Pre-Investment Power Moves: Assessing Gender Risks in CSA Investments

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Background

Gender lens investing (GLI) aims to achieve both financial returns and positive social outcomes, contributing to broader efforts to reduce gender inequalities and strengthen opportunities for women and girls globally across a variety of sectors (CGAP 2024, Robino and Jackson 2022). In the context of low-carbon, climate-resilient, and nature-positive agrifood systems, GLI plays a critical role in identifying and addressing gender impacts at every stage of the investment lifecycle (Derenoncourt et al. 2022). By assessing how investments influence women's access to resources, decision-making power, labor conditions, and economic empowerment, GLI helps ensure that these transformative agrifood systems deliver equitable benefits (Aslam et al. 2021, Verhart 2019).

The growing evidence base demonstrates that investments can drive positive change beyond simply targeting women, tackling issues like the gender wage gap, improving labor conditions, and promoting fair access to climate-smart technologies and sustainable practices (FAO 2024; Derenoncourt 2023; FinDev 2023).

Despite the growing interest in gender lens investing, investors often lack practical tools to assess gender equity risks and opportunities during the critical due-diligence stage. Without a clear framework, it is difficult to predict how specific Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) practices will affect women's access to resources, labor burden, decision-making power, and economic empowerment.

The AICCRA project, funded by the World Bank's International Development Association, seeks to foster a climate-resilient Africa by enhancing access to climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and climate information services for smallholder farmers. Agri-SMEs, as key actors within agricultural value chains, play a pivotal role in advancing this agenda by providing essential goods and services to smallholder farmers. This Infonote is designed to guide investors in evaluating investment opportunities in agri-SMEs, enabling them to identify and implement gender-responsive CSA practices that maximize both impact and sustainability.

Key messages

- The ImpactSF Gender-Responsive CSA Assessment Tool evaluates the gender equity implications of CSA practices during investment due diligence.
- It identifies potential impacts on women's access to resources, labor burden, decision-making, and economic empowerment.
- CSA practices are rated as low, medium, or high in gender responsiveness.
- By assessing gender equity risks pre-investment, the tool enables targeted mitigation strategies in the post-investment phase.

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The Gender Responsive CSA Assessment Framework

The Gender-Responsive CSA Assessment Framework aims to provide a structured, evidence-based approach to evaluate the gender responsiveness of recommended agricultural investments or interventions. By assigning each practice a rating of low, medium, or high gender responsiveness — and offering clear justifications for these ratings — the tool enables investors to identify potential gender risks and prioritize interventions. This approach not only supports more equitable outcomes for women but also strengthens the overall impact and sustainability of CSA investments.

Gender Responsive CSA in the context of the Tool

Within this methodology, **gender responsiveness** refers to the extent to which a CSA practice considers and addresses the specific needs, roles, and constraints of women, as well as how well it fosters gender equity in access, decision-making, and benefits. Since gender roles in agriculture are often distinct, the degree to which a practice can support women's empowerment—through increased participation, reduced workload, enhanced decision-making authority, and better access to resources—determines its gender responsiveness.

Key elements considered include:

Access to resources (inputs, technology, finance): Women often face systemic barriers to accessing resources, so gender-responsive practices aim to alleviate or work around those barriers.
Labor intensity: Since women tend to bear a disproportionate share of agricultural and household labor, practices that reduce physical labor or time requirements tend to be more gender responsive.
Decision-making and control: Gender-responsive practices promote greater inclusion of women in decision-making at the farm level, including control over assets and production processes.
Skill and knowledge requirements: Practices that require technical skills or education, where women may have less access, are less gender-responsive unless efforts are made to bridge this gap.
Economic empowerment: Practices that increase women's incomes, productivity, or access to markets enhance gender responsiveness.

Criteria for Rating each CSA Practice

A **three-tier rating system** (low, medium, high) is used to classify the gender responsiveness of each CSA practice. The criteria for rating are based on the following factors:

Access to Inputs and Resources:

High: Women can easily access necessary inputs and resources to implement the practice (e.g., composting, intercropping).
Medium: There are some barriers for women, such as financial or technical constraints, but they can still implement the practice in certain circumstances (e.g., biochar, contour farming).
Low: Significant barriers prevent women from accessing resources, such as credit for improved seeds or capital for coffee grafting (e.g., conventional tillage, lime application).

Reduction in Labor/Workload:

High: Practices that directly reduce women's labor burden, such as integrated weed management or drip irrigation, are rated highly.
Medium: Practices that reduce labor but still require significant effort or external support from men or mechanization (e.g., minimum tillage).
Low: Practices that either do not affect labor distribution or increase the labor burden for women, such as conventional tillage.

Decision-Making Power and Control:

High: Practices where women have significant decision-making control, like composting and intercropping, are rated highly.
Medium: Practices where women can be involved, but the decision-making power is often shared or constrained by men (e.g., agroforestry).
Low: Practices that tend to be controlled by men, especially where men dominate cash crops and key

investments (e.g., improved seeds, certified coffee seedlings).

Skills, Knowledge, and Capacity Building:

High: Practices that can be easily adopted with local and indigenous knowledge or involve skills that women already possess, such as composting or integrated weed management.
Medium: Practices that require some technical knowledge or training, which may be less accessible to women, but could be scaled with the right support (e.g., biochar, contour farming).
Low: Practices that require advanced technical skills or financial capital to adopt, which women often have limited access to (e.g., soil management by lime application).

Economic Empowerment Potential:

High: Practices that can directly enhance women's productivity, profitability, or market access, such as intercropping and integrated soil fertility management.
Medium: Practices that could benefit women economically but are often constrained by external factors like market access or credit (e.g., agroforestry).
Low: Practices that typically benefit men more than women due to entrenched gender roles in resource-intensive cash crops or high-capital investments (e.g., certified seeds, coffee grafting).

Applying the Tool

This tool is an integral component of the broader ImpactSF Gender Impact Assessment Methodology, designed to evaluate the gender equity implications of agricultural investments at multiple stages of the investment lifecycle. Grounded in insights from literature reviews and data provided by investees, this tool considers the unique gender roles, needs, and systemic barriers faced by women farmers within specific value chains and local contexts. By examining critical factors such as access to resources, labor burdens, decision-making power, and economic empowerment, this tool enables investors to identify opportunities for meaningful gender-responsive interventions.

Importantly, the gender-responsiveness rating assigned to CSA practices is not static; it reflects the local gender dynamics, cultural norms, and structural inequities within each value chain. For example, a practice like agroforestry may rank higher in contexts where women have access to land and tree ownership but lower in settings with restrictive land tenure systems. By emphasizing the context-specific nature of gender equity, this tool provides a nuanced approach that ensures agricultural investments are both impactful and adaptable to diverse local realities.

To use the tool, each recommended CSA practice is assessed based on the criteria explained above, considering the local context in many agricultural systems, where women often have limited access to land, credit, or inputs, a disproportionate labor burden, and constraints on decision-making power.

For example:
Composting rates **high** because it can be implemented with locally available resources and reduces reliance on external inputs, which benefits women who may lack access to expensive fertilizers.
Improved seeds rates **low** because access to these seeds is often mediated by access to credit or cooperative networks, areas where women are often marginalized.
Intercropping rates **high** because it aligns with the roles women often play in managing diverse plots for household food security, and it is a practice that they can control directly.

Applying the Tool to Specific Sectors and Local Contexts

Table 1 contextualizes CSA practices within specific sectors, illustrating how local dynamics influence gender responsiveness. In investigating beans in Kenya, coffee in Colombia, shrimp in Vietnam, and tea in Sri Lanka, the tool highlights the critical role of local gender dynamics, value chain structures, and systemic barriers in shaping the adoption and impact of CSA practices. For example, practices like composting may rank highly in gender responsiveness where women are already managing smallholder plots, as in Colombia's coffee sector, while mechanized interventions in Vietnam's shrimp farming may face lower gender

responsiveness due to women's limited access to financing and technology.

Table 1. *Sample Gender-Responsive CSA Assessment by Sector*

Recommended CSA practice	Gender responsiveness rating	Rating rationale
Beans in Kenya		
Intercropping	High	Women often manage diverse, small-scale plots where intercropping is suitable. It enhances climate resilience and can improve household food security.
Organic and microdose of fertilizer	High	Enhances soil quality while reducing reliance on external inputs, making it a more accessible and sustainable option for women farmers.
Integrated pest management	Medium	Women benefit from reduced crop losses but may lack access to training and inputs for pest control.
Early maturing drought-tolerant bean variety	Low	Access to certified seeds is often limited for women due to gender-based restrictions on credit and decision-making authority in agricultural inputs.
Coffee in Colombia		
Use of organic compost for coffee	High	Women can manage composting at household and farm levels, improving soil quality without high costs.
Drip irrigation for coffee plants	High	Reduces labor-intensive watering tasks typically managed by women, increasing efficiency.
Shade-grown coffee	Medium	Women often manage small plots, but limited access to tree ownership restricts benefits.
Coffee seedling grafting	Low	Requires access to credit and training, areas where women face significant barriers.
Shrimp in Vietnam		
Integrated aquaculture with mangroves	High	Women often engage in mangrove restoration, which provides environmental and economic benefits.
Improved pond water management	Medium	Benefits women engaged in small-scale shrimp farming, but technical training may be less accessible to them.
Use of probiotics for shrimp health	Medium	Women have limited decision-making in purchasing inputs but benefit from reduced disease outbreaks.
Mechanized pond aeration	Low	Women have limited access to mechanized tools due to financial constraints and male-dominated ownership of aquaculture facilities.
Tea in Sri Lanka		
Intercropping tea with nitrogen-fixing plants	High	Women frequently manage intercropped tea plots, improving soil fertility and household food security.
Compost application in tea gardens	High	Low-cost and accessible practice often managed by women, reducing reliance on chemical inputs.
Minimum tillage in tea plantations	Medium	Reduces labor intensity, but women may lack decision-making power to implement on large estates.
Improved tea plant varieties	Low	Requires access to credit and formal procurement networks, where women's participation is often limited.

Key Recommendations for Investors

1. **Use the Tool Early in Due Diligence:** Apply the tool at the pre-investment stage to assess gender equity risks, identify opportunities, and inform investment decisions. Early insights reduce risk and enable targeted interventions.
2. **Prioritize High-Impact CSA Practices:** Focus on CSA practices rated as medium or high in gender responsiveness. These areas offer the greatest potential for equitable outcomes and long-term impact.
3. **Align Gender Goals with Investment Strategy:** Set clear gender equity goals for each investment and ensure alignment with assessment findings. Integrate these goals into performance metrics and track them throughout the investment lifecycle.
4. **Budget for Gender-Responsive Actions:** Allocate funds for gender-responsive actions and technical assistance, such as training, access to technology, or capacity building, to strengthen gender equity outcomes in CSA investments.
5. **Monitor, Learn, and Adapt:** Establish systems to track and assess gender outcomes post-investment. Use this data to refine future investments and strengthen the impact of CSA practices on gender equity.
6. **Strengthen Accountability and Transparency:** Share results and lessons from using the tool with stakeholders. Demonstrating transparency enhances investor credibility and drives broader change in gender lens investing.

By tailoring the assessment to sector-specific realities, this tool enables investors to design interventions that align with the unique needs of women farmers, fishers, and value chain actors, driving more equitable and effective agricultural investments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While no methodology is perfect, the Gender-Responsive CSA Assessment Tool enables investors to anticipate gender equity risks at the pre-investment stage, allowing for the development of targeted CSA strategies. The CSA strategies can be supported through technical assistance to address these challenges in the post-investment phase. This proactive approach ensures that gender equity is embedded throughout the investment process, driving more inclusive, sustainable, and impactful outcomes.

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