



Gender-forward practises in agri-business **CASE STUDY 2**

December 2021

GENDER-INCLUSIVE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

This thematic case study forms part of a series. Over the course of 11 months in 2020-21, Value for Women engaged a number of Musika's private sector clients - businesses involved in the agricultural sector - with gender lens technical assistance. Musika is a Zambian non-profit company that works to stimulate private sector investment in smallholder agriculture markets. This case study series describes the strategies, impacts, and learnings that resulted from the technical assistance, with the purpose of facilitating greater ecosystem replication. We share a number of cost-effective entry points that can yield significant impact.

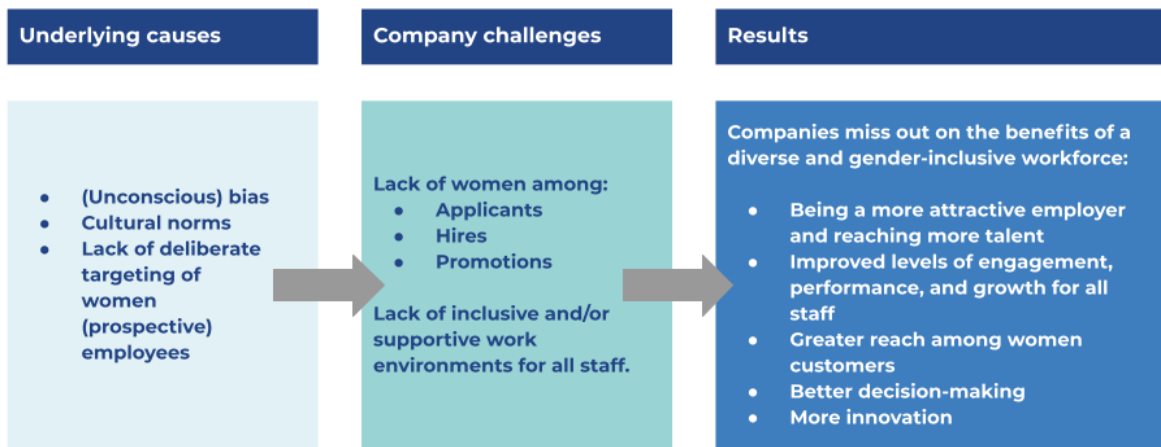
This particular case study focuses on **good practises for getting started with gender-inclusive human resource management.**

1. The challenge

While the overall agricultural workforce in Zambia is 53% women¹, women are notably absent in the agribusinesses that serve the agricultural workforce. Among the agribusinesses in this project, only 19% of their staff were women.² There are various underlying causes of this, including the presence of (unconscious) biases, cultural norms, and a lack of knowledge on how to reach and include women staff. For example, most companies believe they have clear and objective criteria for making hiring decisions. In reality, however, such criteria often depend on assumptions and include characteristics that are 'nice to have' but not crucial— which tends to lead to fewer women applicants as women are more likely than men to apply only when they meet all criteria.⁸

There is a business case for changing this. Research by Deloitte has shown that 80% of job seekers indicate inclusion is important when choosing an employer, and 39% would leave their current job for a more inclusive workplace.³ McKinsey found that more diverse firms are up to 25% more likely to outperform their peers, while companies that are in the bottom quartile of gender diversity are almost 20% less likely to outperform their peers— in effect, a penalty for lack of diversity.⁴ See Figure 1 for these underlying causes, how they translate to inclusive HR challenges for companies, and the impacts on companies' bottom line.

Figure 1: Underlying causes and results of inclusive HR challenges



Taking a holistic approach to incorporating a gender lens throughout all aspects of the employee lifecycle will support all employees, regardless of gender, to thrive and succeed in their roles. Additionally, it has the potential to make any business a more attractive employer.

2. The approach

A fundamental principle with gender-inclusive HR is to avoid reliance on individual staff or managers' personal commitment to inclusivity. Every individual carries some unconscious bias,⁴ and so companies need policies (formal rules and guidelines) and practises (steps and actions) that do not require individuals to actively check and negate their bias in each decision they make, but rather that give them tools that effectively de-bias the process.⁵ This means two key things for agribusinesses:

1. **Formally documenting policies**, so that employees and managers alike have clear documents and agreements to fall back on— rather than relying on individual best intentions.
2. **Basing workforce decisions and processes on objective criteria**, which are clearly written down and shared with all respective parties, and on data which can be tracked to identify and correct for any possible skews in decision-making.









Value for Women focused on establishing these elements in the agribusinesses where sex-disaggregated HR data and an employee survey had identified gaps (see *Case Study 1 for guidance on doing this requisite first step*). For each of these agribusinesses, Value for Women developed **an approach tailored to the agribusiness's specific gaps**. With some agribusinesses, the approach was to **review existing HR documents and provide templates for improvement**. With other agribusinesses, we provided Gender Inclusion 101 **training** to management or all staff, as well as in-depth training on gender-inclusive recruitment and performance management for the HR team and sales representative managers.



3. The solutions

“It’s something we’ve been talking about a lot lately. There’s a shift, especially in the field; perceptions have changed in the field.”

“[We need to consider] where we post our job adverts. ... If women don’t apply to jobs from Facebook, [we should not] post ads there.”

The following table provides examples of HR changes implemented and the resulting or expected impact.⁶

Challenges observed	Solutions / changes implemented	Achieved or expected impact ⁷
Observed gaps in HR policy documents - either not covering all best practises of inclusive workplaces, or inadvertently opening scope for bias.	Updated HR policies to align with best practises.	 Improved employee engagement, satisfaction, wellbeing and retention - in particular for women employees, but across the board.
Job advertisements were unintentionally gendered and distributed through channels that reached men more than women.	Editing job advertisement wording (e.g., excluding overtly gendered words; making explicit a commitment to inclusive hiring). Using new channels to reach more women (e.g., reaching out to agricultural colleges).	 Increase in the number of women applying to each position.
Selection criteria included characteristics that were ‘nice to have’ but not crucial and were sometimes based on ideas around ‘suitable personality types’.	Designing objective criteria through clarifying and articulating what the company is truly looking for in recruits, what might be proxies for objectively determining such, and what characteristics might be less critical.	 More applications from women candidates, and more women hired .
Some team members held biased beliefs about women in the workplace, or did not believe additional support to women employees was necessary.	Training in Gender Inclusion 101 and specific gender-inclusive HR topics provided to: management, HR team, all staff, and sales representative managers.	 Across the board, positive shifts in: - employee perspectives on workplace gender inclusion; - attitudes towards women , particularly in technical roles; and -staff talking about gender inclusion more.
Women employees reported feeling they had less access to professional development opportunities/training and that skills gaps hindered their performance.	Company-wide surveys and polls for employees to indicate the topics and skills they would like to see added to the training roster .	 Increased training attendance and engagement among women staff.  Increased internal collaboration , where previously women team members were not consulted on technical matters.
Women commented more on the need for clearer communication about internal job or promotion opportunities and the criteria for each.	Company-wide announcements about available promotions (and criteria for those). Also, company-wide announcements about successful promotions, to raise awareness that ‘this is possible for you.’	 Internal applicants more frequently meet the requirements for the role.  More women explicitly working towards promotions and actively applying for said promotions.

Legend:  Impact achieved  Impact expected

“Men are able to accept her [the first woman in a senior leadership position] as a leader. It was not difficult coming from that training. We realise women are equal partners in development and technical support.”

“[W]hen we include more women, that is also going to help company performance. Women as distributors and consumers are more likely to bring more of their fellow women and more of other farmers on board. Including them would mean positive results with [our] clientele.”

4. Recommendations to get started

For agribusinesses

Start by identifying if your biggest HR pain points are around:

- Hiring and recruiting;
- Performance; or
- Retention and promotion

Be sure to **have management communicate that gender-inclusive HR is a priority, and mandate a team to see the project through.**

Commonly, implementing HR policies and practises is not seen as a top business priority and implementation is deprioritized during busy seasons; this is particularly true for smaller businesses where there is not an exclusive HR team. Yet, HR adaptations and improvements generally require relatively few resources, meaning that agribusinesses can expect to experience few significant challenges in this process so long as they adequately prioritise it.

For ecosystem actors & business development service providers

Share sample policies, tools, and best practises with the cohort/network. Companies in your cohort can implement, or adapt and implement, these tools, reducing the time and effort required to make holistic HR updates.

Provide peer learning opportunities among the HR teams of your cohort/network. This will be particularly valuable for small teams where HR is not always a high-priority focus area and/or which do not have many opportunities to internally share learnings or discuss considerations and challenges.

Set targets for companies' gender-inclusive recruitment and promotion. This can provide an added incentive to companies in your cohort/network to prioritise their HR policies and practises.

Background: Gender-forward practises in agribusiness

Value for Women defines gender-forward business practises as ones that:

- 1) Intentionally seek to rectify gender inequalities by providing **products** and services that close gender gaps or meet the needs of women and/or girls;
- 2) Support gender diversity through internal policies and practises in the **workforce**; or
- 3) Strengthen inclusion and diversity across the **value chain**.



Gender-forward agribusiness practises are good for both socioeconomic development and business. Specifically, gender equality (SDG 5) is a prerequisite for sustainable development, and it is mutually reinforcing with increased food security (SDG 2).⁸ Additionally, gender-forward businesses are likely to have higher financial performance than the median and greater capacity for innovation.⁸ They also have expanded market reach by focusing on both women and men.

In Zambia, women are estimated to make up 53% of the agricultural workforce⁹ yet their yield lags behind that of men, as their businesses are more likely to be informal, and using less efficient and low-value activities.¹⁰ However, research has shown that **women producers would be just as efficient as their men counterparts if they had equal access to productive assets, inputs, and hired labour. Their productivity could**

increase even further with access to services specifically catering to gendered differences.¹¹

In this light, **Musika**, a Zambian non-profit company that works to stimulate private sector investment in smallholder agricultural markets, partnered with Value for Women to provide gender inclusion technical assistance to four agricultural businesses in the country. Musika aims to reduce poverty in the rural households of Zambia and ensure that both women and men equitably participate in and benefit from the development of the agricultural market; they recognise that women's empowerment is core to this.

Authors: Renée Hunter & Yvonne Krywyj, Value for Women
Image credits: Global DevLab on Flickr

Endnotes

- 1) FAO (2018). [National gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods](#).
- 2) Value for Women's Gender Self-Assessment Results of 10 Musika corporate clients.
- 3) Deloitte (2017). [Unleashing the power of inclusion: Attracting and engaging an evolving workforce](#).
- 4) McKinsey (2020). [Diversity wins: How inclusion matters](#).
- 5) Pragma Agarwal (2020). [Sway](#) & Iris Bohnet (2016). [What Works: Gender Equality by Design](#).
- 6) Bear in mind that these insights are, by design, context- and company-specific, and cannot necessarily be generalised to other organisations. While reading these insights can trigger similar understandings for other organisations, and might serve as inspiration, we highly recommend that each organisation interested in similar strategies design and implement their own data collection strategy. The starting point for a data-driven approach should be the absence of preconceived notions and assumptions.
- 7) Where organisations have implemented and measured change, the impact is given - for others, the expected impact is described.
- 8) Care International (2020). [Gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of food security and nutrition](#).
- 9) FAO (2018). [National gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods](#).
- 10) World Bank (2015). [Linking women with agribusiness in Zambia](#).
- 11) Value for Women (2018). [Gender inclusion for climate-smart agribusiness](#).