

Gender Equality and Voluntary Standards



Gender, Social Inclusion & Trade
Working Group

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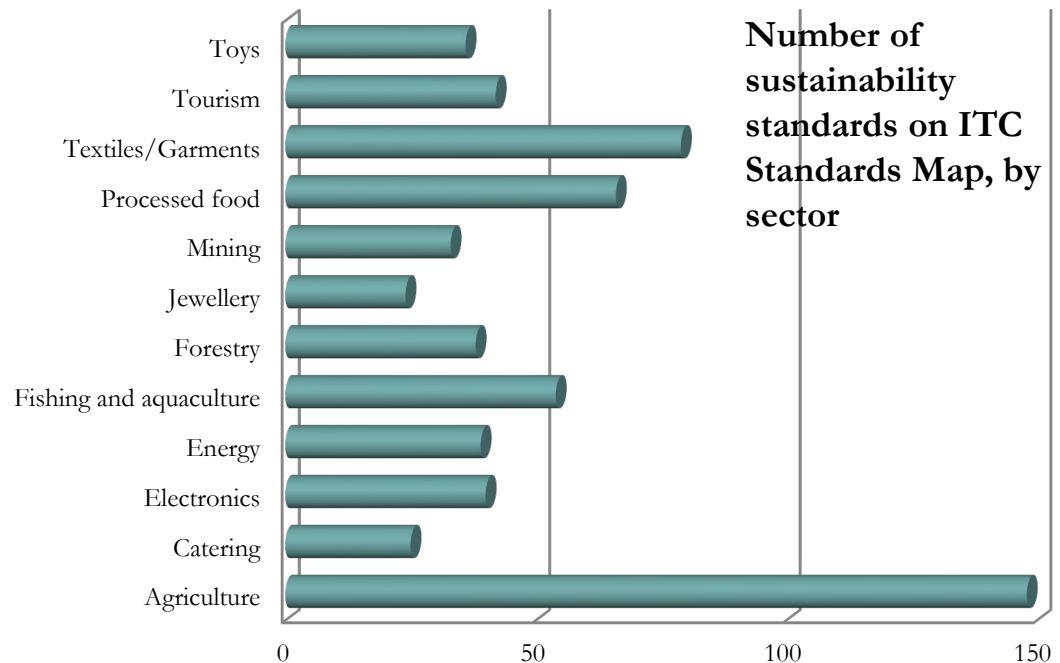
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Voluntary sustainability standards in global trade

- 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



Homeworkers stitching shoes for export in Tamil Nadu, South India. © Homeworkers Worldwide

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.
- 5. Develop and implement a gender-responsive National Action Plan** on Business and Human Rights based on the UNGP gender guidance.