



# Can private food standards promote gender equality in the small farm sector?

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## ABSTRACT

Agricultural commercialization can help to lift subsistence farmers out of poverty, but can also have adverse effects on gender equality. We explore whether private food standards – with their particular elements to regulate production and trade – could serve as a vehicle to promote gender equality in the small farm sector. We use gender-disaggregated data from coffee producers in Uganda and focus on two sustainability standards that explicitly address gender issues, namely Fairtrade and UTZ. Entropy balancing techniques, combined with estimates of farmers' willingness to accept standards, are used to control for possible selection bias when comparing certified and non-certified households. We find that standards and their certification programs increase wealth in male-headed and female-headed households. In male-headed households, standards also change the intra-household distribution of asset ownership: while in non-certified households, assets are predominantly owned by the male household head alone, in certified households most assets are jointly owned by the male head and his female spouse. Standards also improve access to agricultural extension for both male and female farmers. Effects on women's access to financial services are statistically insignificant. Private standards cannot completely eliminate gender disparities, but the findings suggest that they can contribute towards this goal.

## 1. Introduction

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals emphasize the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment for poverty reduction and food security (UN, 2016). Yet, achieving gender equality remains a challenge, especially in rural areas of developing countries (FAO, 2011). Agricultural commercialization and linking farmers to high-value markets are seen as promising strategies to lift subsistence farmers out of poverty (Maertens and Swinnen, 2009; Rao and Qaim, 2011). However, as is well known, commercialization can also have adverse effects on women's empowerment and gender equality (von Braun and Kennedy, 1994). Given gender disparities in terms of access to land, farm inputs, and rural services, women farmers often find it more difficult to participate in modern value chains (Maertens and Swinnen, 2012; Oduol et al., 2017; Quisumbing et al., 2015). Further, social norms and gender roles may limit women's engagement in cash crop production and marketing (Handsusch and Wollni, 2015; Njuki et al., 2011; Orr et al., 2016; Waltz, 2016). Several studies also show that women may lose control over agricultural income, when farming becomes more profitable and market-oriented (Chege et al., 2015; Fischer and Qaim, 2012; von Braun and Kennedy, 1994). This is

problematic not only for women's empowerment, but also from a broader welfare perspective, because female-controlled income is often more important for family nutrition and child wellbeing than male-controlled income (Doss, 2013; Hoddinott and Haddad, 1995; Malapit and Quisumbing, 2015).

Here, we explore whether private food standards could possibly serve to mitigate negative effects of agricultural commercialization on gender equality. Private food standards – such as Fairtrade – are gaining in importance in global food chains that involve smallholder farmers in developing countries (Clark and Martínez, 2016; Lee et al., 2012; Maertens and Swinnen, 2009). These standards cover a wide range of issues, such as food safety, human welfare, labor conditions, and environmental stewardship. We focus on two particular standards that are aimed at promoting sustainability, namely Fairtrade and UTZ.

Fairtrade seeks to lift poor producers out of poverty by providing higher/more stable output prices (i.e. the Fairtrade floor price) and by enabling collective, development-related investments (e.g. in health projects, infrastructure, or value addition) through the Fairtrade premium (Fairtrade International, 2011a). UTZ (formerly UTZ Kapeh, which means 'good coffee' in the Mayan language) was introduced by a Dutch coffee roaster around the turn of the millennium.<sup>1</sup> UTZ's

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017, UTZ announced its plan to merge with the Rainforest Alliance, another private sustainability standard for products from tropical regions.

approach is to train producers on farming methods that enhance yields and product quality – and thereby farmer profits (UTZ, 2015a). In the small farm sector, Fairtrade and UTZ certification is typically group-based (i.e. introduced and managed by farmer organizations), because certification of individual farmers would be too costly.

Fairtrade and UTZ also include specific components to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Fairtrade International, 2009; UTZ, 2015c). For instance, farmer organizations that are certified under these two standards need to comply with non-discrimination policies. Certified organizations are also encouraged to organize gender equality awareness workshops, implement special programs tailored to women farmers, and promote female participation in agricultural training sessions.

Do gender-sensitive standards, such as Fairtrade and UTZ, deliver on their goal to promote gender equality? This question is relevant from a policy perspective, because governments and NGOs are supporting farmer adoption of standards in the belief that they are indeed an effective tool to promote various development goals (Bacon, 2005; Handschuch et al., 2013).

A growing body of literature has analyzed whether sustainability standards deliver on their promise to improve living standards among farm households in developing countries, with mixed results (Bolwig et al., 2009; Chiputwa et al., 2015; Chiputwa and Qaim, 2016; Ibanez and Blackman, 2016; Jones and Gibbon, 2011; Kleemann et al., 2014; Meemken et al., 2017a; Mitiku et al., 2017; van Rijsbergen et al., 2016). However, these existing studies typically focus on the farm or the farm household as the unit of observation. Issues of intra-household distribution of costs and benefits have hardly been analyzed. Hence, it remains unclear how sustainability standards affect gender equality (Terstappen et al., 2013). A few quantitative studies have looked at gender aspects from a broad perspective (Chiputwa and Qaim, 2016; Ruben and Fort, 2012), yet without analyzing details of intra-household distribution. A few qualitative studies have investigated experiences of female farmers or of employed female workers in certified value chains (Bacon, 2010; Bonnan-White et al., 2013; Hutchens, 2010; Loconto, 2015; Lyon et al., 2010; Lyon, 2008). We contribute to this literature by analyzing if standards deliver on their goal to promote gender equality by using quantitative approaches and considering different areas of women's empowerment.

The concrete research objectives are to evaluate (1) whether standards benefit women and men in male-headed households, (2) whether costs and benefits are equally distributed within male-headed households, and (3) whether female-headed households can benefit as well. The analysis is based on gender-disaggregated data from a survey of coffee producers in Uganda. Some of the sample households are certified under Fairtrade or UTZ standards, while others are not certified. For the impact analysis, we use outcome variables that capture different dimensions of women's empowerment, such as gendered asset ownership, time allocation, participation in farmer group meetings, and access to financial services. Entropy balancing techniques (Hainmueller, 2012) are employed to reduce possible selection bias due to observed differences between certified and non-certified farmers. To reduce possible bias from unobserved heterogeneity, we additionally use estimates of farmers' willingness to accept (WTA) standards as a conditioning variable in reweighting the data.

## 2. Possible effects of food standards on gender equality

Depending on their focus in terms of certification requirements, not all standards can be expected to improve gender equality. However, we hypothesize that those standards that specifically address gender issues can contribute to promoting gender equality. In this section, we discuss existing gender components of Fairtrade and UTZ standards and possible effects on women's empowerment. This discussion builds on existing qualitative studies and provides the framework for the quantitative analysis below.

### 2.1. Gender components of Fairtrade and UTZ

In this study, we analyze the gendered effects of Fairtrade<sup>2</sup> and UTZ standards. We take these two standards as examples of sustainability standards that include gender components. In the analysis, we consider both standards together. While Fairtrade and UTZ differ in terms of several aspects (Chiputwa et al., 2015), the gender components, which are the focus here, are very similar for these two standards. Fairtrade and UTZ both highlight their commitment to promote gender equality on their homepages and in several reports (Fairtrade International, 2011a, 2009; UTZ, 2015a, 2015c). Fairtrade has developed a gender strategy (Fairtrade International, 2009), aimed at gender mainstreaming along the value chains. UTZ recommends the use of its 'gender checklist' to promote gender equality along value chains. Further, UTZ is piloting gender-sensitive approaches to auditing, including the training of auditors on gender issues (UTZ, 2015c).

Fairtrade and UTZ also specify a range of mandatory and suggested measures to promote gender equality (see Table 1). The specific goal of these measures is to raise awareness and strengthen women's position in their households, farmer organizations, and communities (Fairtrade International, 2011a, 2009; UTZ, 2015a, 2015c).

Farmer organizations certified under Fairtrade or UTZ are encouraged to implement workshops on gender equality, targeting both women and men. Further, the establishment of training programs tailored to the specific needs of women farmers is also encouraged (Fairtrade International, 2011b, 2009; UTZ, 2015c). Fairtrade farmer organizations sometimes use parts of the Fairtrade premium for implementing such programs (Fairtrade International, 2011a).

Another objective is to increase women's participation in regular (agricultural) trainings, group meetings, and other activities implemented by certified farmer organizations. To promote this goal, farmer organizations certified under UTZ have to ensure that women are informed about upcoming training sessions. Furthermore, trainings have to be held at times feasible for women, and participation of women and men has to be documented (UTZ, 2015b).

Farmer organizations that are certified under Fairtrade or UTZ have to respect non-discrimination principles in recruiting, paying, and treating staff. Further, women employees have the right to maternity leave. Sexual harassment must not be accepted (Fairtrade International, 2011b; UTZ, 2015b, 2015c). UTZ additionally encourages farmer organizations to strive for equal representation of disadvantaged groups (incl. women) among their staff (e.g. extension officers or farmer organization leadership) (UTZ, 2015b, 2015c).

### 2.2. Possible effects on economic empowerment

Individual control over economic resources (e.g. cash income, asset ownership) is a key driver of women's empowerment (Doss, 2013; Johnson et al., 2016; Kabeer, 1999). Women who are employed (e.g. in the agro-processing sector) or who sell products in the market generate their own income, which contributes to economic empowerment (Maertens and Swinnen, 2012). However, women's role in cash crop production and marketing may be limited; these crops and the income generated from sales are often controlled by men (Njuki et al., 2011). Many of the sustainability standards with relevance to smallholder farmers focus on traditional cash crops, such as coffee, tea, or tropical fruits. Drawing from previous studies, we hypothesize that sustainability standards may contribute to women's economic empowerment (1) by improving women's access to markets and/or (2) by increasing women's control over income from cash crop production and sales.

Several studies suggest that standards and certification requirements can promote women's access to markets and their role in cash

<sup>2</sup> We refer to Fairtrade standards set by Fairtrade International (Fairtrade International, 2011b).

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