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Beyond compliance: How voluntary sustainability standards shape gendered bargaining and coffee yields in Rwanda

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Abstract

As gender equity gains prominence in global sustainability agendas, Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance are increasingly seen as tools to influence women’s empowerment in agricultural systems. Yet little is known about how these standards shape gendered power relations within farming households and whether they influence productivity outcomes. This study investigates the relationship between VSS certification, women’s empowerment, and gendered social norms in Rwanda’s coffee sector—a key export industry where women play vital roles as farmers, workers and entrepreneurs.

Using a mixed-methods design, we draw on panel data from 822 coffee-producing households (2022–2023) and semi-structured interviews with 20 couples (40 individuals) to compare certified and non-certified groups. Empowerment is measured using the Abbreviated Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI), while social norms are assessed through free-listing and norm perception indicators.

Findings show that certified households exhibit higher empowerment scores, more equitable perceptions of gender roles, and greater joint decision-making. Empowerment is positively associated with coffee yields, especially on jointly managed plots in certified households. These results suggest that certification can contribute to reshaping intra-household dynamics and improving productivity.

However, persistent patriarchal norms—particularly around mobility, reproductive autonomy, and labour expectations—continue to constrain full empowerment. Even within certified households, women’s ability to make independent decisions or move freely remains limited, reflecting deeper normative structures that VSS alone may not fully address.

The study highlights both the potential and limitations of VSS certification as a gender-transformative tool. While certification is associated with improvements in empowerment and yield outcomes, it does not automatically dismantle entrenched gender norms. This underscores the need for deeper integration of norm-change strategies into VSS frameworks. Interventions that directly engage with gendered expectations and power hierarchies—alongside technical and economic standards—are crucial for achieving meaningful and lasting empowerment.

By unpacking how certification interacts with household power dynamics and social norms, this research offers new insights into the gendered impacts of sustainability governance in global agri-food systems. It calls for a reimagining of VSS as more than compliance tools—toward frameworks that can actively challenge and shift the social structures underlying inequality.

Keywords: A-WEAI, coffee, gender norms, Rwanda, Voluntary Sustainability Standards, women's empowerment