Guidance note: setting gender responsive sustainability standards

Tackling gender inequalities is becoming increasingly important for voluntary sustainability systems to address. More and more, sustainability systems are looking to integrate gender into their standards and the management of their organisations. Sustainability systems that are not gender-responsive can result in unnecessary health and safety risks for women and girls, and lead to unequal impacts and unintended consequences. This briefing note provides a collection of good practices to support sustainability systems, including ISEAL Community Members, to get started and progress on gender issues.

A CGIAR-ISEAL scoping study on the state of gender integration among ISEAL Community Members in the agri-food sector highlighted three steps to approaching gender equality in sustainability systems: minimum prevention of harm within standards, proactively supporting gender equality within standards, and promoting gender equality and women’s rights beyond the standard. This briefing primarily focuses on the first and second steps that address gender equality within standards and draws examples of good practice from ISEAL Community Members.

1. Approaches to tackling gender inequality

![Diagram showing approaches to tackling gender inequality]

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2. ‘Do no harm’: building gender sensitive foundations

At the bare minimum, standards should have basic requirements to protect women from harm. Key areas include:

- anti-discrimination and equality of treatment
- zero tolerance for harassment or violence
- accountability requirements
- gender-specific fair working conditions

Below are some examples of how these have been incorporated into standards.

2.1 Anti-discrimination and equality of treatment

- Specifying that workers are not subject to discrimination in recruitment, promotion, access to training, remuneration, allocation of work, termination of employment, retirement, or other activities (Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard 2.4.1.a).
- Ensuring the non-discrimination policy is communicated to farmers/workers/employees (Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) Principles and Criteria Version 2.1 6.4.4).
- Having a non-discrimination and equal opportunity clause, with possible exceptions for diversity targets (IRMA Standard for Responsible Mining 3.1.3).
- Requiring specific outreach to women farmers and workers to be conducted by women facilitators (BCI Principles and Criteria Version 2.1 6.4.5).

2.2 Anti-harassment

- Having a clause stating no tolerance of gender-based violence (Fairtrade Standard for Small-scale Producer Organizations 3.3.4).
- Including a procedure for cases of sexual harassment in grievance procedures, with a designated woman or women’s committee directly linked to senior management (Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour 3.5.27).
- Requiring operators to ensure workers do not suffer from abuse, harassment and/or violence – this could include having a publicly available and communicated policy/procedures/protocols/internal regulations to prevent sexual and other forms of abuse, harassment and/or violence (Bonsucro Production Standard 2.3.2).
- Recommending actions to combat harassment or abuse against women, such as farmer groups imposing sanctions on members that physically or emotionally abuse their spouses or ensuring that a woman directly receives money from the sales of product produced on her land (Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard 2.4.1.a).

2.3 Accountability

- Workforce analysis for each site which includes information about gender (Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard 3.1.2.a).
- Collecting sex-disaggregated data (BCI Principles and Criteria 7).
- Due diligence on human rights risks and impacts including consultation with vulnerable groups such as women, who must be meaningfully engaged during the assessment process (Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard 1.3).
- Mitigation strategies designed to address risks to be developed with consideration of women’s needs (IRMA Standard for Responsible Mining 3.5.2.5).

2.4 Gender-specific fair working conditions

- Including special accommodations for pregnant and nursing women, e.g., a separate space to breastfeed (IRMA Mining Standard 3.2) and breastfeeding breaks (Rainforest Alliance 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Standard: Farm Requirements 5.5.3).
- Setting maternity leave according to national laws or collective bargaining agreement (CBA) regulations (Fairtrade Standard for Small-scale Producer Organizations 3.3.27).
- Separate accommodation and separate sanitation facilities for men and women in the case of 10 or more workers (Rainforest Alliance 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Standard: Farm Requirements 5.6.7 and 5.7.1).
3. Beyond ‘do no harm’: proactively supporting gender equality

Sustainability systems can take the next step by proactively supporting gender equality through their standards. Good practice examples from ISEAL Community Members are grouped into three categories:

- policy/strategy requirements for members and producer organisations
- representation (from ground-level committees through to organisational governance and internal processes)
- enabling environments and systems change

3.1 Policy/strategy requirements

A significant step that standards can take to proactively support gender equality is to require their members to have their own gender policies and strategies in place. For example, Fairtrade International requires small-scale producer organisations to develop and implement a gender policy, ensure members are aware of this policy and its contents, and involve women in the development and implementation of the policy. Examples of topics that can be included in a gender policy, from the Fairtrade Standard for Small-scale Producer Organizations 4.3.1 are:

- promoting the participation of women in boards, leadership positions and other structures within the organisation
- measures against sexual harassment
- a grievance mechanism
- collection and use of gender-disaggregated data
- investing in projects and programmes focusing on women’s needs.

3.2 Representation

Standards can support gender equality by requiring women’s improved representation at various levels. At the ground level, this can include ensuring that committees include representation of diverse groups, that grievance committees are gender-sensitive and that there is a specific gender committee. At an organisational level, gender equality can be promoted through employment practices.

3.2.1 Ground-level examples

- Including a gender-sensitive grievance committee within grievance mechanisms (Rainforest Alliance 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Standard: Farm Requirements 1.5.1).
- Appointing a committee responsible for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of measures that promote gender equality and women’s empowerment that includes at least one woman and one person from management (Rainforest Alliance 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Standard: Farm Requirements).
- Ensuring committees reflect the composition of the membership, including in terms of gender. Such committees include producer executive bodies (Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour A4.2.3) and committees deciding on the use of premium payments and community investments (Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard 1.1.2a).
- Including gender in community needs assessments and evaluations, covering topics such as gender equity, participation by women in income-generating activities and farm decision-making, and other women’s empowerment issues (Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard 1.2.1a).

3.2.2 Organisational-level examples

- Promoting gender equality in employment practices, training opportunities, awarding of contracts, processes of engagement and management activities (FSC Principles and Criteria V5 2.2).
- Promoting women’s inclusion in management and skilled positions, with recruitment operations increasing women’s presence in management and skilled positions to not less than 15%. Women should also be included in leadership and decision-making bodies (Bonsucro Production Standard S.4.1).
3.3 Enabling environments and systems change

Sustainability systems can also support gender equality and women’s empowerment by including requirements within their standards that address the enabling environment and seek to change systems. Activities might include capacity building, training that considers gender-specific needs, and sensitisation of all staff and workers. Examples of how this can be incorporated into standards include:

- Requiring companies to give special attention to the empowerment of women by means of adequate training, capacity building, guidance, encouragement and assistance as necessary (Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour 2.2.6).
- Training doctors, nurses and key personnel among security staff, managers or others on how to recognise signs of gender-based violence and understanding of relevant laws and organisational policies (Responsible Jewellery Council Code of Practice: Standard 2019 18.2).
- Putting in place a documented training programme that takes into account gender-specific needs (RSPO Principles and Criteria 2018 3.7.1 (C)).
- Conducting community-based women’s empowerment training, covering topics such as developing business skills, vocational trainings and life skills, legal rights and civic education (Bonsucro Production Standard 5.4.1).

4. Beyond standards: promoting gender equality and women’s rights

It is also important to think about what can be achieved beyond the requirements of the standard itself. Approaches to supporting gender equality are more successful when considered holistically at an organisation-wide level. Some ideas to consider are included here:

- Having gender in your theory of change (e.g. Fairtrade USA)
- Having an overarching gender policy/strategy (e.g. Gold Standard gender policy)
- Including gender in your organisation strategy (e.g. Forest Stewardship Council Strategy 2021-2026)
- Including gender in indicators for your strategic targets (e.g. Better Cotton Strategic Direction)

References

Fairtrade USA, Fairtrade USA Agricultural Production Standard Version 1.2.0, 2022.
Fairtrade USA, Theory of Change, 2021.

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