
Gender Equality in Palm Oil Production and Sourcing

Palm Oil Toolkit
Discussion Paper 01



Version 1.0



The Palm Oil Toolkit has been developed by Proforest as part of the Good Growth Partnership's Responsible Demand Project, thanks to financial support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through World Wildlife Fund (WWF). We also acknowledge co-funding from Forest Governance, Markets and Climate (FGMC) Programme.



01 Introduction

This discussion paper is part of the Palm Oil Toolkit (www.palmoiltoolkit.net) which aims to help palm oil trading companies understand gender perspectives and issues as well as to serve as a guide to apply in their supply chains when dealing with these issues. This document is split into 3 chapters, namely Introduction, Tools and Approaches, and Recommendations.

1.1 What is gender equality?

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a foundation for a sustainable future. Achieving gender equality means everyone enjoys the same rights, responsibilities, decision-making power and opportunities. Communities that practice gender equality as a norm are commonly seen as prosperous, safer and healthier. However, gender inequality in agriculture is widely recognised as an issue that must be addressed urgently.

In the palm oil industry, although women workers contribute significantly to the operations and management in the oil palm sector (office or in the field), employment has long been male dominated. This lopsided employment stems from traditional gender norms, according to a 2017 Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) study. Inequitable government and private sector policies and programmes institutionalise discriminatory norms maintaining the status quo.

Over the years, Proforest has developed several approaches to improve gender awareness and sensitivity in the palm oil sector. Key documents developed by Proforest include:

- **Gender Equality Guidance for Fieldwork¹**
- **Gender Equality Guidance Paper for Responsible Sourcing projects²**
- **Gender Equality Guidance Paper for Projects to Implement Responsible Production³**
- **Gender Discussion Paper from the Soy Toolkit⁴**

This Gender Equality Guidance paper aim to provide a rationale and recommendations for integrating women’s rights and gender equality into projects, as well as identify opportunities for gender sensitisation and/or transformation. Proforest’s ACRES approach shown in Figure 1 uses the 5-element approach for responsible sourcing of palm oil. Thus, this approach is also applied on this guidance paper to integrate and echo gender equality and women’s rights in responsible sourcing.

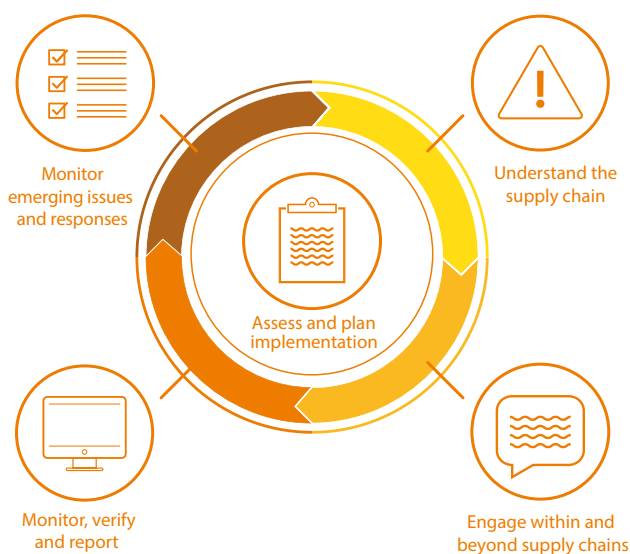


Figure 1: The 5-element approach in responsible sourcing based on Proforest’s ACRES approach

1.2 Global gender inequality perspectives

Globally, women make up around 48% of the agricultural workforce and the remaining 52% of the workforce composed of men. This difference may suggest that most women are also involved in unpaid tasks that support men's work. This wide gender gap⁵ also cautions that women are disproportionately disadvantaged in the agricultural sector, due to discriminatory attitudes, norms and roles assigned to them in society. This leads to less control of resources, fewer opportunities, and being left out of decision-making. The *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Statistics in 2021* shows that daily, woman commit 2.5 times more hours in unpaid care and domestic work than men.⁶

Employment within the oil palm industry is male dominated. This is due to several factors including the traditional patriarchal gender norms, and unconscious bias within the employment process. Moreover, women workforces are overrepresented as 'casual workers' which limits them access to workers' rights, equal opportunity, and decent working conditions. Women's ability to exercise their voice and agency in oil palm communities are restricted by communal structures and norms that route decision-making processes through male community leaders and household heads.

The systemic issues women face in oil palm are similar to other agricultural sectors, including:

- a) lower pay than men;
- b) denial of labour rights and precarious job security through treatment as casual workers;
- c) limited opportunities to take up leadership roles;
- d) gender-based violence and harassment;
- f) industry unethical practices that harm women's health, and
- g) discriminatory laws and policies

1.3 Barriers faced: perspectives on gender inequalities in Indonesia and Malaysia

Indonesia and Malaysia have similar challenges in fostering gender equality in oil palm production due to societal misogyny which includes social institutions that limit women's and girls' control over their bodies, son bias, restricted access to resources and assets, restricted civil liberties, male-biased discriminatory family codes, early marriages, polygamy, unequal parental rights and inheritance as well as divorce laws that disempower women and children. These norms create various levels of barriers for women to work outside the traditional roles, thus creating a cycle of dependence. The following issues are all key barriers faced by women in Indonesia and Malaysia in employment.

a. Women receive less pay compared to men

On average, women receive less pay than men for work of equal value.^{7,8} Studies have shown that "women are often paid less than the provincial minimum wage".⁹ Their wages only start from Rp. 20,000 to a maximum of 40,000 "per day for eight working hours or more".¹⁰

Although, the jobs and tasks at plantations are different for women and men, the oil palm production is framed by the 'masculine' lens due to the physical requirements involved, which values the male role while women's contributions are under-valued or marginalized. Instead, jobs are offered to outsiders rather than local women, to "fill labour needs and have a controllable pool of workers contributing steadily across the year."¹¹

In Indonesia, around 1.5 million women work as plantation workers or smallholder farmers. In addition to an informal job with less pay, CIFOR's study of the *Dayak Kantuk Sebaruk* in Silat Hilir, West Kalimantan, Indonesia shows women working in palm oil production are also responsible for daily family meals, as well as domestic care for children and elderly.¹²

b. Women forced into unacknowledged precarious work

The ILO defines precarious work as employment that offers “compensation, hours or security inferior to a ‘regular’ job”.¹³ Women workers in Malaysia and Indonesia are “over-represented in the category of casual workers”.¹⁰ Casual work in oil palm is a form of precarious work. Women casual workers are deprived of the following benefits:

- social security, including pensions, health insurance;
- maternity leave (workers found to be pregnant are often requested to resign by their companies and to re-apply once they have given birth);
- protection against discrimination (i.e. sudden termination¹⁴ or the request to resign when found to be pregnant)

In a CIFOR dialogue in Indonesia, it was informed that “work done every day for the same amount of hours cannot be considered as casual work”.¹⁵ In Malaysia, forced labour is a risk among migrant women due to the high dependence on migrant workers. The risks and insecurity of women migrant workers’ immigration status in Malaysia (e.g. as a temporary, irregular or undocumented migrant) have been exploited by some employers to deprive the women of wages, benefits, and to use threats of deportation or detention by immigration.¹⁶

c. Discrimination against women in workforce

In 2019, women workforce only accounted for nearly 39% of the global labour force with only 28.2% working in managerial positions. In the plantation sector in Indonesia and Malaysia, female support, like creches or elderly care facilities are not universal, leading to greater female workforce dropout. With 54% female labour participation rate, many women work in the informal sector to have adequate time and resources for domestic responsibilities. Women seeking to re-enter the workforce after a family-related hiatus face pay gap and hiring discrimination. The 2010 and 2015 OECD reports on Malaysia, recommended the government to introduce affordable childcare support for women entering the work force, provide pension fund and insurance for injuries at the workplace.

d. Unaddressed gender-based violence

The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention of 2019 (No. 190) defines harassment as “a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices” that “aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm”. This covers physical abuse, verbal abuse, bullying and mobbing, sexual harassment, threats, stalking, and others.¹⁷ The Verite Palm Oil Toolkit quoted ILO’s affirmation that the most common and pervasive form of violence and harassment is gender-based violence, especially towards women, and this is common in the palm oil industry.¹⁸

In general, women migrant workers are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence, with limited access to legal redress.¹⁹ Prevailing cultural pressure in Malaysia and Indonesia forces any form of harassment to be under-reported. An international analytics group called, YouGov Omnibus, found that 36% of Malaysian women and 17% of Malaysian men have experienced sexual harassment.²⁰ This creates further barriers that restrict women from joining the workforce as they fear for their safety on the job.

An Associated Press (AP) article in 2021²¹ showed that sexual violence against women and girls in plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia is pervasive, and “of the nearly 100 grievances lodged [with the RSPO] in Indonesia and Malaysia in the last decade, ... abuses of women are almost never mentioned.” These “labour abuses regularly occur industrywide”, they write, including on RSPO certified plantations. The Indonesian National Commission on Violence against Women indicated the problem is widespread, with female migrant workers being especially vulnerable.¹⁴

Sexual violence often correlates with other violations of women's rights. Workplace abuse of power in sexual exploitation could fall within the definition of modern slavery. Sexual exploitation in the workplace is also linked with human trafficking. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, during her visit to Malaysia in 2015 stated that "it is prevalent in the country that young foreign women and children are trafficked, brokered into marriages with older men or recruited into supposedly legal work, but later on forced into commercial sex trade."²²

e. Women disenfranchised from traditional land and community decision-making positions

The United Nations SDG 2021 report⁶ highlighted that there are significant gaps in addressing inequalities for women's equal access to land. In most countries, less than 50% of women and men engaged in agriculture have ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land.⁶

In West Kalimantan, Indonesia, women and men participate in all aspects of the oil palm smallholder economy. Unfortunately, smallholder land plots were registered only in the name of the male head of household. Women were excluded from the process, thus leading to disenfranchisement with the following consequences:

- a. Denied their rights to shared ownership and control of land;
- b. Not represented in the smallholder cooperative;
- c. Denied monthly income from the FFB sale; and,
- d. Denied independent access to agricultural inputs, training and credit.⁵

The nebulous arrangements surrounding the Indonesian Government's plasma-schemes' land allocation and agreements with companies have led to the commodification of land, exacerbating the exclusion of women. Some studies have linked these developments with the acceleration of the erosion of women's rights and position in rural or indigenous communities.^{23,24}

f. Women's health at risk from lack of healthcare services and support

Women workers in palm oil plantations are largely employed for fertilizer and pesticide application. This exposes these women workers to harmful agrochemicals, including highly hazardous ones. It has been documented that Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and safety standards are sub-par or absent – exposing these workers to health risks.⁹ It gets passed on in turn to their children "due to the use of agrochemicals in the plantations and lack of compliance with health and safety standards."^{25,26} Women workers exposed to or handling agrochemicals show greater tendencies to experience reproductive problems, such as birth defects, infertility, delayed pregnancy, spontaneous abortion, still births, pre-term birth, intra-uterine growth retardation, perinatal mortality, [and] endometriosis.^{27,28}

Pregnant or breastfeeding women receive no maternal support further eroding women's rights to substantive equality in employment.²⁹ Additionally, "women workers do not have access to information on occupational safety and health (OSH). They need labour protection due to a limited number of inspections."³⁰ The conditions surrounding pesticide work is precarious work, as defined by the ILO.³¹ This also occurs despite having documentation to show that their occupation is dangerous and unsafe with reports of numerous injuries, some leading to disabilities.³² The situation is more fraught for migrant workers in Malaysia who "are denied their fundamental right to equality of treatment with nationals and thus deprived of, *inter alia*, lifelong pensions in case of permanent disability."³³ Pesticides Action Network Asia Pacific's (PANAP) 2019 submission to the UN's Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls, suggest a dearth of accessible or affordable/supported basic health services.³⁴ Furthermore, the lack of health insurance for women, including casual workers, compounds the problem.

g. Discriminatory laws and legal gaps

Globally laws and enforcement have gaps that continue to discriminate and disempower women through prejudicial and misogynistic laws. This has led to low participation of women in public life, who experience disproportionately greater violence, barriers to determine their reproductive rights, family affairs, property, etc.

While Malaysian civil law provides equality of inheritance, the parallel Islamic law subverts women in particular. A Sexual Harassment Bill is still unrealized after 30 years of lobbying by women's groups.³⁵ Whilst the international women's human rights framework, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is embedded in the Malaysian Constitution and Article 8(2) in the Constitution prohibits gender discrimination, however enforcement on gender equality is not carried out nor respected. Malaysian regulations prejudice against women in general, with very specific implications for migrant women. Malaysian immigration law is skewed to recognize male rights and status, while non-Malaysian women are deprived of their rights, whether expressed or not under national laws.³⁶

According to the Women Count Data Hub's SDG Dashboard, 75% of legal frameworks in Malaysia promote, enforce and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator, with a focus on violence against women. As of February 2021, only 14.9% of seats in parliament were held by women. Also, women and girls aged 15+ spend 19.1% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 6% spent by men. As of December 2020, only 45.1% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas, in particular: violence against women and women in local governments. In addition, many areas such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment, there is lack of comparable methodologies for regular monitoring. Closing these gender data gaps is essential for achieving gender-related SDG commitments in Malaysia.

Indonesia's Presidential Instruction No. 9/2000 on Gender Mainstreaming in National Development is based on CEDAW. Under Art.108 of the Indonesian Civil Code, barriers are placed against women in public life through impediments in wealth acquisition or receipt of payments. Based on the Gender Inequality Index, Indonesia ranked 105 out of 162 countries globally. The Gender Inequality Index measured gender inequalities in reproductive health (measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates), empowerment (measured by proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females and males aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education); and economic status expressed as labour market participation (measured by labour force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years and older).

Indonesia's Ministry of Law and Human Rights reviewed 20 laws and regulations that were discriminatory against women.³⁷ 154 discriminatory regulations were uncovered by Komnas Perempuan at provincial, municipal, and village levels. Efforts like the Gender Equality Law are juxtaposed by anti-pluralism, intolerance and societal misogyny that marginalizes minorities at sub-national law-level.³⁷ Article 108 of the Civil Code set barriers for women to acquire assets, as it prevents married women from entering into contracts or receiving payment from individual business activities. Despite some reforms, the law lacks adequate enforcement. Married women are challenged in accessing business services or credit leading to special credits for women, like 'perkassa' (credit schemes specifically for women in micro and small enterprises), launched in 2006-2007 with funds from the Ministry of Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprise.³⁷

02 Tools & approaches

2.1 Tools

Tools for corporate application are readily available, while direct support in the form of specialist organizations with expertise in gender equality issues are emerging in the “ecosystem” of the oil palm sector. As the issues, challenges and tools for gender transformative actions become more concrete, the science and data surrounding implementation of reform in relation to women’s rights and gender equality at corporate level will improve. The following are off-the-shelf tools available to any oil palm sector stakeholder along the supply-chain for implementation.

2.1.1 Women’s Economic Empowerment Principles (WEP)

Established by UN Global Compact and UN Women, the Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) are a set of Principles offering guidance to businesses on how to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the workplace, marketplace and community. The WEPs are informed by international labour and human rights standards and grounded in the recognition that businesses have a stake in, and a responsibility for, gender equality and women’s empowerment.³⁸

The WEPs are defined by seven high-level Principles:

- 1: Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
- 2: Treat all women and men fairly at work - respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
- 3: Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
- 4: Promote education, training and professional development for women.
- 5: Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
- 6: Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
- 7: Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

The WEP provides a range of tool, examples, thematic guides, templates, FAQs, and insights that are revealing and thoughtful. Resources³⁹ provided include corporate actions as well as topical guides for specific gender-based challenges that are well suited for direct adaptation and implementation along the oil palm supply chain.

2.1.2 RSPO Practical Guidance on Gender Inclusion and Compliance to P&C 2018 and ISH 2019

The RSPO Practical Guidance on Gender Inclusion and Compliance to P&C 2018 and ISH 2019 was created to support the operationalization of gender-based criteria and requirements. This guidance serves as a manual for a gender-inclusive palm oil business that integrates the United Nations’ Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEP) principles. For the oil palm sector, this guide “describes the gender-based constraints to be addressed followed by guidelines for the actions to take.”⁴⁰ Importantly, the guidance is correlated to relevant parts of the RSPO P&C that would be essential to meeting certification requirements.

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The guide is organized into five major sections, with clear emphasis on the corporate responsibilities:

1. What is Women's Economic Empowerment and why is it important for RSPO?
2. The company as an employer. Strategies to address gender-based constraints of female (and male) employees. Practical strategies with examples for working with employees, plantations, mills, schemes, labour providers, and larger smallholders.
3. Working with independent smallholders: strategies to address gender-based constraints of female smallholders. Practical strategies with examples for working with independent smallholders, and smallholder groups/organisations.
4. The company and the surrounding community. Establishing good relationships with the communities surrounding their plantation.
5. Internal processes and capacities. Two tools involved: a quick gender equality scan, and a risk assessment tool.

2.1.3 Sustainable Development Goals Compass

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Compass provides a set of tools and guidance to realize the United Nations SDGs.⁴¹ The SDG Compass “provides guidance for companies on how they can align their strategies as well as measure and manage their contribution to the realization of the SDGs.”⁴¹ Specifically, SDG5: ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’, contains clear guidance that can form the basis of a holistic revision of corporate operations and culture to be gender transformative.

The SDG Compass provides a set of clear examples and direction for such an endeavour.⁴² The SDG Compass lists and links tools developed by various organizations for corporate uptake. Currently for SDG5, the SDG Compass provides links to six generic tools with gender equality components.⁴³ The tools and approach provided through the SDG Compass can form the foundation for actions that can be activated at macro or corporate level through to specific ideas that are adaptable to the oil palm sector.



2.1.4 Agricultural Commodity Responsible Sourcing (ACRES)

ACRES is an approach developed by Proforest to establish an effective implementation of responsible sourcing and production of agricultural commodities. ACRES functions as a guide to help palm oil producers and suppliers understand and address issues within the supply chain relating to the volumes purchased and the performance of suppliers, as well as beyond the supply chain relating to the places palm oil is produced and the systemic issues within the sector.⁴⁴ The steps of the ACRES approach aim to build a coherent and continuous program or process for identifying, strategizing, acting and monitoring. The supply-chain focus provides a strategic approach to establishing good practices, radiating it out along the supply-chain and mainstreaming good practices. This is shown in Figure 2 below.

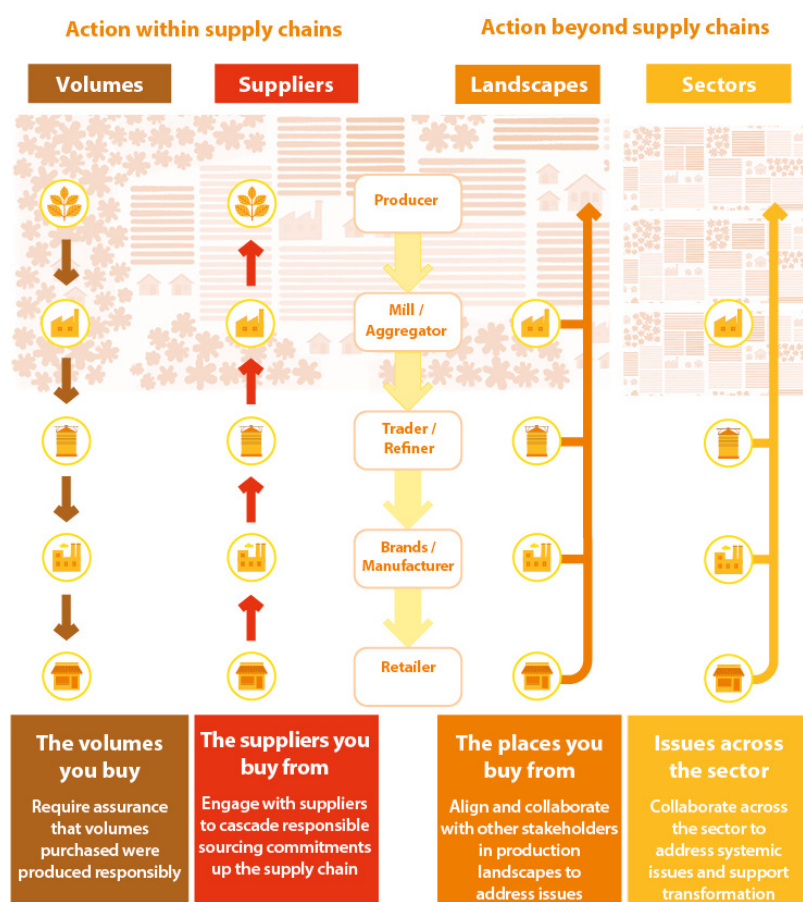


Figure 2:

Actions are needed both within and beyond the supply chain to effectively implement responsible sourcing commitments and maximise positive impact. (Image source: Proforest)⁴⁴

Why the ACRES approach to working both within and beyond supply chains is necessary in the context of gender equality:

a. Scale and efficiency in delivering commitments:

Supply chain companies have a responsibility for their own supply base but implementing commitments in every single supply chain can be slow and expensive, especially where there is complex supply. Therefore, combining individual activities with collaboration within and beyond supply chains can help to deliver results at scale and more cost-effectively.

b. A practical way to maximise leverage:

Combining these four processes to deliver commitments and enables buyer(s) at different points in the supply chain to focus greater efforts where they have most leverage.

c. Effectiveness in addressing issues:

The underlying causes of many issues (i.e. gender inequality, child labour, forced labour) are complex and addressing them effectively requires collaboration between many different actors, so solutions need to go beyond individual supply chains and involve other stakeholders.

d. Achieving positive impacts:

Working beyond supply chains provides opportunities to collaborate with other actors, particularly local stakeholders, in production landscapes and across sectors. This helps build local engagement and ownership which increases the likelihood of local positive impact and contributes to long term sustainable development including gender mainstreaming among others.

2.2 Approaches

As an approach to achieve gender equality in the palm oil industry, the Five Elements from Proforest's Palm Oil Toolkit is the primary reference (Graphic 2). The ACRES approach is also incorporated into the 5-Elements to create a clear step-by-step guideline in implementation. The RSPO guidance on gender inclusion provides other ideas and approaches also.

Each of the five elements below are explored in detail in relation to gender equality:

2.2.1 Element 1: Assess and plan implementation

Most companies involved in sustainable palm oil supply chains have introduced or developed policy and practices setting out pertinent environmental and social issues to be addressed, with targets for these issues. The Proforest Palm Oil Toolkit Element 1 aims to give companies clear approaches with tools and guidance to crystalize aspirational goals into concrete plans based on science and research into specifics on the environmental and social issues.

Element 1 is key, as it puts in key foundations for the comprehensive implementation of a gender equality plan at all levels, inside and outside the organization. Element 1 specifically aims to do the following, which incorporate gender equality:

- Outline the importance for the companies to **develop responsible sourcing commitments and an implementation strategy** considering the key challenges of deforestation, peat conversion and exploitation of the rights of workers, local communities and indigenous people at different stages of the supply chain.
- **Consolidate best practices in the palm oil sector** for certifications, sector initiatives and collaboration in landscape level through some practical examples of different companies.
- **Outline a process on implementation plan development** based on the strategy in place and SMART approach with clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to allow reporting and monitoring.

Companies can conduct internal baseline gender assessments by using the tools available through the **RSPO Practical Guidance on Gender Inclusion and Compliance to the 2018 P&C and 2019 ISH Standard**, Part V Internal Processes and Capacities, which includes a Gender Quick Scan and Gender Risk Assessment.

a. Gender Quick Scan

This gender scan can be a self-assessment tool. In essence it contains four steps that aim to understand the capacity of companies to meet the needs of its workforce, smallholders and communities. Existing policies and practices would be evaluated too, assessing how robust and relevant it is to tackling the gender equality issues prevalent in that organization's context.

- Step 1 - Complete the gender scan individually, preferably followed by a focus group discussion
- Step 2 - Joint scores are given to the five domains and the spider graph is made
- Step 3 - Areas of improvement are discussed and agreed upon
- Step 4 - Strategic planning and corrective action.

A *gender analysis* can be carried out through a process of systematically asking questions that highlight the differences between men and women within the oil palm community, including for example, the different expectations placed on them and their subsequent roles and responsibilities; access to and control of resources; decision-making power; risk of gender-based violence. Gender analysis is an important step because it will enable policies to push for equal access, participation, control and benefits, for all relevant stakeholders along the palm oil supply chain, including through affirmative action.⁴⁶

Examples of questions to be asked in a gender analysis are:

- Roles and activities: who does what? when? and how?
- Resources and constraints: who owns/controls the resources, who makes decisions?
- Benefits and incentives: who controls the activities, who benefits, who receives income?/ non income incentives?

This includes reviewing pre-existing commitments or policies, identifying gaps, and benchmarking against peers and the level of internal engagement on responsible sourcing.

Utilizing other tools designed to support social issues, communities, human rights, planning and capacity building may be beneficial where gender-linked criteria for assessment can be integrated into the actions. It can also contribute towards a holistic perspective on gender equality issues faced by the operation through extrapolating relevant data, i.e. the data sets that can have gender-linked implications, or data that can be analysed through a gender sensitive perspective. Examples of potential application include applied use of spatial data to identify strategic priorities, or in assisting with future planning of infrastructure to support women's access to facilities like healthcare and childcare.

b. Gender Risk Assessment

The second tool in the RSPO Practical Guidance⁴⁷ is a Gender Risk Assessment. As a follow-up to the Gender Scan, this risk assessment step “will provide some suggestions on how to ensure that the internal organisation of the company is capable of putting in place the contents of this gender guidance”.⁴⁰ Table 1 below is taken from the RSPO Practical Guidance document. It provides a series of questions that will show where the gaps occur and the suggested actions in terms of policy and/or implementable actions.

Table 1: RSPO Practical Guidance on Gender Inclusion and Compliance to the 2018 P&C and 2019 ISH Standard

Potential Risks	Suggested Actions
Is there a gender equality policy in place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a gender equality policy. • Communicate the policy with company staff and public. • Make a public policy statement on gender equality and women's economic empowerment
Are gender equality strategies and action plans in place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop strategies to address gender-based constraints of female employees, women smallholders, and women in communities. Consider also which women are particularly discriminated against on the basis of, for example, marital status, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, faith, language, ethnicity, location and income levels.

Potential Risks	Suggested Actions
Are gender equality strategies and action plans in place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define how the company will reach, benefit, and empower women at all these levels.
Is there an equal representation of women at HQ and at senior management level?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure diversity and representation in the workforce. Consider affirmative actions to facilitate the recruitment and retention of female staff. This may be particularly important for mothers returning to the workplace (where there is a tendency for them to take up part-time and less senior roles to allow them to balance work and childcare demands).
Is there a budget available for gender activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate sufficient funding and resources in annual budget planning for gender-related activities.
Is gender expertise available in the companies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit or retain gender expertise amongst staff members. These should be dedicated roles which are adequately resourced and not added to people's existing job descriptions. Engage external expertise or NGO partnership. Participate in gender networks to build internal learning and relationships with other actors working on women's rights and gender equality issues. Exchange experiences with other palm oil companies and build organisational learning on gender equality issues. Assign gender focal points for specific strategies, e.g. the development of gender committees. They can work closely with gender advisors who can mentor them, enabling them to work in their teams to build awareness and capacity of staff on gender equality issues.
Are gender results measured?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mainstream sex-disaggregation in operational data. Collect and analyse efficacy of gender empowerment activities.
Are gender results communicated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share experiences on good practices and stories of changes in the lives of women staff and female farmers or stakeholders. Publish on company website or other media outlets.

c. Developing an Implementation Plan

After analysing the results of the assessments, a clear plan that addresses the issues identified is the next step. Firstly, the development and adoption of a **corporate gender policy and vision** that embeds guiding principles for remedial actions to reverse existing gender inequalities is necessary. This would also be the main reference for organizational values on gender equality and women's rights. This core document would inform a **gender equality implementation plan's** directions and priorities. This action plan should consider both internal actions (for example ensuring more women are in senior management roles) as well external actions, for example, supply chain transformation and anchor monitoring by providing the template for benchmarking and articulating performance indicators as well as targets. However, it may be more practical to have brief gender equality plans for each project or initiative that is nested within the corporate plan to ensure this is considered in *all* initiatives.

The existing number of organizational and project planning instruments as well as guides can be applied in developing an implementation plan for the organization. To develop gender sensitive plans, it is necessary to involve or integrate women's perspectives, and guidance on how to do this can be found in Proforests' Gender Equality Guidance Paper for Projects to Implement Responsible Production.³ This plan will invariably include actions outside the immediate circle

of the company, including *inter alia* supply chain issues, jurisdictional challenges, and socio-cultural-political challenges.

It may be more straightforward in establishing implementation processes for internally influenced or controlled activities, as it can be acted upon independent of other factors. Supply chain actors require further assessment, as identified under Element 2 below. Goals established under the implementation plan need to be measured against supply chain conditions. The goal is preventing asymmetrical processes or boutique / bespoke arrangements to accommodate gender requirements.

The goals, key performance indicators, milestones and timelines for internal and external actors need to be developed along a single plan that is set at the start of the process. While supplier engagement will result in practical requirements to modify elements of the plan, the overarching targets, approaches and strategy must remain consistent to the original goals.

2.2.2 Element 2: Understand the supply chain

Suppliers' commitments towards women's rights and gender equality may be evaluated on their ability to address gender discrimination and protection. Identifying and short-listing progressive companies in the supply chain to collaborate on gender equality issues are the goals of Element 2. Systemic issues, either caused by legislative conflict or existing normative approaches, need to be identified to differentiate pragmatic, company-level activities against issues requiring broader, consensus-based or jurisdictional resolution.

Reapply approaches from Element 1 to assess and understand the status of supply chain actors would provide a consistent and familiar approach and tool. For the conduct of a gender risk assessment, the application of performance standards like RSPO Standards can offer ready-made benchmarks and baseline requirements. Similarly, a quick gender equality scan can be modified along the same parameters to produce an assessment checklist that reflects benchmarks that are easy to understand, familiar and measurable.

a. Certification

Supply chain actors that are awarded and maintain certifications, like RSPO certification, ISO, ESG, etc. can use specific criteria of these standards to demonstrate their gender-related action. Putting aside issues and questions over the reliability of 3rd-party certification⁴⁸, companies entering into a certification process, especially sustainability certification assessments, must demonstrate or evidence some level of gender-positive action.

In terms of certification assessment, Proforest's Gender Equality Guidance Paper for Fieldwork provides some ideas for selecting partners or assessors that are gender sensitive.¹ For instance, where databases of consultants/assessors are held, it is recommended to add information about the degree of experience or confidence in bringing a gender-equality perspective to the field work. Likewise, for new partner or assessor selection. Some ideas for partnership criteria are, the policy on gender equality and internal training on gender for team.

Companies may have stronger confidence and shortlist key actors in the supply chain with a track-record of continuous certification to partner on building gender-sensitive supply chains and business relationships. There is greater probability that working towards or maintaining sustainability certificates (like RSPOs) will create deeper appreciation, stronger foundations, adequate resources, experience and corporate support to establish activities or programs to empower women. This is based on the broad appreciation of how establishing the constructs, policies and practices for certification exposes the corporation to sustainability and social justice approaches, while simultaneously generating organization-wide "desire" to improve sustainability performance across the board.

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While identifying and focusing on supply chain actors with certification tends to have greater potentiality for partnerships, the presence of certification *per se* does not provide full assurance that the company has its affairs in order. A gender risk assessment and quick scan for suppliers are still critical in identifying the specifics of the operations to map and understand gender-based challenges.

2.2.3 Element 3: Engage within and beyond supply chains

Engagement with the supply base can give insights into socio-political, physical or cultural challenges to adopting gender-positive policies, whether it comes from systemic hindrances, legal challenges or breaking taboos and ingrained societal prejudices.

Gender equality considerations must be included when engaging suppliers (internal and external, current and new) on performance and standards. Framing gender equality issues within a holistic programme of supplier engagement, performance assessments and action planning would inculcate gender-sensitized approaches at basic discussions within or beyond the supplier base. Employing a gender sensitive process can be instituted and established as the norm in supplier engagement to raise the profile and urgency of gender equality.

a. Supplier engagement and activity within the supply chain

Other approaches and tools under Element 2 cannot be substituted by supplier engagement. The approaches work concurrently to generate a composite picture. The significance of engagement is the direct dialogue with the supply chain. It is empathetic and symbolic of serious commitment that sends a clear message about the priority of gender equality to other companies. Therefore, establishing a broad platform of engagement for discussion of gender equality issues with the supply chain provide opportunities for informal observation of attitudes towards gender sensitivity or the treatment of women.

Additionally, relevant documentation on gender equality and related issues from suppliers can be augmented by indirect or direct research of practices by specific suppliers. Observation of practices and attitudes towards women or empowering tools can provide indicators to probe further. Targeted dialogues and discussions in direct communications would provide a clearer, nuanced, specific and actionable assessment of the suppliers.

Dialogue on gender equality issues as part of supplier relationships can uncover issues that may be obfuscated in formal assessments like certification or a quick scan. It also provides a window into observing how embedded gender equality policies are in an organization. For example, visiting corporate offices that are homogenous in composition can be a good sign of gender-positive recruitment and retainment policies.

Real progress is seen through verified policy implementation. Through a shortlisting process (as described under Element 2), specific suppliers can be targeted for concrete programs to support them to achieve gender equality objectives; a coherent approach expedites progress and establishes a strong base for verification and future-planning. This work consists of multiple steps:

- Supporting suppliers to develop their own policies and commitments;
- Carrying out field or desk-based verifications of supplier performance;
- Providing training on the content of the policies, developing toolkits or guidance material, supporting suppliers to develop implementation plans;
- Supporting clients to develop grievance mechanisms;
- Support and/ or monitor suppliers' steps to address grievances in the supply base;
- Request suppliers to report on traceability.

The Proforest's Palm Oil Toolkit **Briefing Note 03**⁴⁹ section provides practical and adaptable tools, activities, approaches and tips that are generic for supplier engagement. It should inform the companies on the technical support needed for the effective implementation of gender equality objectives as part of the overall strategy deployment. The Element 1 of responsible sourcing⁴⁵ recommends collaborative and inclusive strategies, including development of Supplier Action Plans that are designed to target gaps and issues with concrete actions, goals, milestones and implementation steps. Incentivising adoption of tools, activities, approaches and other best practices can be a proactive pursuit in engagement through framing their implementation as part of ESG or sustainability certification requirements.

b. Supplier engagement and activity beyond the supply chain

In instances where gender equality cannot be realised at company level, as it requires a change to jurisdictional laws, border influencers may unite to tackle the issue. Therefore, where broader issues are encountered, this would provide opportunities for wider activity, either through collaborating with peers, stakeholders or supply chain actors. This is particularly useful where the issues to be addressed are jurisdictional or beyond the scope of the individual corporation to resolve.

c. Landscape or jurisdictional approach on gender equality

Landscape or jurisdictional initiatives are also currently emerging as ways of achieving responsible production of palm oil at a larger scale. Different landscape or jurisdictional initiatives will involve various stakeholders, objectives and activities, and therefore may achieve different outcomes for gender equality. In order to get a clear picture of the role of women in palm oil sector, it is important to know what are the specific groups of women that are within the plantation and processing. It is possible to analyse the gender-based constraints they face and look for solutions at different level. This will allow in addressing the gender-based constraints of women in the whole palm oil sector and contributing to greater gender equality in general.

The box below describes a case study regarding women worker participation in social dialogues within the landscape programme of Siak Pelalawan Landscape Program.⁵⁰

Case study in Indonesia: Social dialogues in the palm oil sector in Siak and Pelalawan

CORE (Consortium Resource Expert – CORE) consists of Proforest and Daemeter together with CNV-Internationaal under Siak Pelalawan Landscape Program and Production Landscape Program conducted a research mapping on social dialogue in Siak and Pelalawan district of Riau Province in Indonesia. The findings indicated that most social dialogues through Bipartite* and Tripartite** avenues are **not represented by women workers in the palm oil sector**. Nevertheless, RSPO certified mills and plantations in Siak and Pelalawan have gender committees as avenues to ensure women workers are represented and heard. In general, the low participation of women in these avenues is due to the lack of understanding for the need for gender participation and inconvenient time of the scheduled meetings. This resulted in weak gender perspective nor women's empowerment to issues related to women's rights and gender equality such as reproductive rights (i.e., pregnancy, lactation facilities, menstrual leave, etc.), wage discrimination and harassment. Thus, the landscape program of Siak Pelalawan Landscape Program aims to strengthen social dialogues in Siak and Pelalawan district among key stakeholders including embedding gender perspectives across the board in the dialogue processes.

* Bipartite Institution – a forum where workers and management communicate and consult with each other regarding issues relating to industrial relations, enterprise sustainability and workers' welfare.

** Tripartite Institution – a forum or institution that focuses on the relationship between three key role players or actors: employer, employee, and state.

2.2.4 Element 4: Monitor, verify and report

To build successful programs that are transformational, the need to monitor, verify, report and learn are essential. Ingraining gender-sensitivity across the supply chain would affect virtually all aspects of an organization in a profound, visible and permanent way. In the palm oil sector, much of the supply chain operates in restrictive, regressive and oppressive contexts. Therefore, pressure to dampen, dial-down or remove gender-positive action needs special attention. Monitoring and verification must be cognizant of existing stakeholders who are actively, directly, indirectly or covertly attempting to subvert women's rights. Such actors may be present within implementors (e.g. operations managers) and impact KPI achievement.

Key metrics for charting progress must be developed inclusively, particularly with input from women workers, as well as internal or external expertise. Metrics and KPIs for supply chain actors may need modification to adapt to the specific circumstances of shortlisted suppliers (e.g. capacity limitations).

Analysis of implementation progress, impact and key lessons that are conducted consistently through a thoughtful process (e.g. with a third party assessor), will support reporting and analysis for future planning. Building on the approach of Element 1, best practices that can support a sophisticated and differentiated appreciation of the specific realities for women in different circumstances can be achieved through data disaggregation and in-depth study amongst sub-groups of women who may be disproportionately affected.

Publicly disclosed reporting from the supply chain through sustainability certification assessments, ESG or shareholder reporting or other audit-based, structured, quantifiable instruments can be integrated into performance assessments.

2.2.5 Element 5: Monitor emerging issues and responses

Having a functional monitoring and reporting mechanism in the implementation of a gender equality plan will provide information and data to assist future planning or course correction. Persistent poor performance, failing or missing KPIs can indicate broader issues or factors hindering implementation. Investing adequate resources and expertise to analyse performance and impact reporting from internal and supply chain activities would give greater chances and assurance that the entire program is robust and conducted in the best possible way.

Referring and assessing whether activities align with the corporate gender equality policy and vision as well as the gender equality implementation plan that were developed at the outset under Element 1 helps to ensure that activities are in line with the core values and minimizes mission drift, which can become a significant issue in activities relating to systemic challenges like government policies and law reforms.

Cultivating linkages with local networks of civil society groups, community councils, women's co-operatives, local feminist academics, activists or women's movement actors, workers' unions/representatives and other activities not directly linked to the supply chain provides an organic, informal and low-level feedback mechanism that can percolate and flag issues to plantation or operational management. Facilitating feedback and dialogue provides a strong platform for forecasting future issues and formulating responses. This can include the following structures:

- Formal partnerships with local Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) on supporting implementation of gender sensitive or transformative projects (inter alia various sustainability projects);
- Organization of events, meetings, sessions and other interactive engagements at local level to directly invite feedback and interaction with relevant stakeholders to filter through emerging issues;

- Development of relationships and meaningful relationships with individuals, leaders, women leaders and local stakeholders to build dialogue and communications channels to catch issues at the lowest level to achieve resolution with minimum disruption.

From experience, Proforest expects that Element 5 would be phased-in after initial implementation, both for in-house targets and shortlisted supply chain partners. The analysis of results must be treated according to three imperatives: course correction for failing activities; stepwise actions and/or recommendations; and forecasting future issues to plan.



03 Recommendations

3.1 Overall recommendations

According to the United Nations, a gendered approach to commodity supply chains directly contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 5 to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. Moreover, Goal 5 has the potential to contribute to eight other SDGs⁵¹ around betterment of life.

Some corporations have embarked in mainstreaming gender equality in their day-to-day operations. Mainstreaming gender equality is not simply men and women being treated in the same way but recognising that women and men have different work circumstances. These need to be recognised and addressed to enable them to fully benefit and participate equally in work. Thus, a gender-sensitive approach across operations and supply chains is vital.

The following are recommendations to enable companies to take a holistic approach in making their operations gender-sensitive.

3.2 Element 1: Assess and plan implementation

a. Gender policy

A policy document is the ultimate articulation and reference for corporate values and their manifestation in practice. Verification assessments will provide sufficient information to support the development of a robust policy that informs the detailed implementation plan for gender positive actions.

b. Gender-sensitive visualisation of the palm oil sector

For a start, develop gender-sensitive visuals for the palm oil sector to illustrate and visually guide the male-dominated industry to recognize the importance of gender equality, as shown in Figure 3 below.

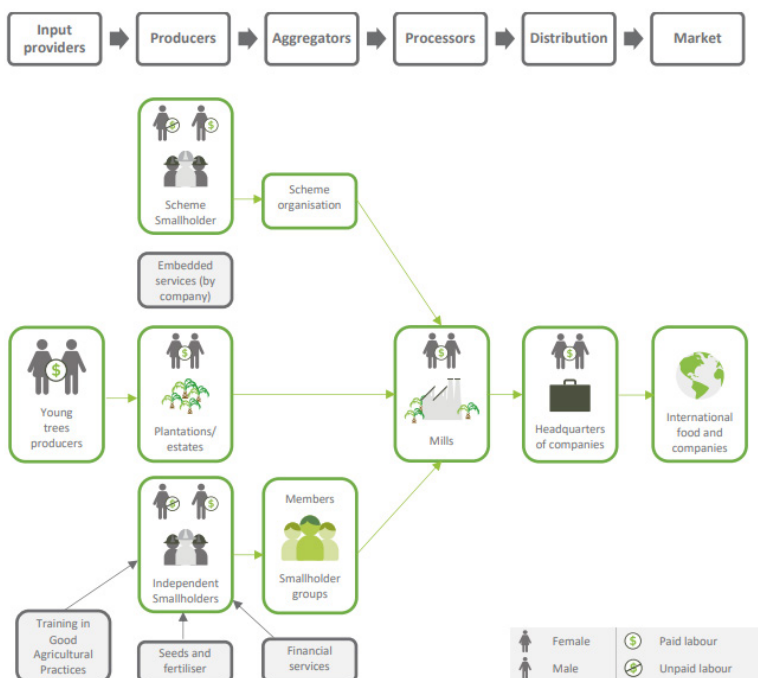


Figure 3: Example of a gender-sensitive palm oil sector map. (Image source: RSPO)⁴⁰

c. Gender risk assessment and audit

Guided by the feedback gathered from consultations from various actors along the supply chain, companies are encouraged to conduct a gender audit on their operations to understand the challenges and barriers in their operations. The assessments should (i) reflect the commitments from the company on gender equality, respect to labour rights and inclusion of women in supply chains as stipulated in their policy; (ii) capture the gaps and risk of the company and their suppliers.⁵² The RSPO Quick Gender Scan and Gender Risk Assessment tools (see Chapter 2) can be used by companies to gather the needed information accurately.

3.3 Element 2: Understand the supply chain

a. Conducting consultations with supply chain actors

Industry-wide learning through information exchange between companies and experts can support greater alignment on solutions. One method is by initiating an industry-wide questionnaire that is aligned with the industry best practices, for the use of the various stages in the supply chain. Alternatively, a company could develop its own supply-base wide questionnaire and the results should inform their strategy on gender equality in their operations as well as for its third-party suppliers. For example, Proforest conducted a Gender Equality in Palm Oil Production and Sourcing Baseline Questionnaire in 2022 of on-ground practices regarding gender equality with the palm oil supply chain actors as part of this paper development. An in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the supply chain can be built through links with organisations involved in gender equality work. This includes Women's Rights Organizations, who can provide a fuller understanding of the cultural context companies are operate in. Companies can identify opportunities to participate in existing activities e.g. Oxfam's gender mapping.⁵³

b. Ensuring women's equal participation in consultations

The Proforest questionnaire exposed an almost universal lack of inclusivity and holistic thinking on integrating gender sensitivity into consultation processes. As opposed to organizing processes and consultations in a silo based on issues, gender sensitivity and equality must be cross-cutting in all processes and consultations to build a robust response to gender discrimination that is institutionalized or ingrained culturally in the oil palm sector and its operating context. The lack of gender sensitivity amongst supply chain actors or partners should not discourage the imposition of gender-based processes and requirements for planning and other processes to ensure gender sensitive operating environments along the supply chain.

c. Focus on sustainability certified supply chain actors

Companies from the supply base that are pursuing or are already certified under a credible sustainability standard like RSPO hold greater probability of interest, or have similar targets on multiple sustainability issues or projects. Such instances provide opportunities to co-operate on gender related projects or actions of mutual benefit. It will likely increase accountability, reliability and positive results.

3.4 Element 3: Engage within and beyond supply chains

a. Incentives to promote gender equality as part of good practices in supply chains

Gender equality can contribute to increasing production yields and improving overall rural livelihoods and communities. Data suggests giving women the same access as men to agricultural resources could increase production on women's farms in low-income countries by 20 to 30%.⁵⁴

b. Ensuring adequate and transparent information dissemination for informed choices by women

Information that is transparent, unbiased and timely that is provided to women in communities through mechanisms that support their uptake of information ensures women can make informed choices with regards to the companies operating in their environment, its impacts, opportunities and costs. The use of communications methods like audio-visual briefings or other tools attuned to women's lived-realities is extremely important and empowering.

c. Corporate advocacy in support of laws that raise women's rights, equality and fight for women's oppression

Companies adopting gender sensitive policies act upon internalizing and articulating CEDAW and ILO 190 standards into practices. In addition to that, companies can demonstrate efficacy and positive impacts of gender equality by engaging local governments in ways to expand such good practices into legislative requirements or laws. The box below gives examples of corporate advocacy to promote gender sensitive policies in Malaysia and Indonesia.⁵⁵

Corporate advocacy to promote gender sensitive policies in Malaysia and Indonesia

In Malaysia for example, corporations could become powerful lobbyists of a Gender Equality Bill and the ratification of ILO 190, matching the practices of the company that is pioneering these approaches.

In Indonesia, urgency is needed supporting rights of indigenous women's land ownership – based on the CEDAW Committee Concluding Recommendation. It is of urgent importance that corporations support the advocacy and legislative process of laws to ease indigenous and native women's oppression.

3.5 Element 4: Monitor, verify and report

a. Setting monitoring, review and improvement structures

Monitoring protocols must be established to ensure scheduled and ad hoc monitoring activities are carried out throughout implementation, ideally using neutral, external or third-party assessors. Existing review and project management structures in-company can provide the service and support for any course correction.

b. Collating external certification or audit information from supply chain

Certification assessment reports and other audit-based reporting can be accessed and used as a proxy to monitor supply chain actors' performance. Other publicly available information including shareholder reporting or ESG disclosures provide information to measure achievements.

3.6 Element 5: Monitor emerging issues and responses

a. Broad-based information collection relating to gender issues, gender politics, best practices and policies

Maintaining a proactive approach to collate and review the latest information and thought leadership or trends from various sources, including certification standards, NGOs, WROs and international bodies, allows a company to stay up-to-date and responsive to issues, which is a necessary investment in time.

b. Building partnerships for implementation, dialogue and feedback

Constant inputs and challenges to the implementation plan from relevant stakeholders, especially those with vested interest in gender equality or direct impact, will drive a robust and relevant activity. Criticism from these stakeholders often cut to the core of issues. These groups will focus on efficacy, effect, consequences and results, since it directly affects their “bottom line”. Holding these discussions within the ambit of corporate implementation allows the company to mitigate risk of negative publicity, engages potential adversaries in constructive dialogue and provides best insights into the effectiveness of the activities.

c. Champion a gender-sensitive culture, safe environment and operating procedures

Inculcating gender-sensitive norms, practices and culture at the workplace requires leadership, perseverance and imagination. Gender sensitivity can be established and grown through consistent and serious leadership. Holding individuals accountable to positive behaviour and setting the right examples are just as important as setting quotas for women in management where the setting is one dominated by male-centric culture. Ensuring that proper safeguarding policies and processes are in place as well as a culture where women feel confident to anonymously report safeguarding incidents is another important step.

Integrating, operationalising and institutionalizing good practices and policies that stem from a gender positive and sensitive approach helps to ensure gender issues are not overlooked, under-represented or wrongly addressed going forward for any actor in the oil palm supply chain. Raising the profile of gender equality and establishing a safe working environment through internal campaigns must be spearheaded by top management and ownership to have any gravitas, especially in a culture that mainstreams misogyny.

This paper concludes by providing the rationale behind each recommendation for ensuring gender equality conversations and actions for improvements progresses within the supply chain.

Learn more and help us improve

More information is provided in the references below and at www.palmoiltoolkit.net

Please also share with us information that will improve this Discussion Paper (via palmoiltoolkit@proforest.net).

Acknowledgements

Proforest would like to thank the following people and organisations for their input and comments on earlier drafts of this document:

Kanwal Ahluwalia

Andrew Ng (**Grassroots**)

Melissa Akhir , Nur Adila Md Ali and Jaskirath Sohanpal Kaur (**Kemban Kolektif PLT**)

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