to strengthen the integration between research, standards development, and advocacy strategies to enhance the adaptive capacity of VSS systems.

3.2.3 Summary

Table 5. How VSSs go beyond compliance requirements

SRVC phase	VSS activities outside of compliance requirements
Plan/Prepare	Strategies that set explicit commitments, assign institutional responsibility, and embed gender equality as a cross-cutting priority. VSSs are also developing risk-based gender assessment tools, which give certificate holders structured frameworks for identifying gender-specific gaps through sex-disaggregated data and link findings to remediation.
Respond	No distinct beyond-requirements activities were identified for this phase in the VSSs examined; Respond-phase measures (e.g., gender-based violence remediation roles) are primarily addressed through certification requirements (see Table 3).
Recover	VSSOs are piloting gender-related tools at the farm level and establishing gender committees within producer organizations, creating an ongoing organizational function for gender equity.



SRVC phase	VSS activities outside of compliance requirements
Adapt	VSSSOs are investing in training and capacity-building initiatives designed to shift norms over time. VSSSOs are also conducting research and advocacy to influence the broader policy and market environment, including land rights, credit, and training barriers for women farmers. Together, these efforts work toward institutionalizing gender equality and shifting norms at scale, though reach remains limited relative to global value chains.

Source: Authors.



4.0 Private Sector Approaches to Addressing WEE

As gender inequalities in GVCs have come under greater regulatory and public scrutiny, private sector companies have increasingly made commitments to gender equality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). A growing number are moving beyond VSS compliance to adopt measures that more directly address gender inequalities and advance WEE at the production level. For instance, Mars' Sustainable in a Generation Plan 2017 committed to renew and create policies with a gendered lens, including those that apply to the supply chain through a supplier code of conduct (Gender-Responsive Due Diligence, 2020a). Similarly, Unilever's Responsible Partner Policy and Nestlé's Responsible Sourcing Standard specify non-discrimination requirements, including provisions addressing gender equality (Nestlé, 2024; Unilever, 2022).

This section examines private sector approaches through the Plan/Prepare and Respond phases (Section 4.1) and the Recover and Adapt phases (Section 4.2). The company initiatives presented in this section are illustrative examples of approaches used today to support women producers. We have not independently assessed their impacts, reliability, or effectiveness. Evidence is drawn from publicly available sources and interviews. Separate, dedicated research would be required to provide an assessment of impacts, effectiveness, and reliability.

4.1 Plan/Prepare and Respond

Private sector actors plan, prepare, and advance WEE principally through two mechanisms: institutional commitments to gender equality and activities that aim to address specific risks women face in production. The quality and enforceability of these contributions vary by company size, commodity, and the degree to which gender is integrated into core business processes rather than managed as a standalone sustainability initiative.

4.1.2 Committing to Equality

Companies across commodities are making commitments to women's empowerment, which can be a foundation for planning and responding to gender inequalities in their supply chains. For example, large buyers such as Nestlé/Nespresso, Cargill, Unilever, and others have signed the UN WEPs (UN Women & UN Global Compact, 2026), signalling a business-level commitment to gender equality across operations and supply chains. WEPs were designed by UN Women and the UN Global Compact to provide guidance through seven principles on what private sector operations can do to provide a framework of principles for how businesses can promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, supply chains, and communities. For instance, in 2017 Unilever published its Responsible Sourcing Policy with relevant considerations aligned with WEPs, such as treating all women and men fairly at work (Unilever, 2017). In an independent study conducted by Oxfam, authors found that when it comes to Principle 5, Enterprise Development, Supply Chain, and Marketing Strategies that Empower Women, most of the top 10 food and beverage companies



have a supplier code of conduct that promotes gender equality. However, it is less clear from the publicly available documentation how companies communicate this to their suppliers and how progress is monitored and evaluated (Mahendru & Sabri, 2021).

Institutional commitments like WEPs function principally as Plan/Prepare instruments; they can provide a basis for establishing internal accountability structures, provide expectations to supply chain partners, and help prioritize barriers to women's participation and economic inclusion throughout their sourcing and activities. However, UN WEPs' signatory status is a voluntary declaration without external verification, and gaps can remain between institutional commitment and operational implementation (Mahendru & Sabri, 2021). A key opportunity lies in strengthening the operationalization of these commitments through clearer targets, supplier-facing requirements, and integration into procurement decision making and performance incentives, alongside more robust transparency and reporting mechanisms that would allow progress to be independently assessed.

4.1.3 Integrating Gender Into Risk Analysis

Integrating gender-specific risks into their risk analysis is another measure some companies are developing to help plan, prepare, and respond to gender-related risks, barriers, discrimination, or exclusion in their supply chains. In the case of Nestlé, the Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality Program is a gender analysis tool developed in partnership with UN Women to embed gender considerations into the program's assessment of farm-level sustainability (Nespresso & TechnoServe, 2017). Mars's Resilience Journey, conducted with the Royal Tropical Institute across Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Indonesia, aims to understand the daily lives, aspirations, behaviours, and attitudes of women and girls in cocoa-growing communities, moving beyond the collection of demographic data to generate the contextual intelligence needed to design gender interventions that address the underlying causes of gender inequality (KIT, 2026; MARS, 2026a) .

Integrating gender into risk analysis strengthens the ability of companies to identify differences in how women and men experience risks and opportunities and their respective vulnerabilities based on gender and design more context-specific interventions. It represents an important shift from generic risk screening toward a more granular understanding of how gender shapes outcomes in value chains. However, the effectiveness of these tools is often constrained by the limited availability of high-quality sex-disaggregated data and weak linkages between risk identification and corrective action. There is a clear opportunity to improve data, while also ensuring that identified risks are systematically integrated into sourcing decisions, supplier engagement strategies, and remediation processes, rather than remaining at the diagnostic stage.

4.1.4 Strategies to Respond to Specific Gender Inequalities

One of the main ways companies are responding to gender-related harms, rights violations, and safety risks is by developing targeted initiatives to address a specific issue. Most commonly, these focus on gender-based violence and workplace safety. Within these programs, main measures include grievance mechanisms and training.



For example, the Women's Safety Accelerator Fund was implemented in partnership with Unilever, Twinings, Taylors of Harrogate, Tesco, UN Women, and IDH, with the goal of shifting harmful gender norms in their value chains (IDH, n.d., 2025; Unilever, 2024).

Targeted initiatives can generate meaningful and visible improvements in specific domains, such as workplace safety and awareness of gender-based violence, and can serve as an entry point for addressing gender inequality within supply chains. These initiatives are particularly valuable when they are locally grounded and delivered in partnership with specialized organizations that bring gender expertise. However, interventions targeting one aspect of gender inequality should not be assumed to automatically spill over into other dimensions, and complementary approaches encompassing multiple reinforcing aspects are required if economic empowerment is the goal (Bayissa et al., 2018). A key opportunity is to better integrate these interventions into longer-term gender strategies that link immediate risk mitigation with broader changes in norms, governance, and economic opportunity structures, as well as to strengthen coordination across programs to ensure cumulative rather than siloed impacts.

4.1.5 Sourcing VSS-Certified Products

Another way companies are responding to gender inequalities in their supply chains is by using and engaging with VSS schemes. For example, in the cocoa sector, under pressure from Oxfam's Behind the Brands campaign, companies including Nestlé, Mars, and Mondelēz made commitments to conduct third-party gender impact assessments in their supply chains in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The campaign evaluated the social and environmental policies of companies, including the inclusion of women in their supply chains, non-discriminatory policies, and VSS-certified sourcing commitments (Hoffman, 2013).

In addition, VSSOs also work directly with companies. For instance, Mondelēz committed to working with Fairtrade International and the Rainforest Alliance to increase opportunities for women in the cocoa supply chain and to seek opportunities to strengthen certification standards with respect to women's rights. In this sense, the company was trying to use their sourcing relationships to push VSS schemes to do **more** on gender, rather than only sourcing VSS-certified products because those schemes already solved gender problems.

Sourcing certified products enables companies to leverage existing sustainability standards and third-party verification systems as a scalable mechanism for identifying, managing, or creating incentives to address gender-related risks. This can reduce implementation burdens and increase credibility, particularly in complex, multi-origin supply chains. However, reliance on certification systems can create distance between corporate actors and on-the-ground gender outcomes, especially where traceability systems such as mass balance limit visibility into production conditions. There is an opportunity to strengthen this approach by improving traceability, enhancing alignment between corporate gender commitments and VSS gender criteria, and creating more direct feedback loops between sourcing decisions and gender outcomes in producing communities. In addition, combining certification with complementary company-led or partner-led interventions could help close gaps where standards alone are not sufficient to address structural inequalities.



4.2 Recover and Adapt

The private sector also adopts measures that aim to restore women's access to opportunities and support longer-term systemic change for WEE. Company strategies to support recovery and adaptation encompass initiatives for inclusive access to finance, leadership training, and in the most advanced cases, business model innovation that builds women's market access into the business and sourcing model itself.

4.2.1 Partnerships

The dominant delivery model for private sector measures described below is through partnerships, typically with international development. When companies decide to establish market access interventions and capacity building at the production level, their approach includes a partnership with an NGO that leads the implementation of the interventions rather than intervening directly. For example, CARE International is among the most common partners that companies, particularly large buyers, engage with to execute gender initiatives. The organization works with Mars, Mondelēz, and Cargill simultaneously across financial inclusion, leadership training, and governance and norms. Other common partners include UN Women, Oxfam, TechnoServe, Rikolto, and IDH. This partnership modality is common among large buyers, largely as a response to civil society requests for accountability. The advantage is that delivery is led by an experienced partner with gender equality expertise. The drawback is that direct relationships between women and the sourcing company do not develop and may not continue.

4.2.2 Expanding Women's Access to Finance

A number of companies have adopted measures aimed at expanding women's access to finance, which is crucial to their economic empowerment. A common approach to this is the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) model, which creates community-managed savings and credit pools that give women access to financial services outside the formal banking system. For example, Mars's Women for Change initiative, which is implemented in partnership with CARE International in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, has been scaling VSLAs across cocoa-growing communities, supporting at least 100,000 VSLA members and generating over USD 20.8 million in savings and credit and USD 13.5 million in loans (Mars, 2023, 2026b). Mondelēz International's Cocoa Life initiative embedded VSLAs as a central gender intervention across its supply chains in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Indonesia, and the Dominican Republic. As of 2024, 69% of VSLA participants are women (Mondelēz, 2024). Cargill, in partnership with CARE and the International Cocoa Initiative, has similarly integrated VSLAs as part of their larger Gender Equity & Women's Empowerment Approach. As of 2021, the initiative had reached 11,000 women (Cargill, 2021).

Financial inclusion initiatives such as VSLAs provide an important pathway for expanding women's access to savings, credit, and informal financial services, particularly in contexts where formal banking systems remain inaccessible. However, they must be accompanied by changes in social norms that restrict women's mobility and voice, since income gains risk being captured by male household members rather than women themselves (Nguyen



et al., 2024), and the productive investment of savings depends on women's ability to make autonomous decisions about land, labour, and crop management.

4.2.3 Leadership Training and Capacity Building

While we saw above that some company trainings focus gender-related harms and rights violations, such as gender-based violence, and workplace safety risks, under Recover and Adapt we include training and capacity building aimed at strengthening women's skills, leadership, financial literacy, and pathways to greater control over assets and decisions. Examples we found across commodity sectors tend to focus on women's leadership and entrepreneurship and financial literacy.

In coffee, JDE Peet's Avanza Café initiative involved them partnering with the United States Department of Agriculture and the international non-profit TechnoServe to provide leadership skills training to women coffee farmers through the Maximizing Opportunities in Coffee and Cacao in the Americas (MOCCA) project (TechnoServe, 2024, 2026). The Starbucks Foundation's Origin Grants fund initiatives in East Africa, Central America, and Southeast Asia developed by organizations such as Mercy Corps, CARE International, Bean Voyage, and UNICEF, with a goal of reaching 1 million women and girls by 2030 (Starbucks, 2026). For example, in North Sumatra's coffee-growing communities, Starbucks awarded a grant to World Relief to train 10,000 women in entrepreneurship, financial, and leadership skills (Starbucks, 2026).

In cocoa, Cargill's Cocoa Promise initiative in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon, Indonesia, Brazil, and Ecuador has paired literacy and entrepreneurship training with promoting women's land tenure and leadership in farmer organizations (Cargill, 2021). Cargill has also partnered with impact investment hub LadyAgri to equip women producers in Cameroon with processing technology, equipment, and training in agricultural practices to enhance their market access (Cargill, 2022). JB Cocoa's program in Ecuador with Rikolto combined gender equity awareness sessions for both men and women with entrepreneurial, farm management, accounting, and credit access training for women cocoa farmers (Palomino, 2023).

In palm oil, the Decent Rural Living Initiative, a collaboration among Cargill, Golden Agri-Resources, Musim Mas, Sime Darby Plantation, and Wilmar, piloted gender committees on Indonesian palm oil estates with the explicit aim of transforming how women perceive their own potential as agents of change within the industry, targeting not just compliance with gender representation requirements but a shift in individual and collective agency (Decent Rural Living Initiative, n.d.).



4.2.4 Integrating Women's Empowerment Into the Business Model

In a few cases, companies are integrating women's empowerment into their business models. We see this happening mainly with SMEs, whereas larger brands tend to aim for improvements within existing structures.

One business model is co-ownership with farmers, including a target percentage of women farmers. Divine Chocolate's model is built around the Kuapa Kokoo cooperative¹ in Ghana, in which 100,000 or more Ghanaian farmers co-own the company. It has pursued a target of 33% women ownership within the cooperative and seen the first woman president elected in the cooperative's history (Divine Chocolate, 2026; Gender-Responsive Due Diligence, 2020b; Global Exchange, 2010; Modern Ghana, 2010). This outcome of combining producer co-ownership, Fairtrade International premium investments, and deliberate affirmative governance policies, illustrates how ownership structures can serve as a vehicle for structural change when aligned with consistent institutional commitment.

Other models focus on women-led producer organizations, create market linkages, upgrade quality, and provide financial structures, guaranteed purchasing, and consumer-facing storytelling. For example, Bean Inspired Coffee Roasters (Ireland) has built women-grown coffee as its primary business model, entering direct purchasing relationships with women-led producer groups and investing in consumer education about the structural gap between women's labour contribution (approximately 70% in coffee production) and their share of ownership, income, and decision making (Bean Inspired Coffee Roasters, n.d.). Kaffee Kooperative's Fair Chain model keeps roasting, packaging, and branding under the control of the producers rather than under the control of a company in the consuming market, retaining value added at source in Rwanda. Their role as the distribution arm of Angelique's Finest in Germany grew out of a relationship of genuine trust, in which significant groundwork had already been laid by Rwandan women on the ground, and Kaffee Kooperative's contribution was primarily to support market linkages in Europe. Since then, the partnership has continued to be responsive to producer needs: for every package sold of its Special Edition Coffee Angelique's Finest Klima Kaffee, EUR 1 is returned to the women's association to fund tree planting (X. Kitzinger, personal communication, February 24, 2026).

4.2.5 Direct Relationships With Producers

Direct relationships with producers, most common among SMEs, support market access by focusing on the branding and marketing of products in ways that build consumer awareness and demand in importing countries. Japanese buyer Sakatonotchu has identified the missing link between international markets and coffee-origin countries as the most critical gap to address (R. Tasai, personal communication, February 26, 2026). Kaffee Kooperative has responded to this challenge by developing media and featuring producers' own stories on coffee packaging. Sakatonotchu, for its part, focuses on workshopping producer narratives to make them resonate with Japanese consumers.

¹ See more on the Kuapa Kokoo cooperative here: <https://www.kuapakokoo.co>



Yet consumer-facing awareness strategies must go hand in hand with supporting producers to strengthen their agricultural practices and improve coffee quality. As RGC Coffee emphasized, highlighting the stories, leadership, and work of women coffee producers is essential, but creating sustainable opportunities requires going beyond storytelling. It also means strengthening their capacity to produce high-quality coffee, so that their work is recognized and valued by the market and can translate into long-term commercial relationships and improved economic opportunities (L.A. Lozano, personal communication, March 27, 2026). To this end, Sakatonotchu has engaged producers in learning production practices that guarantee coffee quality, as well as sharing value-added uses of coffee by-products, such as coffee peel tea. In the financial sphere, RGC Coffee, through its Los Sueños del Café program, has established a revolving credit fund for women coffee producers, combining access to financing with capacity building to strengthen their decision making and management of productive activities. The women themselves actively participate in managing the fund through the credit committee, while receiving financial literacy training with practical tools applicable to both their coffee businesses and household finances. This model seeks to strengthen women's economic autonomy and create opportunities that can be sustained over time. Access to finance is complemented by a direct commercial relationship: RGC Coffee purchases the coffee produced by participating women, helping connect them to the market and generate income opportunities through their own coffee-growing activities (L.A. Lozano, personal communication, March 27, 2026).

These business model approaches operate at a smaller scale but embody a more structural approach to WEE, seeking to change the terms on which women producers participate in value chains rather than improving outcomes within existing structures. These approaches can create more durable pathways for gender equality by linking women's participation directly to governance and value creation rather than treating it as an external add-on. However, they remain limited in scale and are largely concentrated among smaller or mission-driven enterprises, raising questions about scalability within mainstream commodity markets. There is an opportunity to explore hybrid models that integrate these principles into larger corporate sourcing systems, including through shared ownership arrangements, strengthened producer governance roles, and more equitable value distribution mechanisms within conventional supply chains.



4.2.5 Summary

Table 6. Private sector practices and initiatives

SRVC phase	Private sector initiatives
Plan/Prepare	Companies are adopting institutional commitments to gender equality, such as signing onto the UN WEPS. Companies' policies reflect non-discrimination commitments. However, evidence suggests gaps remain in how these commitments are communicated to suppliers and monitored. Companies are also integrating gender considerations into risk analysis tools developed in partnership with gender-specialist organizations, generating contextual information on women's lives in producing communities to inform interventions.
Respond	Companies respond to gender-related harms primarily through targeted initiatives (most commonly, multistakeholder funds addressing gender-based violence and workplace safety through grievance mechanisms and training) and through engagement with VSS schemes. These responses include commitments to third-party gender impact assessments made under civil society pressure and direct work with VSS bodies to strengthen certification standards on women's rights rather than relying on certification alone.
Recover	The dominant recovery mechanism is financial inclusion through VSLAs, typically delivered via partnerships with international development organizations. Several large buyers have scaled VSLA programs to reach thousands of women across cocoa-growing regions, generating significant savings and credit volumes with high rates of women's participation.
Adapt	Companies are investing in leadership and entrepreneurship training initiatives, often delivered in partnership with international NGOs, spanning financial literacy, land tenure support, and farmer organization leadership. In a smaller number of cases, companies—predominantly SMEs and mission-driven companies—are integrating women's empowerment directly into business models through co-ownership structures, women-led sourcing models, and value-retention arrangements that keep more of the value chain in producing countries.

Source: Authors.



5.0 A Smart Mix of Solutions to Advance SRVCs

Advancing WEE in agricultural value chains is not a problem that any single actor or instrument can solve alone. A “smart mix” of solutions that combines certification schemes with complementary private sector initiatives is a way to advance progress toward addressing gender inequalities in global supply chains. This section draws on the cross-cutting patterns identified in Sections 3 and 4 to outline what a smart mix of solutions looks like in practice and where the most significant opportunities for improvement lie.

Value chain actors cannot tackle WEE without first confronting the root causes of gender inequality that structure women’s participation in markets. **The distinction between gender inequality as the root cause, women’s economic exclusion as the value chain risk, and WEE as the desired outcome matters in practical terms.** Most of the interventions mapped in this report incorporate, to varying degrees, a set of initiatives that address barriers limiting women’s market participation: gender-based discrimination, gender-specific rights at work, access to training and capacity building, and restricted access to credit and extension services. These are the conditions that VSS requirements, in their Plan/Prepare and Respond functions, can help identify, prevent, and mitigate. When VSS requirements are audited and enforced, buyers sourcing certified commodities can gain some assurance that work is being done on the ground. But VSSs do not have the mandate or capacity to directly connect producers to markets, and that is why proactive private sector efforts to reach, train, and source from women producers are an indispensable complement, not a substitute, to what certification can achieve where gender-related requirements are included, audited, and enforced.

Private sector actors are not only relying on VSS compliance to engage with gender equality but also developing their own initiatives that provide women producers with training and financing mechanisms and integrate women producers into their business models. Most of these initiatives are implemented in partnership with NGOs—CARE International in cocoa and coffee, TechnoServe in coffee, the Ethical Tea Partnership in tea, and CottonConnect in cotton—with companies providing funding and market relationships and NGO partners providing on-the-ground expertise. These institutional partnerships represent a model of shared responsibility, a core mechanism through which private sector actors can contribute to more SRVCs.

The intervention approach has implications for how the smart mix is designed. Large buyers tend to partner with major international development organizations to reach producers at scale. For example, Mars’s Women for Change program with CARE International reaches over 101,000 VSLA members across Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. These large buyer initiatives are typically structured around the company’s sustainability platform and decoupled from sourcing decisions, meaning that women producers who participate may not receive preferential market access as a reward for their increased organizational capacity. Some SMEs engage directly with women producers, building personal sourcing relationships with individual cooperatives and women-led groups as part of their business model. For example,



Kaffee Kooperative's partnership with Angelique's Finest, Sakanotochu in Rwanda, and RGC in Colombia are smaller in scale but embody a more direct accountability to women producers as the primary beneficiaries of the business relationship. These companies also tend to foreground the personal stories of women producers, making visible the individuals behind aggregate program numbers, which both influences how consumers perceive corporate gender commitments and creates a different quality of trust between buyer and producer.

It is also important to note that the smart mix of solutions identified in this report is unevenly distributed across commodities and geographies. The examples provided demonstrate a more developed ecosystem of VSS, private sector, and NGO partnerships in cocoa and coffee. Tea has a growing set of initiatives, particularly around safety and rights in South Asian contexts, but lacks the VSLA-based financial inclusion infrastructure present in cocoa. Cotton strategies remain structurally split between factory-level interventions by big brands and farm-level engagement by BCI, with CottonConnect and the Organic Cotton Accelerator pointing toward what more direct farm-level engagement could look like. From the commodities we looked at, flowers remain the least-developed commodity for private sector gender interventions beyond VSS requirements, with a gender-focused workplace initiative in Ethiopian floriculture, supported by the Ethiopian Horticulture Producer Exporters Association, the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), and the Business for Social Responsibility, standing out as a notable but relatively isolated example (IDH, 2018).

In a context where private sector actors face growing consumer demand for transparency and ethical sourcing, the incentive to integrate gender initiatives as a sustainability signal is real. The most effective initiatives are those that maintain women's own benefit as the primary goal and build accountability to women producers into the design of the intervention. There is still substantial work to do across commodities where women's agricultural labour is extensive, but their recognition, support, and market access remain limited. Closing these gaps will require expanding the smart mix of solutions across the production systems that are the basis of supply chains.



6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Key Takeaways

Both VSSs and private sector initiatives have become mechanisms for advancing WEE in value chains, yet their approaches vary considerably in ambition, scope, and implementation.

Gender inequality remains a sustainability challenge in global agricultural value chains. Addressing it is complex and requires coordinated action among multiple actors, whose complementary actions can support and contribute to reducing the barriers that women producers continue to face in production systems. These include access to finance, training, leadership positions, decent work, and decision-making power.

There is increasing attention to gender equality across VSS systems and private sector initiatives, although significant gaps remain.

There is attention to gender equality across both VSS systems and private sector initiatives; however, significant gaps remain around evidence of how this is done in practice, and the different tools necessary to address different issues in different contexts, from preventing discrimination, responding to harms, and restoring opportunities to creating genuine structural change on women's access to land, finance, productive assets, leadership, producer organization governance, market relationships, and control over income. Non-discrimination and equal rights provisions are widely covered; however, measures that address underlying power relations, social norms, ownership, market access, and governance remain less developed.

Plan/Prepare and Respond measures are common across value chain actors but remain largely focused on risk and compliance.

Across the VSSs examined, non-discrimination requirements and equal rights provisions are now widely embedded in certification systems. Beyond requirements, VSSs are increasingly developing dedicated gender strategies and risk assessment tools to strengthen their ability to identify and address gender-related risks. Similarly, private sector actors are adopting institutional commitments to gender equality, integrating gender considerations into risk analysis, implementing targeted programs to address issues such as gender-based violence, and sourcing from certified supply chains. While these measures represent progress in recognizing and responding to gender-related risks, coverage remains uneven. Risk assessment systems also frequently face challenges related to data availability and the translation of identified risks into corrective action.

Requirements related to maternity protection, breastfeeding accommodation, prevention and remediation of gender-based violence, and protections for seasonal, migrant, temporary, and informal workers are inconsistently addressed across standards and company initiatives.

Many interventions continue to focus on compliance and risk mitigation rather than addressing the underlying power relations, social norms, and economic structures that perpetuate inequality.



Recover and Adapt approaches show the greatest potential for transformation but remain unevenly developed and often limited in scale.

Among the VSSs examined, Recover and Adapt measures are less common than prevention-oriented approaches but offer greater potential to address root causes of inequality. In particular, access to remedy from harm or rights violations is largely missing (apart from the establishment of grievance mechanisms). Beyond certification requirements, VSS organizations are increasingly piloting gender-responsive approaches, building producer capacity, establishing gender committees, conducting research, and engaging in advocacy to influence broader policy and market systems. Private sector actors are supporting recovery and adaptation through financial inclusion initiatives, leadership and entrepreneurship training, and, in some cases, business model innovations that embed women's participation directly into ownership structures, sourcing relationships, and value distribution mechanisms. Village Savings and Loan Associations, women's leadership programs, and support for women-led producer groups represent some of the most widely adopted approaches. Recover and Adapt measures are more effective when they move beyond improving women's participation within existing systems and instead seek to transform the structures, incentives, and governance arrangements that shape women's opportunities within value chains.

Training and leadership programs can improve skills, confidence, and participation, but they do not automatically change the conditions that limit women's economic power.

Many of these interventions remain project-based, dependent on external partners, or limited in commodity-specific sectors (e.g., coffee, cocoa) and geographic scale. Capacity-building programs often focus on improving women's skills without simultaneously addressing barriers related to land ownership, decision-making power, access to productive assets, or discriminatory social norms. Similarly, business models that more fundamentally redistribute power and value within supply chains remain concentrated among a relatively small number of mission-driven enterprises and have yet to be adopted at scale.

Best outcomes are achieved when certification is supported by a range of public and private policies and governance structures.

WEE is therefore not achieved through any single intervention. It requires a smart mix of complementary actions that simultaneously address immediate risks, restore opportunities, strengthen agency, and create enabling conditions for long-term inclusion and leadership. VSS certification can set expectations and provide some assurance where gender-related requirements are audited and enforced, but it cannot by itself deliver market access, finance, land rights, care-related infrastructure, or changes in buyer–producer relationships. Private sector initiatives, along with government policy, NGO partnerships, and producer organizations, all have complementary roles.



6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Plan/Prepare and Respond

VSS Criteria and Practices

- **Strengthen gender-responsive risk assessment and monitoring requirements.** VSSs can move beyond non-discrimination provisions by requiring systematic gender-responsive risk assessments, gender action plans, and the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data. Risk assessments should identify gender-specific barriers, vulnerabilities, and opportunities and be linked to corrective action and continuous improvement processes.
- **Extend protections to all categories of workers.** Many women participate in value chains as seasonal, temporary, migrant, subcontracted, or informal workers. VSSs can strengthen their criteria by ensuring that gender-related protections, labour rights, and grievance mechanisms apply consistently across all categories of workers rather than only permanent employees.
- **Institutionalize gender expertise and accountability within certification systems.** Dedicated gender committees, gender focal points, and gender-responsive assessment tools can improve the ability of certification systems to identify and address gender inequalities. VSSs should ensure these mechanisms are adequately resourced and integrated into certification, monitoring, and auditing processes.

Private Sector

- **Translate corporate gender commitments into operational requirements.** Companies can strengthen the implementation of commitments such as UN WEPs by embedding gender objectives into procurement practices, supplier requirements, sourcing decisions, and internal performance metrics. This should include training and support for suppliers to facilitate implementation.
- **Integrate gender into supply chain codes, commitments, and risk management systems.** Gender-related risks, barriers, discrimination, and harms should be systematically incorporated into risk assessments, supplier monitoring, and remediation processes. Risk identification should be linked to concrete actions, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms rather than remaining solely diagnostic.
- **Move beyond issue-specific interventions toward integrated approaches.** Programs addressing specific issues such as gender-based violence or workplace safety can be strengthened by linking them to broader efforts addressing women's economic participation, leadership, access to resources, and decision-making power.
- **Improve accountability for gender outcomes throughout supply chains.** Where companies rely on certification systems, mass balance sourcing, or implementation partners, mechanisms should be strengthened to improve visibility into gender outcomes and create stronger feedback loops between sourcing decisions and impacts on women producers.



6.2.2 Recover and Adapt

VSS Criteria and Practices

- **Expand Recover and Adapt measures within standards systems.** VSSs can complement prevention-oriented requirements with stronger Recover measures that should address restoration after exclusion, discrimination, or harm, such as access to remedies, restored participation, livelihood recovery, or support to regain market access. Adapt measures should focus on longer-term changes to systems, governance, incentives, and institutional capacity to ultimately support women's long-term economic empowerment, resilience, and adaptive capacity.
- **Move beyond preventing discrimination toward addressing structural inequalities.** While non-discrimination remains essential, VSSs can increasingly incorporate requirements and guidance that address underlying barriers to women's participation, leadership, decision making, and access to productive resources.
- **Promote women's leadership and participation in governance structures.** Standards can strengthen requirements and incentives for women's representation and meaningful participation in producer organizations, cooperatives, committees, and other decision-making bodies.
- **Support innovation and strengthen advocacy.** Gender pilots, research initiatives, and learning platforms can help identify effective approaches and generate evidence on what works in different commodities and contexts.
- **VSS organizations can play an important role in disseminating lessons and supporting continuous improvement.** VSS organizations are well positioned to use their convening power and multistakeholder networks to advocate for policies and market conditions that support the economic inclusion of women producers.

Private Sector

- **Strengthen long-term partnerships while building local ownership.** Partnerships with organizations such as CARE International, Oxfam, UN Women, TechnoServe, and Rikolto bring valuable expertise. However, companies should also seek to build and invest in sustainable local capacity and direct relationships so that capacity and accountability can endure beyond project cycles. Companies' investments in local women's organizations, producer groups, cooperatives, and local service providers can also improve the accessibility of grievance mechanism and access to remedy.
- **Scale business models that embed women's empowerment into value creation.** Emerging models that integrate women into ownership structures, governance systems, sourcing relationships, and value distribution mechanisms demonstrate significant transformative potential. Companies should explore opportunities to adapt and scale these approaches within mainstream value chains.
- **Use sourcing and market relationships as levers for transformation.** Companies can leverage long-term purchasing relationships, supplier engagement, and market incentives to promote women's leadership, participation, and equitable benefit sharing throughout value chains rather than relying solely on project-based interventions. This approach could include long-term sourcing relationships with women-led producer groups, procurement incentives, preferred supplier pathways, transparent pricing, and mechanisms for women producers to influence sourcing arrangements.



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