

# TOWARDS ACHIEVING GENDER EQUITY IN THE FOOD SECTOR: WHAT CAN INVESTORS DO?



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Cover photo: A Cambodian woman from the Kampong Phluk commune preparing shrimps for the drying process. Credit: Banung Ou\Oxfam.

## INTRODUCTION

The need for companies to drive gender equity has received varying degrees of attention over time. It has been part of companies' diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts. It was reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when women's significant contributions to the economy and to society were made clear as many quit their jobs in large numbers to tend or care for family members and/or carry out other domestic responsibilities. And since the pandemic, investors have expanded their efforts to encourage companies to do more on ensuring gender equity.

However, what has been missing from these efforts is a focus on the women and gender-diverse people<sup>1</sup> that play a vital role further upstream in company supply chains – from factory floors to farms – particularly in the Global South.<sup>2</sup> In the limited instances where the women who power global supply chains have been put into focus, most have focused on the experiences of women workers in the apparel sector.

Women are an integral part of companies' supply chains, in some cases being the majority of workers. Yet, they remain marginalized, invisible, discriminated against and unrecognized. Four of Oxfam's most recent reports – one on a food commodity,<sup>3</sup> two on food retailers<sup>4</sup> and one across agribusinesses<sup>5</sup> – highlight the inequities women continue to face across the food value chain, and especially further upstream in company supply chains. Oxfam's latest assessment, outlined in a report released in 2023,<sup>6</sup> showed how companies have made only incremental changes to advance gender equity. Most companies are taking too long to move on their own.

Oxfam wants to engage with investors, who are well-positioned to encourage companies to advance gender equity, including further upstream in their supply chains. As shareholders in food companies, investors are crucial stakeholders who can help drive meaningful change.

This paper presents investors with information and guidance on how they can help reshape this narrative and encourage companies to act. It is informed by reports and assessments by Oxfam, its partners and allies, along with one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and workshops with women's rights organizations, companies and investors. It is organized as follows:

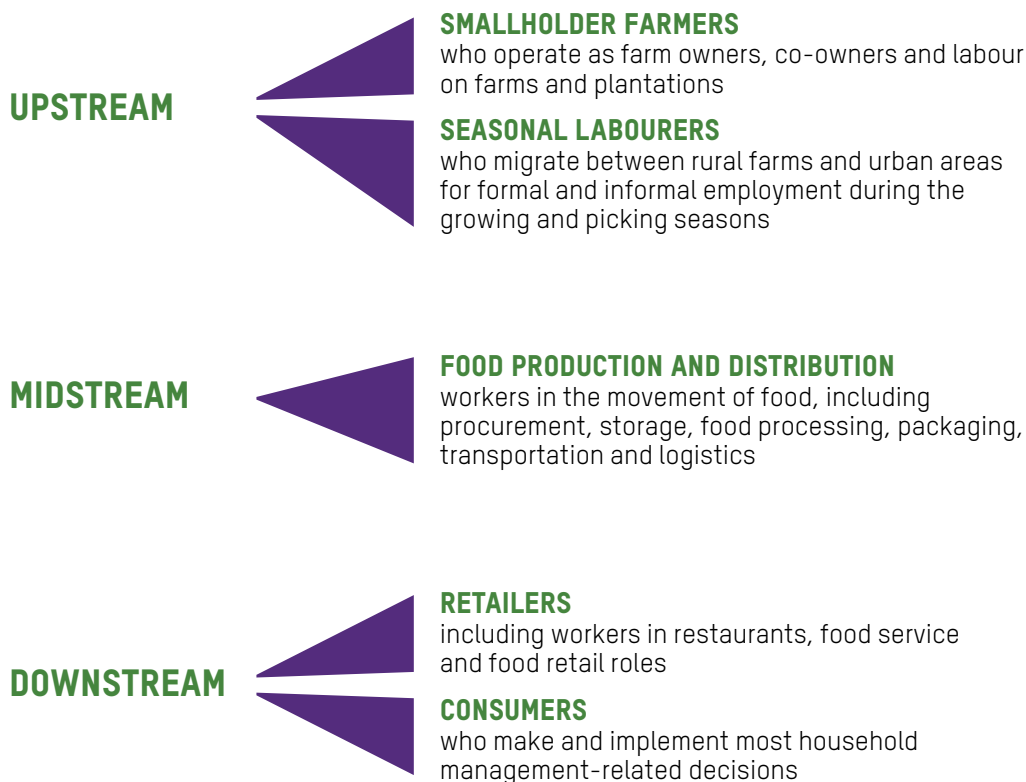
- Section 2 outlines the role women and gender-diverse people play across the food value chain and especially further upstream in company supply chains, and the inequities they face.
- Section 3 examines the current efforts of food and agriculture companies and the role they can play in advancing gender equity in their supply chains.
- Section 4 outlines a path for investors in compelling company action to advance gender equity in their supply chains.

## GENDER INEQUITY UPSTREAM IN THE FOOD VALUE CHAIN

### 2.1. Women and the food value chain go hand in hand

Women and gender-diverse people play a critical role in the food value chain, from farming and food production, to processing and packaging, distribution and retail. Women and gender-diverse people are present throughout the food value chain and operate in the following roles and sectors (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Women and gender-diverse people's roles in the food value chain



The food value chain provides a vital source of livelihood income and employment for women and gender-diverse people, especially in rural areas where off-farm employment is scarce.<sup>7</sup> Among all working women globally, about one in three works upstream in the food value chain.<sup>8</sup> These dependencies will grow over time, as more men move out of the sector and women's roles expand.<sup>9</sup>

Oxfam's work is focused on the role of farmers, farm workers and workers further upstream in the supply chains of food and agriculture companies.<sup>10</sup> This guidance draws on those experiences, particularly in food commodities, to shine a spotlight on gender inequities experienced in this context, where large agribusiness traders, food and beverage companies and food retailers can play a pivotal role in shaping outcomes for women.

## 2.2. Gender inequities are widespread upstream in the supply chains of food and agriculture companies

The rights of women and gender-diverse people, including their rights to representation, remedy, equal pay, and occupational safety, are violated at every stage of the food value chain.<sup>11</sup> Especially in the supply chains of food and agriculture companies, they face increasing barriers to safety, recognition and advancement. These challenges are further compounded for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) women and non-cis people, women living with disabilities, and migrants and undocumented women.<sup>12</sup>

### Intersectionality

It is important to acknowledge and understand how different intersecting identities have a disproportionate effect on women, girls and gender-diverse people in agriculture. Globally, rural and Indigenous women, and gender-diverse people, face biases, challenges and constraints that cis men do not. These disadvantages are exacerbated when a woman, girl or gender-diverse person belongs to another marginalized identity in their country, such as discrimination based on their race or caste, migration status, marital status, religion, sexuality, age and other social identities.<sup>13</sup> A gender-transformative value chain must not ignore the intersecting forms of marginalization people face as it increases the risk of discrimination. However, data on intersectionality is largely absent, impeding the ability to understand the disproportionate impacts of intersecting identities on women, girls and gender-diverse people.

**Within the upstream supply chains of food and agriculture companies, women's work is often invisible, un-/under-paid, precarious and insecure.** Working conditions are worse than those of men and frequently dangerous to their health and wellbeing. They are offered fewer opportunities in the workplace and are often discriminated against or denied advancement. The precarity of their work offers them fewer opportunities for advancement and makes them particularly exposed to violence and harassment. The severe inequities women and gender-diverse people face have significant impacts, not only at the individual level but for society at large.

The extent to which inequities are present and salient in upstream supply chains can vary widely according to the regional or country context (e.g. laws/norms, history and impact of colonialism, infrastructure, private sector practices or climate impacts) and commodity-specific context (e.g. type of commodity, how it is grown, sourced and exported, and private sector practices). In consultation with Oxfam partners and colleagues, this guidance has identified six risks that are prevalent across many contexts and commodities in upstream supply chains (Table 1) and include:

1. Discrimination;
2. Unequal access to resources;
3. Unpaid care responsibilities;
4. Unequal compensation;
5. Health and Occupational safety; and
6. Gender-based violence and harassment.

The guidance draws from evidence of gender-based risks documented by Oxfam and its partners in food commodities that include:

- Seafood, including aquaculture, harvesting and processing in Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam (Appendix 2);
- Cocoa production in Ghana (Appendix 3);
- Grape cultivation and wine production in South Africa;
- Banana and pineapple plantations of Costa Rica;
- Coffee production in Brazil (Appendix 4).

Aminah holding coffee beans that she planted on her farm in Indonesia. Credit: Kyo Umareta/Oxfam.



Table 1. Risks prevalent across many contexts and commodities in upstream supply chains

GENDER RISKS	EXAMPLES
<b>DISCRIMINATION</b>	
<p>Women and gender-diverse people are denied employment and access to resources because of the harmful social norms, stereo typical role expectations attached to their gender, while structural barriers in the workplace can limit their economic opportunities, mobility and participation in off-farm employment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employers at pineapple plantations in Costa Rica avoid hiring women or renewing their contracts if they become pregnant, despite regulatory guardrails.</li> <li>• There are more women in lower-paying jobs (e.g. land-based shrimp processing) and fewer in higher paying jobs (e.g. coffee farm supervisors in Brazil).</li> <li>• Because of the increasing precariousness, migrant women in South Africa’s vineyards and grape cultivation must contend with poor working conditions and unfair labour practices.<sup>14</sup></li> </ul>
<b>UNEQUAL ACCESS TO RESOURCES</b>	
<p>Throughout the food value chain, discriminatory practices and social norms can determine who controls and benefits from access to resources (including finance, land, technological knowhow, information, markets, training etc.) and income, creating additional layers of gender inequities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women cocoa farmers in Ghana have less access to resources, connections to buying companies, credit to purchase fertilizers etc.</li> </ul>
<b>UNPAID CARE RESPONSIBILITIES</b>	
<p>Women’s participation in the economy is affected by disproportionate time spent on care responsibilities. Moreover, essential contributions to food production are often considered an extension of their domestic responsibilities and not economic activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Brazil’s Minas Gerais, women coffee workers spend 26.9 hours per week on average on unpaid care (150% more than most men).<sup>15</sup></li> <li>• In the shrimp sector in Indonesia, women are seen as ‘wives of aquaculture farmers’ who manage household duties while tending to ponds.</li> </ul>
<b>UNEQUAL COMPENSATION</b>	
<p>Globally, women employees across the food value chain earn on average just 82 cents for every dollar earned by men.<sup>16</sup> Gendered occupational segregation and social norms and practices create barriers preventing advancement and achievement of their productive capabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many migrant women workers surveyed in South Africa’s vineyards and grape cultivation reported earning less than the statutory mandated minimum wage.<sup>17</sup></li> </ul>
<b>HEALTH AND OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY</b>	
<p>Gender-specific health and occupational safety risks encompass all aspects of the work environment that adversely impact the health and wellbeing of women and gender-diverse workers, and have a direct impact on their productivity. These include cleanliness and sanitation, as well as the physical environment, biological and reproductive risks associated with chemical exposure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditions at shrimp processing plants in Thailand and Indonesia are allegedly considered unsanitary, often with too few toilets and tightly controlled toilet breaks.<sup>18</sup></li> <li>• In Costa Rica, female farmworkers on banana and pineapple plantations face exposure to toxic substances and dangerous pesticides and are not provided with the necessary protective equipment.</li> </ul>
<b>GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT (GBVH)</b>	
<p>Gender-based violence and harassment at the workplace is widespread and pervasive, with severe consequences on mental and physical health.<sup>19</sup> Access to natural resources, most often controlled by men, puts women at risk of sexual violence and exploitation, particularly where resources are scarce or decreasing.<sup>20</sup></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In South Africa, female farm workers reportedly had to perform sexual acts to obtain jobs on vineyards or in grape cultivation. Migrant women workers are particularly prone to abuse and mistreatment and do not speak out for fear of deportation.</li> </ul>

## 2.3. Gender risks and inequities are compounded in times of crises

### COVID-19 impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on women and gender-diverse people, including those in upstream supply chains of food and agriculture companies. Many had to adjust to the realities at the time:

- More job insecurity: Women faced higher job insecurity compared to men, who were less likely to lose work<sup>21</sup> and more likely to be rehired later. Making up a large proportion of seasonal, part-time and piece-rate workers, women were often the first to lose work.<sup>22</sup>
- More unpaid work: Disproportionally more women than men took a step back from work to tend to domestic and care responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> Labour shortages placed an additional burden on women, who stepped in as family labour to do uncompensated harvesting and planting work.<sup>24</sup>
- Unsafe working conditions: Women were more likely to be exposed to unsafe working conditions than men as more of them are informal workers.

### Climate change impacts

The upstream supply chains of food and agriculture companies are dependent on natural resources that are susceptible to climate change and vulnerable to damages or decimation by physical climate change risks. Climate change affects women and gender-diverse workers and farmers in supply chains in different ways than it does men; women and gender-diverse people are at greater risk due to the inequities they already face.

- Cultural and social norms impede their access to the resources (education, training, information, networks) needed to develop climate resiliency to risks stemming from climate change impacts and to adopt climate-smart practices and technologies.<sup>25</sup>
- Greater challenges in recovering from extreme weather events and shocks (e.g. lost jobs, more unpaid care duties, less access to credit, insurance or government support).
- Greater risk of gender-based violence and harassment, given increased scarcity and tension in homes and communities, vulnerability to sexual coercion, and violence used to exert power and control over, among other things, scarce natural resources.<sup>26</sup>
- Impacts on productivity and/or crop yields because time spent away from these activities tends to increase care and household responsibilities.<sup>27</sup>

# 3.

## THE ROLE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE COMPANIES IN DRIVING GENDER EQUITY IN THEIR SUPPLY CHAINS

### 3.1. Food companies can drive gender equity in their supply chains

The world’s leading food and agriculture companies have significant power and influence. They include:

- Traders, processors or agribusinesses that are a vital connection between producers and consumers, operating in and influencing every aspect of food production and distribution.
- Eighteen food and beverage companies that made on average US\$14bn a year in windfall profits in 2021 and 2022 and employ millions of people in the supply chain.<sup>28</sup>
- Food retailers or supermarkets that are the last link in the food value chain and have become de facto gatekeepers of the global food trade – shaping producers and processors into geographically dispersed, highly specialized and multitiered supply chains to deliver precise quality standards for tens of thousands of products every day of the year.

Figure 2. Input companies manufacture essential inputs used in agricultural productions such as seeds and fertilizers



Source: E. Fawcett and S. Zweben. (2021). *Shining a Spotlight: A critical assessment of food and beverage companies’ delivery of sustainability commitments*. Oxfam.

These companies are well positioned to generate solutions and advance gender equity broadly, especially in their upstream supply chains. They may not be investing in gender equity for a host of reasons: supply chain complexities; lack of understanding or awareness of issues; feeling too far removed; or underestimation of the value in doing so. However, they can do more to drive gender equity in their supply chains – in the strategy and governance they establish, the gender policies and practices they develop, the progress and performance that they track, and the information they disclose.

Their efforts should begin with their responsibility to respect human rights (see the United Nations Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct for Multinational Enterprises).<sup>29</sup> This is becoming increasingly important as countries are introducing legislation regarding human rights due diligence and corporate action that would create additional accountability mechanisms for companies, including in their supply chains. In this context, these companies can drive **gender-responsive human rights due diligence (GR-HRDD)**<sup>30</sup> that aims to identify, manage, prevent and eliminate gender-specific risks across a company's entire value chain.<sup>31</sup>

### Kroger and Lidl's human rights impact assessment (HRIA) represents a positive first step

One aspect of GR-HRDD includes conducting gender-sensitive HRIAs that help identify and assess gender-specific impacts across a company's supply chain.<sup>32</sup> While we recognize that it is challenging for companies to conduct HRIAs across all commodities in their supply chains, companies need to start somewhere. In this vein, in 2023, Kroger and Lidl conducted a HRIA of their seafood supply chain. Oxfam made the following observations regarding how gender was captured in the assessment:

- The HRIA presented gender-disaggregated data about onsite interviews. However, according to the third-party who conducted the HRIA, none of the interviewees identified as non-binary. Therefore, this demographic was not captured in the HRIA.<sup>33</sup>
- There is no information about the selection process for interviewees, so it is not possible to ascertain the absence of selection bias.
- It was a gender-sensitive process which ensured that both women and men in the workplace who were interviewed felt comfortable speaking and participating.
- A gender-based analysis was conducted which documented the risks of gender discrimination and sexual harassment and the impacts on women.<sup>34</sup>
- One gender-specific recommendation was presented, which is a starting point towards best practice where the integration of gender is captured across numerous recommendations.

Given these companies' reach and market share, they have significant buying power that can be leveraged to drive change among their suppliers directly as well as indirectly by setting the right tone for the food sector more broadly. This can include risk mitigation efforts as well as value creation efforts, given how women in upstream supply chains have proven to use their limited resources to increase agricultural yields,<sup>35</sup> improve productivity<sup>36</sup> and drive resilience.<sup>37</sup>

### Olam's efforts to advance women's economic empowerment in select supply chains

In its efforts to proactively manage gender-specific risks, Olam tracks the gender profile for several of their supply chains through:

- **Identification of gendered risks:** Olam recognizes that gender-disaggregated data is not always specific to supply chains and regions. Acknowledging this, the company begins the process with desk-based risk-mapping, relying on existing data. Building on this step, in order to close gaps in data and to understand context specific root causes of human rights risks where risk levels are high, Olam follows up with ground-truthing assessments in specific supply chains as needed. Sustainability programmes and processes (like supplier/farmer registration and engagement, farmer training, etc.) serve to help address identified risks.
- **Elevation of the role of women:** Recognizing the underrepresentation of women and the potential discrimination, through its Farmer Information System, Olam is working to bring visibility to women's role in agricultural production which enables the company to better target initiatives to support women in supply chains. This includes working actively to update the system to enable registration of more than one stakeholder per farm, with the goal to be able to register many more women and have the ability to interact directly with them, so women can be more directly involved in the business relationship with the company.

Furthermore, while these companies can adopt standalone gender efforts, it is possible for them to explicitly integrate a gender lens into other relevant company efforts, including:

- **Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI):** Companies have been introducing a host of efforts to enhance DEI in the workplace that include pay equity, professional development, hiring, promotion and retention. It is time that DEI efforts move past company operations and into supply chains. Here companies can adopt a 'do no harm' approach, in which they do not simply consult but co-create solutions with affected stakeholders and feminist groups. For example, building on its work in Southeast Asia, Oxfam has developed a practical diagnostic tool for stakeholders in the shrimp value chain to promote gender equity.<sup>38</sup>

- **Climate:** As companies race to meet their climate goals, there is considerable potential to combine efforts on climate goals and gender equity. By addressing the two together, companies can mitigate risks and increase opportunities to de-risk investment and improve financial returns while improving overall outcomes. The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security has identified areas where business and climate benefits can be realized from climate and gender-smart initiatives.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.2. Efforts to advance gender equity in food and agriculture companies' supply chains fall short

A large part of the focus on gender inequity in companies' supply chains has been driven by civil society, foundations, governments and intergovernmental organizations. Companies – both within and beyond the food value chain – are slowly expanding DEI efforts from their workplaces into their supply chains by increasing supplier diversity.<sup>40</sup> However such efforts have not yet meaningfully expanded to mitigate gender risks or drive value more comprehensively upstream in their supply chains.

Since 2013, Oxfam has been assessing food and agriculture companies' performance on, among other issues, advancing gender equality and women's empowerment further upstream in their supply chains.

Maria harvesting coffee beans with her daughter Lúcia, Minas Gerais State, Brazil.  
Credit: Tatiana Cardeal/Oxfam Brasil.

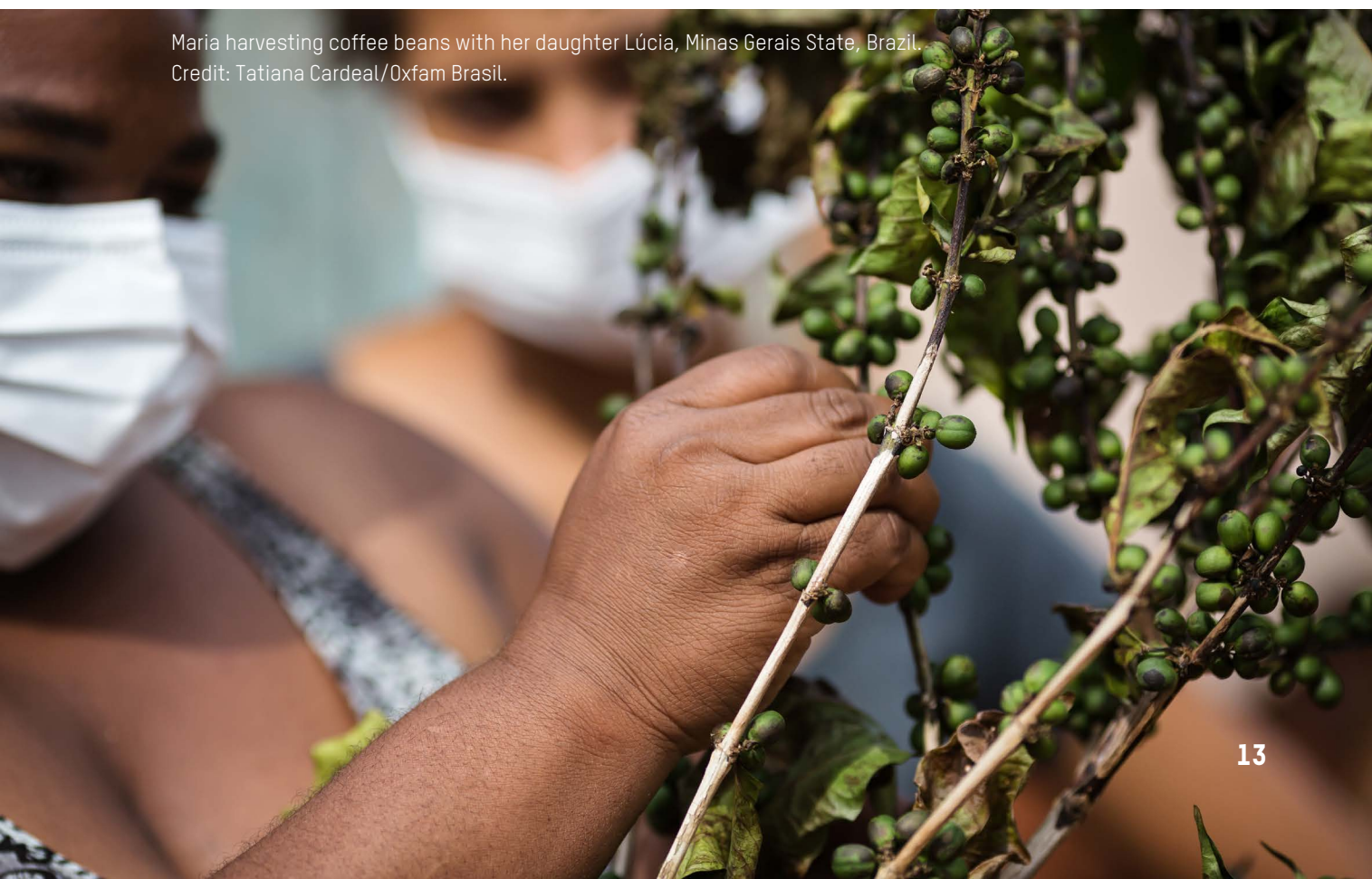
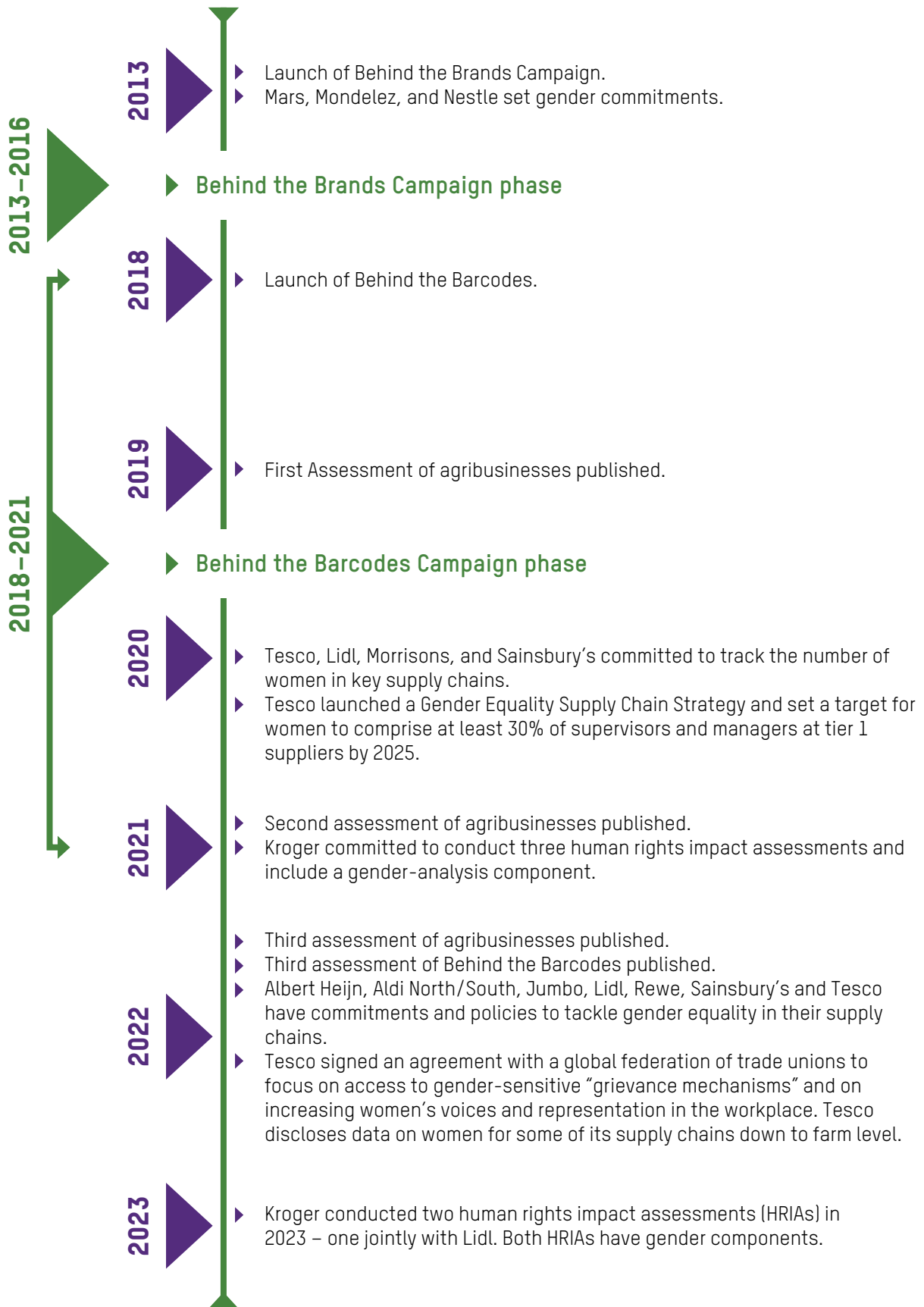


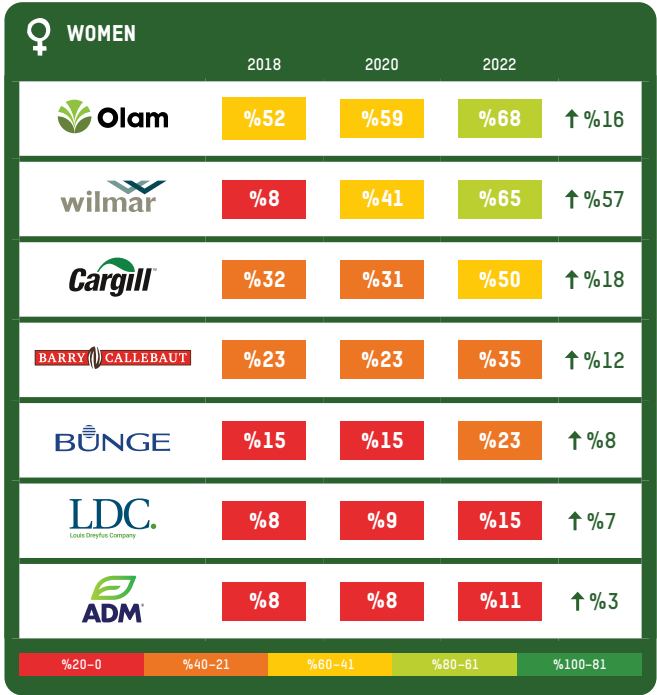
Figure 3. Progress on gender<sup>41</sup> by multinational food and agricultural companies



Oxfam’s work (Figure 4) shows that while some companies have made commitments, few have followed through with robust implementation.<sup>42</sup>

In its most recent report, Oxfam assessed seven of the largest agribusiness companies globally – Archer–Daniels–Midland, Barry Callebaut, Bunge, Cargill, Louis Dreyfuss Company, Olam and Wilmar.<sup>43</sup> This was the third assessment conducted (the first being in 2018 and the second in 2020). Progress since the first report has been limited, with few having prioritized gender equity in their operations and supply chains.

Figure 4. Overview of Oxfam’s assessments of some of the largest agribusiness companies



Source: M. Hamilton. (2023). *Moving the Middle: Oxfam’s Behind the Brands assessment of the global agribusiness sector*. Oxfam.

Olam Group has been one of the first to act in moving toward advancing gender equity (Figure 5). At the other end of the spectrum, companies that still fell below the 20% threshold in 2022 highlight the big divide between the leader and the laggards.

Furthermore, high-quality gender-disaggregated data is essential to understand the roles of women and gender-diverse people upstream in company supply chains as well as the risks they face. There is a severe lack of publicly available gender-disaggregated supply chain data across sectors, including among food and agriculture companies, that limits the ability to assess and address gender inequities. Companies have not invested in collecting, analysing and/or disclosing gender-disaggregated data for their supply chains. An even bigger gap exists in data for gender-diverse people and those facing compounded risks due to other intersectional aspects of their identity, such as age, ability or race, that can vary by context, region or circumstance. Moreover, most efforts to capture a gender and intersectional lens are outside of the food sector. This broad lack of gender-disaggregated data inhibits the ability to hold companies to account for driving gender equity in their supply chains.

## Sources of gender-disaggregated supply chain data for food and agriculture companies

Efforts to capture gender-disaggregated supply chain data are limited. Where gender-disaggregated supply chain data is collected and published at the national level or by companies, it overwhelmingly looks at gender as a binary within food and agriculture companies. Furthermore, available data on women in agriculture is limited and inherently flawed, underrepresenting women's work and participation in the sector. This reflects the often-hidden nature of women's labour in agriculture and the lack of recognition and compensation they receive for it.

Figure 5. Collection of gender-disaggregated data is fragmented across organizations

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCE	GENDER-SPECIFIC METRICS	FOOD-SPECIFIC METRICS	COMMODITY-SPECIFIC METRICS
General Reporting Initiative	Multiple	✗	✓	✓
World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA)	Food and Agriculture	✗	✓	✗
WBA	Access to Seeds Index	✗	✓	✓
WBA	Seafood Stewardship Index	✗	✓	✓
WBA	Gender Benchmark	✓	✓	✗
ShareAction	Workforce Disclosure Initiative	✗	✗	✗
Cocoa Barometer	Cocoa Barometer	✓	✓	✓
Know the Chain	Food and Beverage Benchmark	✗	✓	✗
United Nations	Women's Empowerment Principles	✓	✗	✗
Equileap	Gender Equality Scorecard	✓	✗	✗
Bloomberg	Gender Equality Index	✓	✗	✗
Business for Social Responsibility	Gender Data and Impact Tool	✓	✗	✗
IDH	Gender Toolkit	✓	✓	✗
Equilo	GESI Analysis	✓	✓	✗
Oxfam	Behind the Brands	✓	✓	✗
Oxfam	Agribusiness	✓	✓	✗
Oxfam	Behind the barcodes	✓	✓	✗
International Coffee Organization	Gender equality in the coffee sector	✓	✓	✓

\*The list is not exhaustive and represents some of the prominent ones upstream in food supply chains

## INVESTORS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN ADVANCING GENDER EQUITY

Investors are well positioned to drive gender equity in food and agriculture companies. As shareholders in these companies, they have the power to encourage portfolio companies to act. Whether through corporate engagement, the filing of resolutions or other means, investors can draw from their existing toolkit to prioritize gender in this context. Below are some suggested considerations for why, who, what and how investors can engage with food and agriculture companies to drive gender equity in their supply chains.

### 4.1. Why engage?

There are many reasons why investors should work with food and agriculture companies to advance gender equity in their supply chains, some of which include:

- **Mitigation of gender-specific risks:** Given the growing and disproportionate risks faced by women in the global food value chain,<sup>44</sup> investors can proactively manage gender risks and support the advancement of gender equity in food and agriculture company supply chains. This will also help them proactively manage their own legal, regulatory, operational and/or reputational risks.<sup>45</sup>
- **Increasing role of women in agriculture:** Women are becoming more integral to the global food value chain over time, particularly upstream in the supply chains of food and agriculture companies. This is in part a result of the out-migration of men, from rural to urban areas, or out of the agricultural sector entirely. The share of women in the workforce is higher in some regions,<sup>46</sup> reaching more than 71% of women in southern Asia, compared to 47% of men.<sup>47</sup>
- **Increasing scrutiny by governments into company supply chains:** States and regions are paying close attention to companies' efforts to manage human rights risks and increase transparency in supply chains, which could impose costs on companies for noncompliance.<sup>48</sup>
- **Women's contributions to overall economic growth:** Gender inequities that women face can have direct impacts on business and lead to lower crop yields, lower productivity and lower financial returns.<sup>49</sup> Closing productivity and wage gaps within agrifoods<sup>50</sup> could result in an estimated increase to global GDP of close to US\$1 trillion that will deliver benefits to institutional investors who are concerned about systemic risks to their investment portfolios.<sup>51</sup>

- **Gender-specific value creation opportunities:** Addressing gender inequities and helping women and gender-diverse people realize their full productive capabilities will ultimately represent benefits and/or cost savings for companies and investors.
- **Meeting climate goals:** The effective implementation of climate-smart agricultural approaches is critical to meeting global climate goals. However, despite women's integral role in the global food value chain, they lack access to information, financing, technologies and networks linked to climate-smart approaches. These barriers can act to either increase women's resistance to, or prohibit them from adopting, climate-smart agricultural approaches, which may ultimately also have an impact on investors' related climate goals.

## 4.2. Who to engage with?

Given the expansiveness of the food sector globally and the pervasiveness of gender inequity, investors could choose to engage with any food and agriculture companies in their portfolios to help drive gender equity in their respective supply chains. Oxfam recommends, however, that investors start by prioritizing the largest and most influential companies. Investors could engage with the largest (by market value) agribusinesses,<sup>52</sup> food and beverage companies,<sup>53</sup> and food retailers.<sup>54</sup>

## 4.3. What to engage on?

Discussions with companies, experts and civil society partners led us to prioritize the six salient gender risks identified in Table 1 that drive gender inequity upstream in food and agriculture companies' supply chains. Investors should work with food and agriculture companies in their portfolio to explore these risks and what they are doing to identify, manage, prevent and mitigate them.

This can involve taking a broad approach by exploring the extent to which food and agriculture companies in their portfolio prioritize gender in their supply chains at all. Investors can also take a more targeted approach. Here, they can **engage with portfolio companies on those commodities where salient gender risks are well documented, such as cocoa (Appendix 2), seafood (Appendix 3) and/or coffee (Appendix 4)**, especially where there is a heavy reliance on these commodities. In either case, Oxfam recommends that investors ensure that portfolio companies:

- Commit to advancing gender equity in their supply chain.
- Track and disclose supply chain data disaggregated by gender (in the chosen commodity) (Appendix 1).
- Embed a gender analysis in the company's existing HRDD approach, also known as gender responsive HRDD, which includes meaningful engagement with women and gender non-conforming people.<sup>55</sup>
- Conduct a HRIA with a strong emphasis on the impact on women within the commodity supply chain selected.

- Commit to publish a timebound gender action plan for each HRIA conducted to address issues around gender-transformative approaches, gender mainstreaming, gender and social equity, women’s access to resources, grievances and corrective action.<sup>56</sup>
- Commit to ensuring that workers have access to gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms.<sup>57</sup>

### Time to move away from social audits and embrace HRIAs

Companies rely heavily on social audits to address workplace issues, but social audits have their shortcomings. These include the fact that they are:<sup>58</sup>

- gender agnostic;
- a snapshot in time rather than a continual process;
- less pre-emptive in the identification of risks than HRDD;
- a checkbox exercise to ensure compliance, rather than to create change;
- ill-fitted to identify, let alone stop, violations or abuses;
- focused less on safeguarding rightsholders such as workers and more on protecting companies.

HRIAs serve as a tool for HRDD and are slowly emerging as best practice. HRIAs:<sup>59</sup>

- measure the gap between the human rights in principle and human rights in practice;
- identify the main impacts associated with corporate activities and help determine accountability;
- require an ongoing, gender-responsive and meaningful engagement of rightsholders, including most at-risk populations, to identify the impacts and determine the best approaches to prevent or mitigate them;
- include recommendations to prevent and/or mitigate the impacts identified;
- are followed by a publicly available, timebound action plan to demonstrate how the impacts will be addressed.



Myanmar seafood worker resting behind Talay Thai Market, Thailand. Credit: Patipat Janthong/Oxfam.

#### 4.4. How to engage?

**Prioritize** making gender equity an explicit priority in your corporate engagement with food companies. Boston Common's Gender-Priority Investor Framework<sup>60</sup> is an excellent resource on how investors can use a full value chain approach to make gender a priority across their investment portfolios.<sup>61</sup>

**Integrate** a gender lens into relevant ESG efforts such as HRDD, DEI and climate change. Consider opportunities to address gender equity through an intersectional lens and start by looking at, for example, gender and health and safety, gender and forced labour, or gender and climate.

**Engage** with portfolio companies. We recognize that investors are called on to engage on a host of issues and must determine their priorities. As a starting point, we recommend considering several questions to aid prioritization (Box 6).

**Monitor** companies' performances on advancing gender equity. This is only possible if investors push for companies to disclose information about their activities to advance gender equity, including timely gender-disaggregated data and the results of their HRIAs and follow-up actions (gender action plans and gender-responsive grievance mechanisms). By making the information public, companies will be likely to be more accountable and investors can monitor and compare performance across companies within their investment portfolios.

### Key questions investors can ask companies operating upstream in food value chains

1. Is the company committed to advancing gender equity in its supply chain?
2. Does the company collect gender-disaggregated data (including data on intersectionality such as race, caste, migration status, marital status, religion, sexuality, age etc.) in their supply chain?
3. Has the company adopted a gender-responsive approach to HRDD?<sup>62</sup>
4. Has the company conducted HRIsAs informed by engagement with specific stakeholders/ rightsholders in specific commodities?
5. Has the company created a timebound gender action plan to address all the issues identified under the HRIA? Does it publicly disclose targets and progress against efforts?
6. Does the company have grievance mechanisms that are gender sensitive and extend to those in the supply chain?

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Key gender-disaggregated data in upstream supply chains of food and agriculture companies

Table A1 summarizes the most critical categories and indicators of gender-disaggregated data that should be considered among food and agriculture companies to understand the extent to which they are driving gender equity in their supply chains. It was compiled based on interviews with women's rights organizations and civil society groups focused on gender equity, investors and desk research. There is currently a severe lack of the data presented in Table A1. As such, investors, companies and other relevant actors are encouraged to drive further action.

Table A1. Key categories and indicators of gender-disaggregated data

CATEGORY	INDICATOR(S)	EXAMPLES
Strategy and governance	Commitment	Strategic efforts to advance gender equity in the supply chain (e.g. gender strategy, public statement/commitment, or policies).
	Risk management	Gender-responsive HRDD conducted, action plans co-created with affected communities/workers with measurable targets for salient gender issues identified, routine monitoring. Access to gender-responsive grievance mechanisms (e.g. trusted, survivor-centred).
	Transparency and reporting	Publicly reporting on progress on timebound targets from gender action plans, sharing progress with affected workers and communities. Gender-disaggregated data on leadership diversity, incidents of discrimination, turnover, occupational segregation, contract types, and corrective action at factory/plant/plantation/cooperative levels.
Inclusion	Representation	Non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies (supply chain wide). Gender-balanced representation at all levels of leadership/workforce and by occupation/function. Support for suppliers' non-discriminatory practices in recruitment, hiring, employment and promotions in large-scale supply chains. Non-discriminatory criteria for supplier eligibility (e.g. land documentation, cooperatives membership) in small-scale supply chains. Lack of formal contracts and informalizing roles.
	Enabling environment for freedom of association/collective bargaining	Requirements for companies to work with suppliers to create an enabling environment for all workers (regardless of gender and working status) to exercise their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

<b>Access to resources</b>	Capacity strengthening	Strengthen policies to protect supply chain workers' (regardless of gender and work status) access to technical training and both climate-adaptive and timesaving technology.
	Access to land and land tenure	Strengthen policies to protect supply chain workers of all genders' rights to land ownership (to combat private sector practices that default to male heads of households) and tenure and respect for free, prior and informed consent (FPIC); access to communal land; and access to natural resources are respected, as well as Indigenous and intergenerational custodianship and knowledge of land.
	Access to production inputs	Strengthen policies to protect supply chain workers of all genders' access to key production inputs (e.g. markets, financial services).
	Access to cooperatives, training, extension education	Strengthen policies to protect supply chain workers of all genders' access to relevant financial services and markets due to discriminatory credit and lending barriers.
<b>Compensation and benefits</b>	Pay equity	Companies' purchasing practices and pricing structures including assessment of suppliers' ability to pay a living wage/income and offer workers formal contracts. Plans to mitigate/avoid pay inequity, non-payment and payment solely to the male heads of family farms.
	Paid carer leave/support	Requirement for suppliers' provision of care benefits (e.g. primary and secondary carer leave, childcare and other family support).
<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	Occupational safety	Requirement for suppliers to address the gender-specific health and safety needs of workers of all genders (e.g. hygienic and accessible restrooms for all genders, rest areas, pumping/feeding areas and menstrual accommodating spaces).
	Health information/services	Requirement for suppliers to ensure access to gender-responsive health information and services for their workers (e.g. PPE, pesticide application equipment, sexual/reproductive health, maternal health, cancer screenings).
<b>Violence and harassment</b>	Trafficking	Active efforts to prevent/eliminate trafficking and bonded labour in supply chains.
	Prevention and remediation	Active efforts to prevent and remediate violence and harassment in the supply chain (including commutes to markets or workplaces) and ensure a safe working environment for women and gender-diverse people.
	Domestic violence	Active efforts to support survivors of domestic violence in the supply chain (e.g. on live-in plantations and family farms), risk assessment on women's economic empowerment programmes to mitigate unintended increase in domestic violence resulting from increased women's economic empowerment.

## Appendix 2: Gender risks in cocoa in Ghana

### Gender diversity in the Ghanaian cocoa sector

Ghana is the second-largest producer of cocoa, producing 20%<sup>63</sup> of the world's cocoa beans.<sup>64</sup> Women make up around 25% of the cocoa workforce in Ghana, but are underrepresented in official estimates (including farms owned by their husbands and families) as they are excluded from land ownership, on which figures are based, and their unpaid, on-farm labour is overlooked by official statistics.<sup>65</sup> The role of women farmers in the cocoa industry has become increasingly critical, given their role in addressing key industry challenges, including increasing quality levels and maintaining production despite dwindling supplies. This is coupled with an aging cocoa farmer population and a lack of younger farmers interested in taking on the trade due to low-income generation opportunities for cocoa farmers.

### Key gender risks

Over the years, Oxfam has analysed the existing strategies and interventions implemented by cocoa and chocolate companies operating in Ghana to raise farmer incomes in their supply chains.<sup>66</sup> Some of the main findings on the inequities women face include:

- **Discrimination:** Women's critical contributions within male-headed households continue to remain invisible. The labour they contribute to pre- and post-harvest activities is not recognized or remunerated, but largely accounted for as support to male household heads who are often the registered farmers.
- **Unequal access to resources:** Discriminatory practices, norms and gendered perceptions are prevalent in cocoa production in Ghana.<sup>67</sup> For these reasons, women farmers have insecure land rights, resulting in the denial of benefits from all the advantages that such a status can afford, including:
  - access to credit, which is key to purchasing inputs such as fertilizers necessary to boost yields and productivity.
  - recognition as farmers and landowners due to no documentation, companies' biases that identify males as heads of households, and traditional land tenure systems.
  - access to training, extension and essential connections to buying companies to sell cocoa to.
  - representation in cooperatives, where land ownership is a prerequisite for membership and participation.
- **Unpaid care responsibilities:** As women take on significantly more unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, this has an impact on the time they can spend on, for example, training and extension for cocoa production.

## Appendix 3: Gender risks in seafood in Southeast Asia

### Gender diversity in the Southeast Asian seafood sector

Asia accounts for nearly 80% of all people employed in the primary fisheries and aquaculture sector globally.<sup>68</sup> Women make up around 50% of the global seafood sector workforce.<sup>69</sup> In the primary sector of fisheries and aquaculture, women make up 28% of workers in aquaculture and 15% in fisheries.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, factory work, is taken up more by women than men especially in southeast Asia. Importantly, women play a key role in the wellbeing of their communities through strengthening community bonds and climate adaptation.

- Firstly, through sharing of domestic work and caregiving responsibilities, women take turns to help each other when they are away to take up employment in towns or they work in shifts.
- Secondly, women living in fishing communities are responsible for the conservation work, such as protecting the coastal ecosystems including endemic plants, fish banks and collecting garbage.

The roles that women in the seafood sector engage in are often affected by social, cultural and economic contexts, where many face gender-based constraints that hinder their agency and autonomy and prevent them from fully realizing their productive value in the sector.

### Key gender risks

Findings by Oxfam, partners and allies about the working conditions of women in seafood include:<sup>71</sup>

- **Discrimination**
  - **Pregnancy-related discrimination:** For women working in pre-processing, processing factories and aquaculture in Thailand, enforced pregnancy tests are a norm and can have an impact on their working status.<sup>72</sup>
  - **Over-representation in irregular, informal and low-skilled work:** Women are overrepresented in land-based, lower-paying jobs.<sup>73</sup>
- **Health and occupational safety risks:** Post-harvest women workers in factories are often exposed to dangerous conditions including poor ventilation, limited breaks and crowded facilities.<sup>74</sup>
- **Unequal compensation**
  - On average, women workers in Thailand earn 28.7% less than their male counterparts across different tiers of seafood supply chains.<sup>75</sup> For processing (factory workers), women earn 12.9% less, 41.1% less for pre-processing, and 29.5% less for aquaculture.<sup>76</sup>
  - Within the shrimp sector in Indonesia, women's work is often invisible as they are seen as 'wives of aquaculture farmers', managing household duties alongside tending to ponds.



Maria and her daughter Lúcia with a typical sieve used for farming, Minas Gerais State, Brazil. Credit: Tatiana Cardeal/Oxfam Brasil.

## Appendix 4: Gender risks in coffee in Brazil

### Gender diversity in the Brazilian coffee sector

Most of the world's coffee is produced in Brazil, which accounts for around 40% of global production.<sup>77</sup> The coffee sector in Brazil is highly unequal – just 16% of formal workers are women.<sup>78</sup> The majority of the workforce on farms are from marginalized racial/ethnic groups.<sup>79</sup>

### Key gender risks

The challenges rural women workers working on coffee plantations face because of their status include:<sup>80</sup>

- **Discrimination:** Women are excluded from formal employment and do not enjoy access to job security or to high-paying jobs, even though in many cases women are more educated than men: only 1% are tractor drivers and 5% are farm supervisors.
- **Unpaid care responsibilities:** In Minas Gerais (Brazil's coffee-producing region), women spend 26.9 hours per week on average on unpaid care (150% more than most men).
- **Compensation:** Wage disparity is prevalent throughout the Brazilian coffee sector; female workers on average earn 16% less than their male counterparts in Minas Gerais.
- **Health and safety:** Many women coffee workers in Brazil take used sanitary napkins home because they do not have restrooms with a place where they can dispose them. Moreover, they go to the woods to relieve themselves and face the risk of violence and harassment, animal attacks or potential reactions to harmful native plants.
- **Gender-based violence and harassment:** Women suffer harassment and violence, both physical and psychological, and there are no compliant mechanisms to report such events. In many cases, women are discouraged from making complaints because they feel humiliated or unprotected from their abusers.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Gender-diverse people, according to the United Nations Office of High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR), refers to refer to people whose gender identity, including their gender expression, is at odds with what is perceived as being the gender norm in a particular context at a particular point in time, including those who do not place themselves in the male/female binary; the more specific term 'trans' is used to describe people who identify with a different sex than the one assigned to them at birth.
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