Gender Equality and Voluntary Standards

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Voluntary sustainability standards in global trade

- Emerged in context of globalisation and concerns about environment, human rights, community rights, animal welfare, etc.

- Used by businesses, investors, civil society and governments to articulate, encourage and enforce responsible business practices

- Applied across a range of goods and services. Can be *de facto* mandatory

- Often reference internationally agreed rights and statutory laws – fill a gap in enforcement

- Growing importance due to new corporate due diligence laws
Achievements and limitations of voluntary sustainability standards

- Growing body of evidence on positive economic, social and environmental impacts

- However, outcomes are complex, context dependent and not universally positive

- Standards and auditing often fail to reach the most vulnerable workers and are less effective for complex issues

- Harder for poorer producers and micro and small enterprises to comply, especially given multiplication of standards

- Costs of compliance not always reflected in prices

- Tensions between buyers’ requirements and purchasing practices

Woman working in Fairtrade-certified banana processing unit, Dominican Republic. © Sally Smith
Advancing gender equality through voluntary sustainability standards

- Mixed results but overall minimal impact and can reinforce status quo
- Limitations of VSS often amplified for women workers and producers
- Limited/no coverage of gender in most VSS
- In sectors with majority women workers, any improvements may benefit women... or push them out?
- Gender inequalities rooted in societal structures and relationships. Not easily addressed through top down, technical approach
- Some VSS take a more comprehensive, contextualized approach – seeing positive results
Recent developments and trends

- Greater understanding of need to support suppliers to comply with standards (incl. gender-related standards)
- More meaningful and effective metrics and monitoring, and increased transparency (incl. gender-specific standards and indicators, and gender-responsive auditing and reporting)
- Increased collaboration to address systemic issues (incl. gender issues)
- Role of purchasing practices more openly acknowledged and monitored
- Growing use of ESG ratings and sustainability/impact investing by investors
- Growing calls for mandatory corporate due diligence (+ gender-responsive approach)

**BUT** still inadequate rewards for businesses that demonstrate high standards and a lack of sanctions for those that behave irresponsibly (incl. in relation to gender)

**AND** need far more involvement of stakeholders from supplier countries in development and implementation of voluntary standards (incl. women’s representatives)
Recommendations for policy makers

1. **Recognize the growing influence of VSS and the role of government** in enabling producers and suppliers to comply with voluntary standards, incl. for gender equality.

2. **Engage proactively** with VSS schemes and related multi-stakeholder initiatives in export sectors that are important to the national economy.

3. **Establish mechanisms and fund measures** to enable suppliers, women-led businesses and women producers to achieve gender-responsive VSS compliance and to address gender issues in export sectors.

4. **Develop gender-responsive trade policies** to enable suppliers with gender-inclusive practices and women-led businesses to get preferential access to markets.