



# The Business Case for Women's Employment in Agribusiness

September 2016

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IFC, a member of the World Bank Group, is the largest global development institution focused exclusively on leveraging the power of the private sector to tackle the world's most pressing development challenges. Working with private enterprises in more than 100 countries, IFC uses its capital, expertise and influence to help eliminate extreme poverty and promote shared prosperity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication, *The Business Case for Women's Employment in Agribusiness*, was produced by the IFC Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Services Department and the IFC Gender Secretariat. It was developed under the general guidance of Directors Alzbeta Klein and Sergio Pimenta, and Gender Secretariat Head Henriette Kolb. The core team was led by James Emery and Carmen Niethammer, and also included Amy Luinstra and Sarah Twigg. The report was drafted by a team from Ergon Associates led by Kirsten Newitt and Alastair Usher, supported by Pins Brown, as well as Ariane Hegewisch of the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Funding for the report was provided by The Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality (UFGE), a World Bank Group multi-donor trust fund expanding evidence, knowledge and data needed to identify and address key gaps between men and women to deliver better development solutions that boost prosperity and increase opportunity for all. The UFGE has received generous contributions from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Inclusion of the SolTuna case study was made possible by the work done under the IFC Pacific WINvest Advisory Services Project for which the main funder is the Government of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as well as funds from the World Bank Group's Umbrella Trust Fund for Jobs, and SolTuna.

The case studies underpinning the report were completed with the active collaboration of the five case study companies and our principal counterparts: Roy Fine and Johan van Wyk at Afrifresh; Maria Paula Curto, Mara Pinheiro, and Rachel Carneiro de Sousa at Biosev; Marthinus Stander and Marius Steyn at Supreme Poultry; Le Thi Le Hang, Nguyen Quang Truong, and Pham Trung Dung at Vinaseed; and Jim Alexander and Adrian Wickham at SolTuna.

The extended team involved in the report included IFC relationship managers and investment staff Luiz Daniel de Campos, Vengai Chigudu, Anh Phuong Luu Dang, Konrad Huber, Anup Jagwani, Tania Kaddeche, Ken Osei, and Eric Shayer, as well as Nathalie Hoffmann, Gene Moses, Elizabeth Price, Irina Sarchenko, Hala Sherif, and Bruce Wise, who provided general support and advice. The report also benefits from the useful insights provided by Dalia Bahous, Diana Baird, Benedicte Leroy De La Briere, Namita Datta, Isis Gaddis, Rijak Grover, Alicia S. Hammond, Katherine C. Heller, Aphichoke Kotikula, Sofie Fleischer Michaelsen, Rudaba Nasir, Jannina Flores Ramirez, Alexa Roscoe, Henri Rachid Sfeir, and Sanna Liisa Taivalmaa.

The report was designed by Borys Mar.

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# The Business Case for Women's Employment in Agribusiness

This report was prepared by IFC, the private sector arm of the World Bank Group, as part of a work program on women's employment in agribusiness funded by the World Bank Group's Private Sector Window of the Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality.



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# Executive summary



## WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT MATTERS FOR AGRIBUSINESS

- Women play a crucial role in the agribusiness sector, and agriculture remains the most important source of employment for women in low- and middle-income countries. Women account for a significant proportion of the agribusiness workforce throughout different segments of the agricultural value chain, providing inputs and functions that are critical to business performance. In this context, leading agribusiness firms recognize that women's employment is increasingly a strategic issue. Ensuring equal access to employment opportunities in agribusiness for women, and investing in better jobs and working conditions for women can lead to improved workforce and organizational outcomes that have a direct impact on the bottom line.
- Agribusiness remains central to food security, job creation and inclusive growth in many low-income countries. As such, better jobs for women in agribusiness can have an important spill-over effect on economic and social development outcomes. With the right working conditions and remuneration, agricultural employment can help to create a platform from which more favorable outcomes for rural women and their families are increasingly viable.
- Global research and company case studies indicate that interventions to support women's employment can lead to win-win solutions for companies and women workers. This report expands this research through five agribusiness case studies across a range of regions and sub-sectors:
  - **Afrifresh**, a citrus and grape producer in South Africa;
  - **Biosev**, a sugarcane processing company in Brazil;
  - **SolTuna**, a fish processing company in Solomon Islands;
  - **Supreme Poultry**, a poultry processing company in South Africa; and
  - **Vinaseed**, a seed production company in Vietnam.
- This publication focuses on the case of direct employment relationships, while recognizing that women's work in agribusiness may take on a number of other forms, including small-holder farming.



## IT MAKES BUSINESS SENSE FOR AGRIBUSINESS FIRMS TO INVEST IN BETTER EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

- Greater gender balance in management can lead to improved corporate performance, creating an edge for agribusiness firms that face increasingly competitive global markets and need the right leadership teams to be successful. This is consistent with the experience of agribusiness firms like Afrifresh, Biosev, and Vinaseed, which have found that women bring different perspectives, ways of thinking, and problem-solving strategies.
- Higher levels of gender diversity can also help spark innovation, by strengthening team dynamics and creativity. This is particularly important for agribusiness companies with a science and technology focus like Vinaseed, which needs to keep on finding new ways to grow, respond to changing market and environmental conditions and increase productivity.
- Global competition and cost pressures mean that agribusiness companies need the most productive workers at all levels of the organization, and a reputation as a good employer for women can help to retain and attract these workers. For Biosev, recruiting and promoting women in an industry that traditionally employs few

women is an important tool for communicating its image as a modern, forward-looking company. For fruit producers like Afrifresh, this means not only recruiting the most committed and skilled workers and managers, but also ensuring that the most productive seasonal workers return every year.

- Creating a supportive environment for women workers can have a positive impact on the attendance and retention of workers, resulting in significant cost savings. The costs of high staff turnover and absenteeism are typically underestimated by companies, yet they can be significant for high- and low-skill workers alike. For instance, an IFC diagnostic revealed that high levels of worker absenteeism are costing tuna processing company SolTuna around \$1,580,000 in lost revenue each year. Employee retention is a particularly important consideration for Vinaseed, which makes significant ongoing investments in staff training and development.
- Many agribusiness firms operate on the basis of lean margins and need to maintain high levels of efficiency and productivity to deliver large product volumes at the lowest possible cost. Women are often responsible for tasks in the production process that are critical to productivity, such as picking, grading, and packing. In this context, firms like Supreme Poultry believe that a supportive, non-discriminatory working environment with fair opportunities for women and men leads to higher employee productivity and better overall business performance.
- Leading global brands are increasingly placing social and environmental sustainability at the heart of their business, and women's employment is a key feature. This means that suppliers who want to work with these brands need to be able to demonstrate compliance with voluntary codes of conduct that ensure decent working conditions, including non-discrimination and anti-harassment. This is a particularly important consideration for export producers like Afrifresh, providing high value fresh produce, where there are direct links between suppliers and European supermarkets, which are publicly committed to voluntary codes on supply chain working conditions.
- A solid reputation for good working conditions, demonstrated by proactive programs ("beyond compliance") to support women workers can help to raise the profile of agribusiness firms with respect to buyers, investors, and consumers. For Biosev, a stock-listed company, its reputation as a fair and meritocratic employer is an important part of how it presents itself to potential investors.

#### THERE ARE A RANGE OF PRACTICAL STEPS THAT COMPANIES CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

- To achieve the highest impact, companies need to identify the interventions that are most relevant to their size and operations, as well as the needs and interests of their workforce. These may include:
  - 📎 **Establishing a robust framework for people management:** Transparent and performance-focused human resource (HR) management systems provide a fair working environment that operates to the benefit of women and men alike. At companies like Afrifresh and Biosev, this helps women workers to feel confident that they will receive equal treatment at all stages of the employment relationship.
  - 📎 **Opening up career pathways in management and operations:** Agriculture and agribusiness lag behind other sectors in moving beyond traditional stereotypes of gender roles. Women are still under-represented in agribusiness management, while there are typically high levels of gender-based occupational segregation in operations. At Supreme Poultry, promotion based on merit alone has ensured that more women move into supervisory and management roles, including in production management. Companies like Biosev, Supreme Poultry and Vinaseed that provide women with access to formal and on-the-job training and development opportunities give women crucial support to access jobs in the sector with higher pay and status. This includes higher-skilled management positions, as well as non-traditional occupations like tractor driving.



-  **Creating safer and more secure working environments:** Agribusiness workplaces present a number of serious hazards for workers. Companies can help to protect women and men by conducting occupational health and safety (OHS) assessments that account for gender differences (including pregnancy and breastfeeding) and ensuring that all workers have equal access to OHS training and equipment. Safe transport to and from work can empower women to take up and continue employment, especially in rural areas where the general availability of transport is often limited.
-  **Enforcing strict rules on sexual harassment:** Companies that introduce and enforce strict rules on sexual harassment, alongside effective worker grievance mechanisms, create safer and more productive working environments for everyone, but particularly for women.
-  **Investing in employee health:** Initiatives to support employee health programs, with particular attention to women's needs, can have a significant impact in rural areas, where health clinics may be under-resourced or situated far from the workplace. To promote better health outcomes for workers, companies like Afrifresh have provided workers with additional medical insurance, while others have supported health education programs in order to provide health information that might be otherwise difficult to access in rural areas.
-  **Providing support for working parents:** Across the world, the gendered division of labor in the home means that women typically assume responsibilities for unpaid care and housework. These responsibilities can limit women's participation in paid employment, particularly in rural areas where poor infrastructure and services often mean that family care and household work require more time. All case study companies follow statutory requirements for paid maternity leave and sick leave, which is also available to look after sick children. While these benefits are set by law or collective agreement, implementing them fully and in the spirit of the law creates loyalty and support from workers.
-  **Supporting the care needs of employees:** The case studies show that forms of support for workers with caring responsibilities – such as childcare or flexible work arrangements – can pay off in terms of retention, attendance, and commitment. Afrifresh provides workplace kindergartens to keep children out of harm's way on farms, and to allow their parents to focus at work. Biosev invests in community partnerships on early care and education so that new mothers can return to work, at the same time enhancing its reputation in the local community. All companies provide some flexibility for parents with children in professional and managerial jobs. The case studies highlight the importance of role models, showing that women can be mothers and work in even the most senior positions. Next steps for companies could include initiatives to recognize male employees as husbands and fathers, and supporting them to play an active role in their families to encourage the redistribution of the care burden.
-  **Establishing systems for gender-disaggregated data collection:** Companies that put in place gender-disaggregated data collection systems are better placed to understand the position of women (and men) in their workforce, and to monitor the outcomes, costs, and benefits of interventions to support women workers.

## Foreword

A job is the primary escape route from poverty for the global poor. Creating opportunities for better jobs promotes shared prosperity. Yet today, opportunities for women to participate in the labor force worldwide remain almost 27 percentage points lower than those for men, and in some developing regions women are falling even further behind. Employment of women is vital to driving economic growth and development. No economy can afford to ignore half its talent pool. The private sector, which provides about 90 percent of jobs, is essential for overcoming this employment challenge. Showing private companies how to be “gender-smart” in employing women can promote a healthier overall economy as well as contribute directly to companies’ productivity, profitability, and growth.

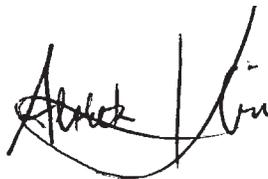
For IFC, the world’s largest global development institution focused exclusively on the private sector, both job creation and gender are top priorities. IFC’s commitment to advancing gender equality is supported by the strong case that it makes good business sense for companies to find gender-smart solutions to their workforce, supply chain, and other operational challenges. Advancing this business case for women’s employment is the focus of this report, *The Business Case for Women’s Employment in Agribusiness*, which examines the experience of agribusiness companies. Across the world, the expansion of agricultural production for global markets has been linked with increases in women’s employment. Although women’s employment in the sector has decreased over the past 20 years, it remains the most important source of employment for women in low- and middle-income countries. Female workers participate in activities throughout the agricultural value chain, as well as across different products and geographies. In agricultural processing, women typically represent the majority of the workforce in developing and emerging markets. This report builds upon earlier work published in *Investing in Women’s Employment*, part of IFC’s WINvest Initiative, and complements IFC’s recent report, *Investing in Women along Agribusiness Value Chains*.

In response to this critical employment and development challenge, IFC is working with agribusiness clients to open up new opportunities for women in the workforce, including in management and leadership roles. This report contributes new empirical evidence showing the business benefits of investing in women as employees in agribusiness. In addition to deepening the business case, the report highlights the ways that leading agribusiness companies have invested in women’s employment opportunities. Our goal is to help IFC clients and other companies worldwide reduce gender gaps in their operations, while reaping business rewards. In doing so, they will advance gender equality more broadly in society.

We are grateful to the five companies—Afrifresh, Biosev, SolTuna, Supreme Poultry, and Vinaseed—for their commitment to this important agenda and their willingness to contribute their experience in the case studies. The firms offer a wealth of experience in dealing with workforce management issues in ways which have increased opportunities for women, while also contributing to the bottom line. Their willingness to contribute to this work on women’s employment adds a new dimension to their evolving partnerships with IFC.

While much progress is being made, we all can do more. At IFC we are committed to applying the knowledge learned with clients and leveraging our partnerships to implement the [World Bank Group Gender Equality Strategy](#). We look forward to continuing to advance the gender agenda with our private sector partners and other stakeholders as we move forward.

**Alzbeta Klein and Sergio Pimenta**  
*Directors, Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Services*  
IFC





# INTRODUCTION

## Why women's employment matters for agribusiness



Photo © Afrifresh

**Agribusiness remains central to food security, job creation, and inclusive economic growth in many low-income economies.** Agricultural income growth can be more effective in reducing poverty in low-income countries than growth in other sectors. This is because the incidence of poverty tends to be higher in rural populations than elsewhere, and a large share of the rural poor depend on agriculture for a living. Moreover, agricultural-sector growth tends to exhibit a higher multiplier effect than growth in other sectors, by raising the incomes of rural populations and increasing demand for non-farming goods and services (Schneider & Gugerty, 2011; Cervantes-Godoy & Dewbre, 2010; Ravallion & Datt, 1996).

**Women's labor is crucial to global agribusiness.** Across the world, the expansion of agricultural production for the global market has been linked with increases in women's employment (Said-Allsopp & Tallontire, 2014). In 2015, one-fourth of all economically active women worldwide were engaged in agriculture (ILO, 2016). Although women's employment in the sector has decreased over the past 20 years, it remains the most important source of employment for women in low- and middle-income countries (ILO, 2016). Female workers participate in activities throughout the agricultural value chain, as well as across different products and geographies. In agricultural processing, women typically represent the majority of the workforce in developing and emerging markets (e.g. ISHS, 2012; TPAWU, 2011; Maertens & Swinnen, 2009; Deere, 2005; Dolan & Sorby, 2003).

**Improving the quality and quantity of jobs for women in agriculture can help reduce poverty and improve family and social welfare** (World Bank, 2007). Better jobs for women can have positive spillovers on economic and social development: research indicates that increases in

women's earning and bargaining power translate into greater spending on, and results for, children's health and education (World Bank Group, 2015; World Bank, 2014). For rural women, agricultural employment – which also faces significant challenges – can create a platform from which seeking out more favorable outcomes becomes an increasingly viable option. Social and economic empowerment is more likely to happen in the lives of rural women who are employed, than in the lives of women who are not employed (Said-Allsopp & Tallontire, 2014).

**This publication aims to fill existing gaps in the literature regarding women's paid employment in agribusiness, especially with respect to emerging economies.** Women workers' contribution to agribusiness is neither fully understood nor fully valued. The vast majority of research on women's participation in agribusiness in emerging economies focuses on small-holder farming contexts (e.g. World Bank, FTF, 2015, 2014a & 2013, 2012), rather than direct employment relationships or women's participation in management. Furthermore, there is limited analysis of the business gains associated with proactive interventions related to women's employment. This publication aims to fill these gaps by:

- Providing a practical look at enterprise-level practices on women's employment in agribusiness; and
- Considering how companies can better support women employees and how this can have a positive impact on companies' bottom line.

**There is an established business case for private sector investment in women's employment, which also applies to agribusiness.** Companies that invest in women can improve their access to labor and talent, can lower the costs of recruitment and (re)training by reducing labor

turnover, can drive innovation and cohesion through having a more diverse workforce and management team, and can improve productivity through stronger teams and employee motivation. Moreover, proven compliance and quality employment can improve access to quality buyers. Thus, agribusiness companies who do not invest in women are potentially missing out on important business gains, and policy-makers are missing a potential lever to open up equal opportunities, and ratchet up labor standards, to support inclusive growth for women workers in agriculture.

**The focus of this publication is women that are directly employed, paid labor, predominantly among larger employers.** While smallholder and outgrower farming has a vital role to play in rural development, it is not the main subject here.

## INVESTING IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AT DIFFERENT POINTS IN THE AGRIBUSINESS VALUE CHAIN

**Agribusiness covers a diverse range of business activities, each with its own set of commercial challenges.** The challenges faced by agribusiness companies, and the corresponding business benefits of investing in women's employment, vary according to market drivers at each point in the value chain, the scale of production, and local labor-market dynamics.

**Women's employment in agribusiness also covers a diverse and overlapping array of working arrangements.** Women and men working in rural settings are often involved in multiple activities and different contractual arrangements, including wage labor, self-employment, and smallholder farming (FAO et al, 2010). Women, in particular, constitute a significant proportion of unpaid family workers and are still over-represented in the most vulnerable and unstable segments of the rural labor market, especially in the agricultural sector (FAO et al, 2010). Yet, in recent years, women have increasingly started to benefit from wage employment in large-scale estate production and agro-industrial processing of non-traditional products for export. In principle, global value chains offer an opportunity for generating higher quality employment

## FIRST-HAND INSIGHTS FROM COMPANIES IN EMERGING ECONOMIES

An important part of the methodology for this study has involved drawing on the practical experiences of agribusiness companies operating in emerging and developing economies.

IFC gratefully acknowledges the participation of the companies who volunteered to share their experiences and are the subject of extended case studies (see Part II):

- **Afrifresh**, an export producer of table grapes and citrus in South Africa;
- **Biosev S.A.**, a sugarcane processor and ethanol producer in Brazil, listed on the Brazilian stock market;
- **SolTuna**, a tuna loining and canning facility in the Solomon Islands;
- **Supreme Poultry**, a poultry-processing company in South Africa and subsidiary of Country Bird Holdings; and
- **Vinaseed**, a seed production company in Vietnam.

These companies were selected on the grounds that they represent a range of agribusiness sub-sectors, across diverse geographies. Collectively, they provide different examples of the modalities and challenges of women's employment in agribusiness, and the types of business gains associated with better support for women workers. All are IFC clients, except for Afrifresh.

The analysis in this publication is also based on a review of the international literature on the business case for investing in women's employment, with a focus on how this applies to the agribusiness sector. It builds on the insights set out in IFC's global cross-sectoral publication on women's employment, *Investing in Women's Employment: Good for Business, Good for Development*.

for women and men in rural areas, but – without careful attention to working terms and conditions – these global value chains can also be channels for transferring costs and risks to the most vulnerable (FAO/IFAD/ILO, 2010).

The case studies in this publication provide examples of women’s employment at different points in the value chain (see Figure I). The featured case studies include some input production (e.g. seeds), most forms of cultivation (recognizing that larger-scale, mechanized production systems are less labor-intensive than smaller-scale systems), and agri-processing. While women are present throughout

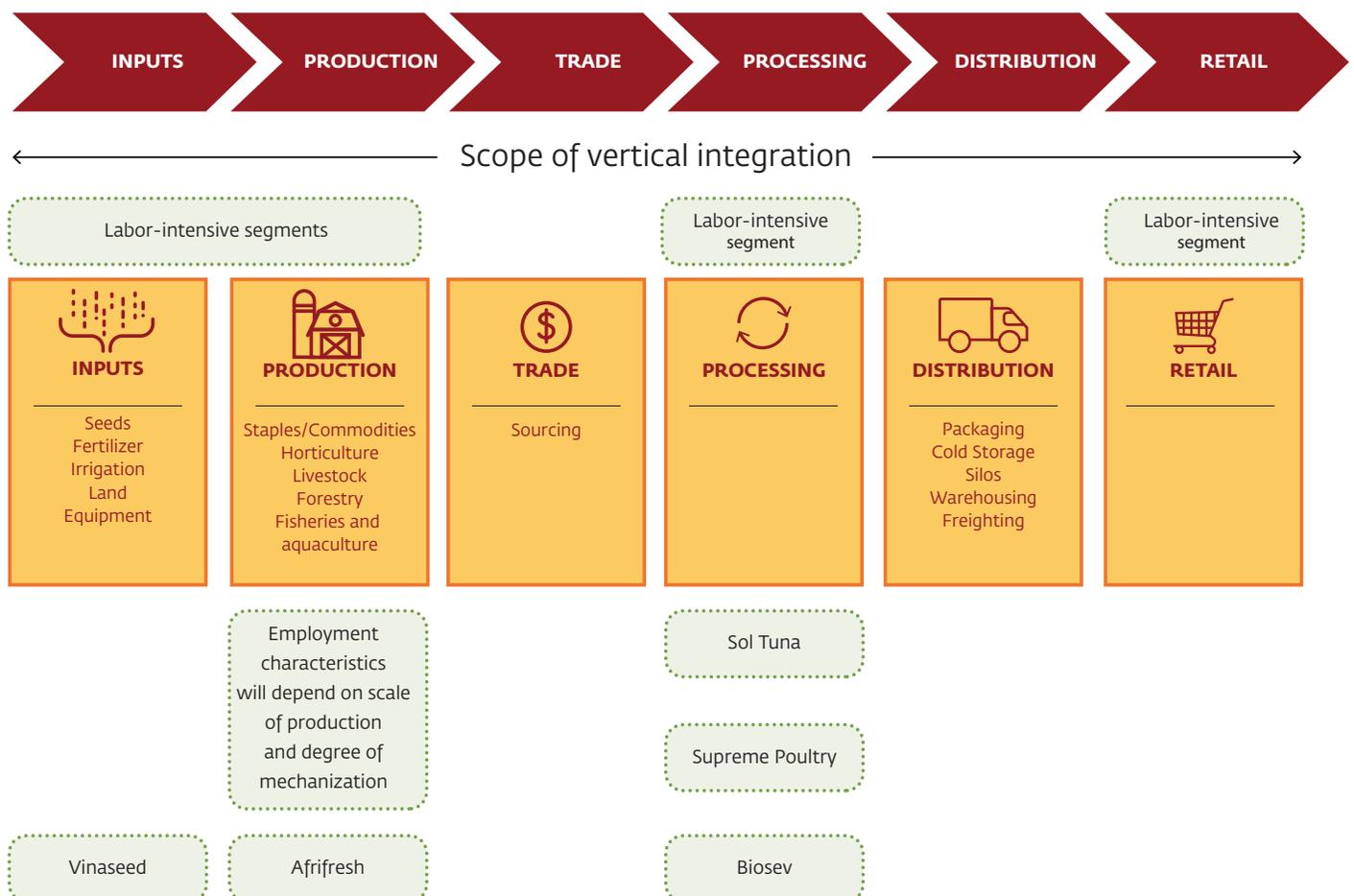
the agribusiness value chain in relation to most products, they often play a particularly prominent role in the labor-intensive segments of production, processing, and retail.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS PUBLICATION

This publication is structured in three parts:

- **Part I** provides an overview of the business case for agribusiness companies to invest in women’s employment and examples of good-practice interventions;
- **Part II** sets out five company case studies, providing snapshots of employer practices; and

Figure: Location of case-study companies within agribusiness value chain segments



Based on IFC et al (2015) 'Private Equity and Emerging Markets Agribusiness: Building Value Through Sustainability'



Photo © Vinaseed

# PART I: OVERVIEW



Photo © Afrifresh

## THE (AGRI)BUSINESS CASE FOR INVESTING IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

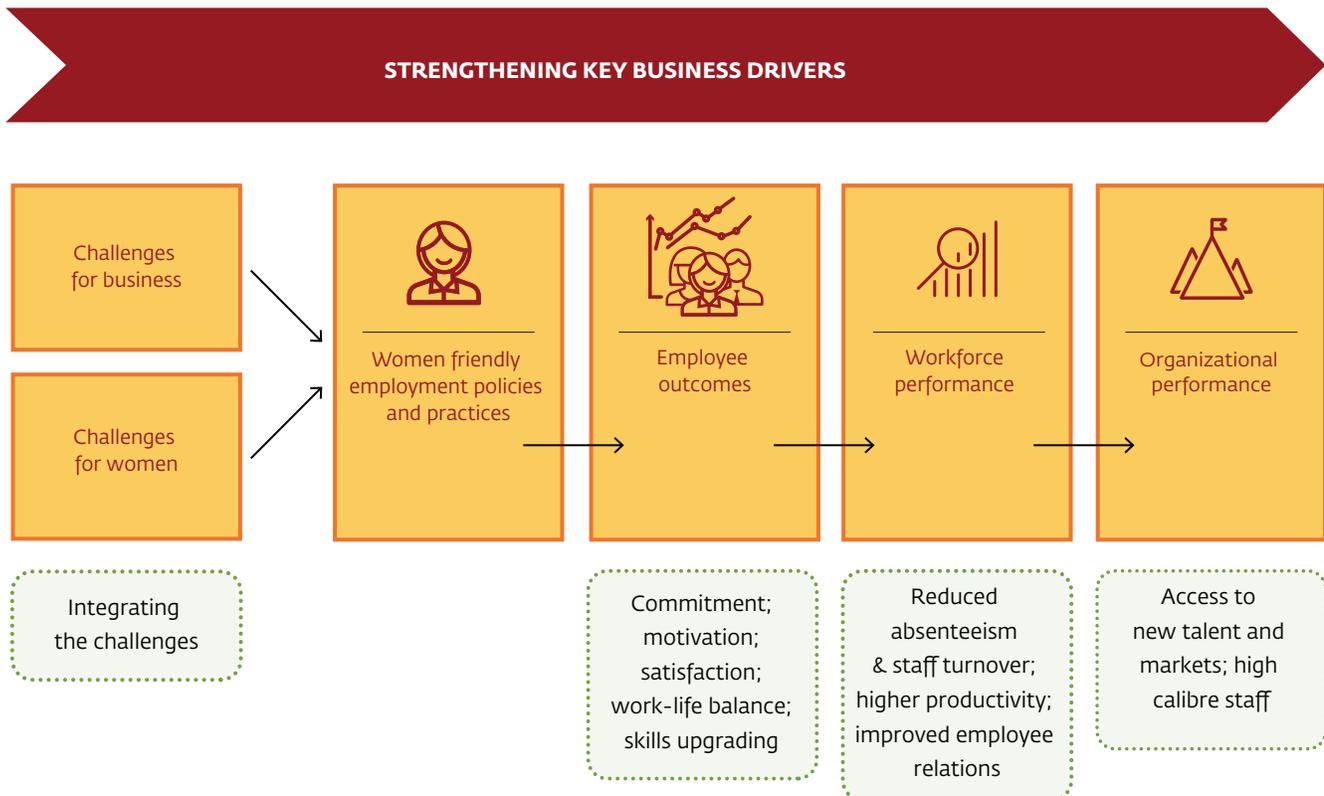
The benefits that agribusiness companies can realize from investing in women's employment will vary according to a wide range of factors.

Many of these relate to a company's specific operating context, including its position in the agribusiness value chain, who its buyers are, whether they are subject to any sustainability/social standards or codes of conduct, and the availability of skilled and unskilled workers in local labor markets. Business gains will also be directly linked to the type of support or benefits offered to women.

**Investments in women's employment can strengthen key business drivers.**

Central to this concept is the idea that good employment practices generate returns for individual employees ('employee outcomes') which support higher-performance working practices: a more engaged, satisfied, and committed employee is more likely to perform at a higher level, develop their performance, and remain in the post. These higher-performance workforce practices can translate into longer-term enhancements in organizational performance (e.g., Monks, 2007).

Figure: Key business drivers



### **Interventions to support women's employment can provide win-win solutions, responding to the interests of both business and women workers.**

For example, agribusiness companies that work to enhance gender balance in management and supervisory positions can strengthen decision-making and problem-solving processes as a result of increased diversity, while also giving women a vital stepping-stone to positions of higher responsibility and pay in an industry that is often dominated by men.

#### STRENGTHENING HUMAN CAPITAL OUTCOMES

### **Being an 'employer of choice': improved recruitment prospects, including in rural areas**

**A sound reputation as a good employer for women can help companies recruit the best workers and managers.** Competitive pressures mean that agribusiness companies need to attract the best and most-committed workers at all levels of the organization, from workers in the fields or on the factory floor through top management. One way to do this is to put in place conditions that support women (and men) workers and draw attention to this in the recruitment process. For Biosev, the strong presence of women in its management team and throughout the company's hierarchy helps send important signals to high-caliber potential future recruits (both women and men) that Biosev is a modern, forward-looking employer, with progressive ideas and practices. Biosev is working to integrate its record as a great employer for women more explicitly into its recruitment and outreach strategies, as a tool to address ongoing perceptions among potential recruits – and their families – that the sugarcane industry is inappropriate for women.

**More gender-inclusive employment practices can improve access to a more educated workforce.** In many emerging and developed economies, women are beginning to outpace men in educational results, which leads women to account for a substantial proportion of educated job-seekers. At Biosev, the mechanization of sugarcane planting and harvesting means that the company is increasingly looking for new workers who have completed high school, and encouraging its current employees – women and men – to seek further training and education. According to a plant manager

from Biosev: “Almost all our female employees between the ages of 20 and 35 are engaged in some educational activity”. Similarly, at Afrifresh, increasingly complex buyer requirements for quality and packaging mean that the company benefits from recruiting packhouse workers with higher levels of basic education. For companies with research and technology operations like Vinaseed, it makes sense to target both female and male tertiary graduates to build a highly educated workforce: more than 80% of Vinaseed's workforce has a university degree.

### **Securing access to a steady and reliable pool of labor can be challenging for agribusiness operations in rural areas.**

This is a particular issue for primary producers in peak season, when companies experience a spike in labor requirements that may not be filled by the existing pool of labor in the local area. In this context, agribusiness companies that position themselves as ‘employers of choice for women’ have a competitive edge when it comes to recruiting local labor. As explained by a manager at Afrifresh: “There are around 10 to 15 farms in the local area, all competing for the same workers. We have to offer at least the same terms and conditions as the others ... offering even better quality employment is important to be an employer of choice.”

**Introducing women-friendly policies can provide the right conditions to ensure that the best seasonal workers return to the company for peak season every year.** Seasonal workers are a pivotal part of the workforce for many agribusiness companies, whose

“It's very important to get the same seasonal workers coming back. We lose production time and training time. Also, you can give experienced seasonal workers more responsibility and let them grow more ... You can find labor easily, but you have to work harder to keep on attracting [it] back.”

Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator, Afrifresh

labor needs vary throughout the year, corresponding to production cycles. For these companies, there are important financial benefits in retaining the same seasonal workers every year: regular seasonal workers are familiar with company policies and procedures, work faster, and require less training and supervision. In South Africa, one Afrifresh farm had to hire an additional 150 workers one year, due to the non-return of its regular seasonal workers that led to a major drop in productivity. The farm had been unable to provide work to all of its regular seasonal workers in the previous harvest, as a result of poor weather conditions that substantially affected fruit volumes. Consequently, the regular seasonal workers found work elsewhere.

**Investing in women and their communities can alleviate labor shortages exacerbated by regional migration patterns.** Rural employers (especially those producing internationally traded agricultural commodities with fluctuating prices, such as tea or sugar) often have to compete with the lure of potentially higher paying jobs in cities, and the appeal of the cities themselves, which is part of the global phenomenon of urban migration (IOM, 2015). In cocoa-growing areas of West Africa, many people – mostly young men – from West African cocoa communities are migrating to work in cities, wealthier parts of the country or higher-paying fields (Chan, 2010). In India, it is common in tea-growing areas for women to migrate to urban areas and take up roles as domestic workers or to follow male family members who have already found employment (Rasaily, 2014). While this is not an issue for Biosev at present, because of the economic crisis in Brazil, the company expects that competition for high-quality staff will return once the economy recovers, particularly in locations that are close to major labor markets such as São Paulo.

### **Improved attendance and retention of employees**

**Creating a supportive environment for women workers can have a positive impact on the attendance and retention of all workers, resulting in significant cost savings for companies.** Many companies find that by creating workplaces that are supportive of women's employment – for example, by having good work-life balance policies, enforcing a

### **SOLTUNA: THE HIGH COST OF ABSENTEEISM**

SolTuna, an IFC client, is a tuna loining and canning facility in a remote area of Solomon Islands. It has a workforce of approximately 1,845 people, the majority of which are women. The company faces major challenges related to worker absenteeism: between 15% and 20% of the workforce are absent most days.

A diagnostic study carried out by IFC found that absenteeism is resulting in significant productivity losses. Assuming full operation for 40 weeks/year, SolTuna could earn an additional \$1,580,000 in annual revenue by bringing absenteeism down. Absenteeism is also leading to additional costs related to excessive overtime and overstaffing that the company uses to handle fluctuations in the number of workers.

These figures establish a clear business case for the company to take action on absenteeism. IFC is currently working with SolTuna to identify what kinds of interventions are likely to have the highest impact. One area currently under consideration is health: over half of all worker absences (53%) are related to personal illness or illness in the family.

culture free of harassment, and having transparent HR management practices where decisions about hiring and promotions are made on the basis of merit and not favoritism – men also benefit, and the workplace becomes a more agreeable and productive environment for everyone. This can lead to significant cost savings for agribusiness companies, as staff are less likely to look for work elsewhere and take unplanned days off work. The costs of high worker turnover and absenteeism are typically underestimated by companies and can be significant for high- and low-skill workers alike.

**High levels of worker attendance are critical for agribusiness companies to achieve maximum productivity.** Reliable attendance is particularly valuable where the harvest is labor-intensive and the picking season

is short; for instance, at Afrifresh, table grapes need to be picked and packed within a six- to eight-week time period. In this context, interventions to improve working conditions can make a significant difference to worker attendance. In Kenya, Finlays Horticulture<sup>1</sup> linked its package of measures to support women's employment directly to a drop in company-wide absenteeism by seven percentage points (IFC, 2013). Similarly, two other farms in Kenya experienced an average decrease of 13% of illness-related absenteeism as a result of worker participation in a women's health program (BSR HERproject, 2014).

**Many agribusiness companies see a direct correlation between their willingness to invest in workers and their ability to retain the most productive and loyal workers.** This has real value at all levels of the organization. Experienced workers tend to be more skilled and efficient: at Finlays in Kenya, an experienced worker can process three times more kilograms of green beans than a casual, inexperienced worker (IFC, 2013). Finlays invests a considerable amount in training and support for its workers (over 50% of whom are women), knowing that “the alternative would be more expensive”; for example, workers would be less efficient, productivity would be lower, and health and safety costs would be higher.

**The right package of terms and conditions can help agribusiness retain the best workers and encourage high performance.** Biosev CEO Rui Chammas is keenly aware that agribusiness competes for workers with other sectors – such as information technology, banking and finance – that have a more modern and professional reputation, particularly in the eyes of younger workers. In rural areas, there are other larger employers that offer potentially similar employment opportunities. Biosev believes that it has assembled a strong team and that it has to ensure that the company provides a working environment that will encourage its workers to commit long-term. Providing a superior healthcare plan that covers the whole family (a benefit highly appreciated by employees and highlighted specifically by single mothers working for the company) and strictly implementing working-time rules, so that employees in operational jobs

“We want to create a culture where people want to work for us and want to stay... Even losing a tractor driver who knows how to spray the vines – this creates a gap.”

Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, Afrifresh

can plan their work and family lives, are examples of practices that help Biosev encourage retention and high performance from its staff.

**High levels of retention are particularly important where companies make considerable investment in knowledge and skills development.** Vinaseed has a highly educated workforce (more than 80% have university degrees) and requires a high degree of innovation and specialist knowledge from its employees. In this context, the company makes a significant investment in formal training and believes that achieving high levels of employee retention – 6.8 years for non-managerial staff and 13 years for managers – is a key ingredient of the company's ongoing success. This also applies to Biosev, which is committed to providing training and development opportunities for workers at all levels, including the provision of educational grants to high-performing individuals.

By retaining the best workers and managers, companies are better positioned to grow and foster a cohesive corporate culture. A strong core of loyal staff not only underpins ongoing financial performance; it is also crucial to future expansion. This is part of Afrifresh's strategy for future growth: providing the right working conditions and learning opportunities, so that workers at all levels are retained and can provide training and oversight for employees in the coming growth phase. The company also considers that a more stable workforce generally leads to higher levels of workforce cohesion, with fewer problems, less interpersonal conflict, and less likelihood of harassment.

<sup>1</sup> In the period since the research was carried out for IFC (2013), the ownership structure of Finlays Horticulture has changed and, as of 2016, most of its Kenyan operations have been re-branded as Flamingo Produce.

## FUELING HIGHER LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE AND INNOVATION THROUGH DIVERSITY

### Stronger leadership and management teams

**Gender diversity in top management is profitable. In increasingly competitive global markets, agribusiness companies need the right leadership teams to be successful.** Historically, women have been under-represented in professional management positions in agribusiness. Modern companies in the sector can no longer afford to overlook the talent of half of the population when building top leadership teams. A recent study of 21,980 companies across 91 countries found robust evidence that a higher presence of female leaders in the C-suite correlates strongly with increased profitability (Noland, Moran & Kotschwar, 2016).

**Greater gender diversity in management can drive greater organizational effectiveness.** A number of international studies across several sectors indicate that gender diversity, including in the boardroom, drives better market performance. One US study of the top Fortune 500 companies found that companies with at least three female board members had a 60% higher return on investment than all-male boards (Catalyst, 2011). Similarly, a recent study in Jordan found that companies with female representation on their board enjoyed almost three times higher return on assets (ROA) and twice the level of return on equity (ROE) compared to companies with no female representation (IFC, 2015). This is consistent with the experience of many agribusiness companies, who find that women bring different approaches and perspectives to management. As observed by one female manager at Afrifresh: “We are not afraid to ask questions. We bring the ‘why?’ to the table.”

**It makes business sense for companies to take a gender-smart approach to their ‘internal leadership pipeline’.** Where a company employs few women, or seeks to bring in different perspectives and experiences, it may make sense to focus on external recruitment. Yet many companies prefer to grow their leaders internally: it is more cost-effective, reduces management time spent on recruitment, and means that future leaders have holistic knowledge of the business. To capitalize on the benefits

### **OLAM: “INVESTING IN WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT MAKES SENSE TO US AS A BUSINESS”**

Olam International is a leading global agribusiness firm with its headquarters in Singapore, operating from ‘seed to shelf’ in 70 countries and supplying food and industrial raw materials to over 16,200 customers worldwide. It has a workforce of 62,500 full-time, seasonal, contract, and temporary employees who work across several businesses and commodities, including cocoa, coffee, cashew, rice, and cotton. Olam employs women at all levels throughout its agricultural value chain: on its farms and plantations, in procurement and logistics, and at its processing facilities.

According to Venkataramani Srivathsan, Olam’s Managing Director & CEO of Africa & Middle East, there is a clear business case for supporting women’s employment: “Investing in women’s employment makes sense. If we don’t, we are potentially missing out on 50% of available talent and we need great people to make our business grow. Once we attract great people, we also need to invest in their development to make them feel motivated and want to stay. That won’t happen unless we have an inclusive working environment that values diversity in all its forms.”

of gender diversity, it makes sense that companies include both women and men in their leadership pipeline. This is particularly helpful when companies operate in rural areas where the availability of skilled workers is more limited and it can be more difficult to attract skilled workers from urban areas. After introducing a program to strengthen succession planning within the business, Finlays, a horticulture company with operations in Kenya, found that it was able to fill about 90% of vacancies in the country with internal applicants (many of whom were women) and made significant savings as a result (IFC, 2013). As a company operating in a remote area of Solomon

Islands where there is limited access to skilled labor, SolTuna is considering expanding its potential management talent pool by providing additional practical support for more women to move into management positions.

**Women and men can bring different personal qualities, behaviors and insights to management roles.** Many companies believe that women managers tend to be more people-oriented and consultative, and more inclined to interpersonal relations. Given that women often comprise an important proportion of the workforce for many agribusiness companies, having more women managers can also provide companies with deeper insights into the needs and motivations of a greater cross-section of their workers. Women managers can help broaden the scope of discussions and they may be more likely to raise issues like work-life balance and social sustainability that affect women and men alike, but which men are less likely to raise (IFC, 2013; Apesteguia et al, 2012). Tran Kim Lien, CEO of Vinaseed, observed that the presence of women and men in senior management brings a “yin-balance” to decision-making processes and, ultimately, creates a stronger team.

### Improved innovation and problem-solving

**Higher levels of gender diversity in teams can enhance problem-solving and spark innovation within companies.**

Innovation is increasingly important to the ongoing resilience of modern agribusiness companies, which need to find new ways to grow, respond to changing market and environmental conditions, and increase productivity. Vinaseed's CEO, Tran Kim Lien, noted that there is constant pressure for the company to keep developing new products and adapting to change, as “innovation has a short life in this industry”. She believes that teams that foster cooperation, communication, and sharing of ideas are more likely to innovate. Gender diversity can contribute to creating this atmosphere: Biosev managers report that women supervisors and managers often have a different, more communicative management style that promotes a more inclusive team environment and encourages contributions from all team members (see also McKinsey, 2008).

**Gender diversity in research teams helps promote ground-breaking innovation.** Remaining at the cutting edge of science and technology is particularly important for agribusiness companies like Vinaseed, which relies on its research and development (R&D) team to keep generating new varieties of seed that the company can take to market. Gender balance in Vinaseed's R&D team is paying off: over the

### WOMEN LEADING IN AGRIBUSINESS: TRAN KIM LIEN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER AT VINASEED

Tran Kim Lien has been Chief Executive Officer and Chairwoman at Vinaseed (a seed production company in Vietnam) since 2004 and, in this time, has presided over a period of impressive corporate growth. Under her leadership, the company has grown by 25 –30% each year during the period 2010 –15. In 2015, the company's annual revenue increased by 74%, from \$32.2 million to \$56 million.

For Tran Kim Lien, the company's focus on providing a supportive and inclusive workplace for women and men alike is an important part of its commercial success. She says, “we are proud to be a company in the agribusiness sector that prioritises gender equality. We put our ethical values into place, including equal opportunity and transparency.”



Photo © Vinaseed

period 2010–2014, the company succeeded in increasing revenue from internally developed technical and scientific products from 0% to 52%. At Biosev, women account for the majority of workers in laboratories and quality control. A female scientist at Biosev was instrumental in developing the processes to turn biomass into animal feed, expanding Biosev's range of products and improving its environmental sustainability. This success at Vinaseed and Biosev is consistent with a recent study of more than 4,000 companies with R&D teams, which found that the probability of innovative developments significantly increased when there were higher levels of gender diversity (Diaz-Garcia et al, 2013). The researchers attributed this to different perspectives, leading to a wider range of ideas and greater creativity. Similarly, a study of US companies found that positive impacts of female representation in top management are particularly strong in companies that have a strategic focus on innovation (Dezsö & Ross, 2012).

**In many agribusiness companies, women are often involved in the hands-on process of implementing innovative new practices.** In many companies with production or processing activities, women are often concentrated in key operational areas and, as such, play a pivotal role in rolling out new practices (e.g. Agwu et al, 2015; Clugston, 2014). For example, at Afrifresh's Berekisanang production site, predominantly female teams have been trained and entrusted with the job of implementing new citrus-grafting techniques from Europe that are not used by other South African companies. Similarly, at Supreme Poultry, the company considers that the high levels of quality and productivity achieved by its women workers mean that it is better positioned to innovate and introduce new higher-value product lines that require more attention to product quality and packaging.

**Greater gender diversity can enhance performance and bring new approaches to problem-solving at all levels of an organization.** In particular, companies can benefit from recruiting more women into traditionally male-dominated roles and management positions, as women can bring fresh perspectives and ways of working (e.g. Clugston, 2014; KIT et al, 2012; Deszö & Ross, 2012). At Biosev, managers report that in areas where women are relatively new to their role – like the driving of tractors and harvesters – they are less likely to be set in their ways and open to new ways of working. As a science

and technology company, Vinaseed encourages workers at all levels of the company to make regular suggestions for 'continuous improvement' in all aspects of the company's processes. This could include office management, as well as scientific processes. The company values contributions from employees at all levels and considers that gender diversity enhances the range and depth of suggestions that are put forward.

## IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY, YIELD AND PRODUCT QUALITY

**In order to achieve optimal productivity, agribusiness companies need to make full use of the skills and talent of all of their workers – women and men alike – at all levels of the organization.**

Many agribusiness companies operate on lean margins and need to maintain high levels of efficiency and productivity at all levels to deliver high product volumes and quality. In this context, agribusiness companies cannot afford to discriminate on the basis of characteristics that are irrelevant to the requirements of a job, such as gender or race, and must instead recruit workers and managers solely on basis of skills and talent. Productivity can also be negatively affected by the presence of discrimination and harassment, as it distracts workers from focusing on their core functions. This is the view at Supreme Poultry, where managers believe that a non-discriminatory working environment with fair opportunities for women and men leads to better overall business performance.

**Women workers are often responsible for tasks that are critical to labor productivity in agribusiness companies.** Across different segments of the value chain, work traditionally done by women includes key tasks in the production process. It is estimated that women comprise up to 70-80% of the global workforce dealing with harvest and post-harvest tasks such as picking, grading, chopping, mixing, packing, labeling, and bar-coding (Bamber & Fernandez-Stark, 2013). In many agribusiness companies, women also represent the majority of quality-control staff. Olam, a major global agribusiness company, employs 25,000 people in 20 cashew-processing units in Africa and Asia: 90% of this workforce is female, as women are considered to be particularly skillful at the cashew-peeling process (Olam, 2016). Similarly, at Afrifresh, women represent the vast majority of workers

in packhouses at Afrifresh. Both Afrifresh and Olam appreciate that the efficiency with which women undertake these tasks – packing and processing – has a major positive impact on daily product volumes and quality targets.

**Women workers are helping companies meet increasingly complex requirements – and low error margins – regarding product packing and quality.**

Afrifresh employs a majority of women workers in its packhouses, as they are recognized to be particularly skilled at meeting buyer requirements on packaging and product quality. Similarly, managers at Supreme Poultry consider that the particular skills that women workers bring to the plant help it consistently achieve high levels of product quality.

**Giving women the opportunity to work in traditionally male occupations can have a positive impact on productivity.**

Many agricultural tasks and occupations are often gender-segregated. For instance, women are typically less likely to work as drivers of tractors, harvesters, or trucks – all jobs that tend to attract higher pay and workplace status. When Biosev moved away from manual harvesting, it opened up new opportunities for its existing workforce – women and men – to become tractor and harvester drivers. Subsequently, managers found the women drivers to be more careful, more concerned with implementing safety rules and procedures, and less likely to have accidents. At the same time, male co-workers reported that having women on teams was leading to more respectful and less ‘rowdy’ behavior, and better compliance with the spirit of safety protocols that are considered integral to productivity. Biosev does not believe that these developments are necessarily a result of fundamental differences between men and women, but rather a consequence of improved gender balance. In addition, opening doors that are often closed to women creates incentives for performance: the women who take these jobs are highly motivated to succeed as pioneers in these professions.

**REDUCING COSTS BY ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)**

**Combating sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) can translate into lower costs and higher productivity for business.** Violence against

women is a major global problem: a recent study estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate-partner or non-partner violence, and suffer a range of adverse health effects as a result (WHO et al, 2013). However, it is vastly under-reported – one recent cross-country study estimated that GBV is formally reported by only 7% of women who experience it – which can lead companies to underestimate its prevalence and impact on the workforce (Palermo et al, 2013). Sexual harassment and GBV (including family and sexual violence) is not just a fundamental violation of women’s human rights, but also has costly impacts on productivity, retention, and attendance (Hersch, 2015). Companies also incur costs through loss of managerial time to investigate complaints and the payment of legal expenses (including litigation costs). There is evidence that workplace policies to combat GBV and sexual harassment can decrease worker absenteeism and related costs (Walker & Duvvury, 2016; Todd, 2013).

Initiatives to eliminate workplace discrimination and harassment, and to support women can positively impact productivity indicators, such as yield, picking/packing volume and product quality. At Finlays in Kenya, managers considered that the company’s increased attention to policies and procedures on fairness and equal opportunity had boosted worker morale and helped certain product lines achieve higher productivity targets, as well as lower absenteeism. This enhances output: Finlays’ managers estimate that a high-productivity worker can harvest and bunch twice the number of flowers as that of a low-productivity worker (i.e. 2,000 stems per day compared to 1,000) (IFC, 2013).

Companies can also benefit from taking proactive action on broader social patterns of violence against women. Research indicates that violence against women is enormously costly for business, particularly in countries where there is a high prevalence of GBV. For instance, some 10% of absenteeism at SolTuna is attributed to ‘family problems’ and workers report that this also affects their ability to be productive at work. A study from Papua New Guinea (ODI, 2015) found that, for some companies, the cost of lost staff time amounts to around 10% of the overall workforce cost. Another study from Peru (GIZ, 2013) calculated that violence against women

cost business \$6.7 billion across the economy each year, as a result of absenteeism and 'presenteeism' of both victims and perpetrators (i.e. decreased performance at work). In Brazil, it is estimated that domestic violence against women costs the country 1.2% of GDP because of lost productivity (FLACO, 2015).

**Investing in a preventative approach to sexual harassment and GBV makes business sense in the long term.** Companies like Afrifresh and Supreme Poultry recognize that it is easier and more cost-effective to take a preventative approach to sexual harassment and introduce robust policies that are widely communicated to, and implemented with, all workers, supervisors and managers, including senior management. At Supreme Poultry, this includes dismissal when sexual harassment has been proven and providing counseling services and referral to specialist services in the case of GBV. At Biosev, all new workers receive training on the importance of mutual respect and a work environment free of harassment during their induction; the company also facilitates a third-party operated hotline, called 'Talk to Biosev', so that everyone – employees and members of the community alike – has a confidential means of reporting incidents of harassment and violence. Being visibly proactive against sexual harassment helps Biosev improve its recruitment pool, as fear of sexual harassment is one of the factors that make some women and their families reluctant to seek work in the sugarcane industry. In Papua New Guinea, where there are high levels of GBV in the community, IFC is working with the Business Coalition for Women, a national group of companies and business leaders that is committed to addressing GBV, in recognition of the costs to business.

#### INCREASING RESILIENCE THROUGH INCLUSIVITY

**A focus on inclusive, non-discriminatory workplaces and sound HR management systems can increase company resilience.** The 2014 Social and Environmental Report for Afrifresh's Berekisanang farm notes that: "sound ethical practices and programs... help management create a business that is socially and economically sustainable in the long term and illustrate management and worker commitment on the estate". For Afrifresh, equal opportunity for women and men makes the company stronger, creating higher performing teams and a more

cohesive working environment that can help it get through high-pressure production periods.

**Leading global brands are increasingly placing environmental and social sustainability front and center of what they do, and women's employment forms a key dimension.** For global consumer goods giant Unilever, environmental and social sustainability is now integral to its brand, and, as part of this, the company considers the advancement of women's rights and economic inclusion to be a business priority. In this context, global brands want to work with suppliers who can align with their sustainability objectives and demonstrate good practice on labor and working conditions, as a sign of more professional and robust management practices. As a publicly listed company, Biosev considers that tackling gender imbalance in employment and being perceived as a fair and meritocratic employer are aspects of its relationship with potential investors. Its record on corporate social responsibility and sustainability is also an important component of how the company presents itself to the financial markets.

#### MEETING ENTRY REQUIREMENTS TO (HIGHER VALUE) MARKETS

**Over the past two decades, there has been a proliferation in the number of voluntary codes of conduct on labor standards and working conditions.** Increasingly, global supply-chain actors, particularly supermarkets, require their suppliers to meet social standards that are typically included in codes of conduct, such as GLOBALG.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practice). These typically include standards to ensure decent working conditions, including provisions on non-discrimination and anti-harassment. For producers such as Afrifresh, these codes operate as a condition of entry to high-value markets, such as the United Kingdom and other European countries.

**Further, a number of agricultural sustainability standards systems are increasingly focusing on gender in their certification processes** (e.g. ISEAL Alliance, 2015). For example, the UTZ Code of Conduct for tea includes additional requirements on gender, in recognition of the fact that tea production largely takes

place on plantations where women form a large part of the workforce. From the third year of certification, plantations are required to provide separate changing facilities, and certificate holders can score additional points by ensuring that workers have access to safe transportation after overtime shifts, and by providing convenient and affordable day-care services for the children of workers (UTZ, 2011).

**Social compliance is a particularly important consideration for high-value fresh produce,** Where there are direct links between suppliers and supermarkets, and labor conditions are under higher scrutiny by international NGOs and trade unions. As noted by a manager at Afrifresh, the company's ability to demonstrate compliance with codes of conduct is crucial, in that "it is now a market-entry requirement, on par with food safety and traceability." Suppliers are typically required to submit to regular and rigorous 'social audits' to demonstrate compliance on labor requirements and working conditions. Even where buyers do not have comprehensive social-compliance programs, suppliers who can demonstrate compliance with codes of conduct have an added competitive advantage, as buyers recognize that sophisticated management systems and quality assurance are needed to meet these requirements.

**By investing in women's employment, suppliers can demonstrate compliance with buyer codes of conduct.**

This provides ongoing market access and enables suppliers to avoid additional costs associated with extra social audits that are triggered by poor performance on working conditions. Finlays Horticulture in Kenya found that providing women workers with greater voice and agency, through training and worker representation, made its social-compliance program more robust (IFC, 2013). Similarly, Afrifresh managers observed that effective worker-management communication plays an important role in preventing harassment and discrimination, thus ensuring continued high performance on social audits.

**ENHANCED REPUTATION WITH BUYERS, INVESTORS, AND CONSUMERS**

**When suppliers go beyond compliance, they can differentiate themselves from other companies and raise their profile with buyers.** A solid reputation for good working conditions, demonstrated by proactive programs to support women workers, can help differentiate agribusiness companies

**MARKS & SPENCER: "WOMEN PERFORM AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN OUR GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS"**

Marks & Spencer (M&S) is a leading global retailer of food, clothing, and home products. The company is headquartered in the UK, has over 1,300 stores worldwide, and employs 83,000 people. Its food division is a key part of the business, accounting for 57% of its annual turnover.

According to Helen McTaggart, Ethical Trade Manager (Food) at M&S, "The social and business case for promoting women's work is clear for M&S: women perform an essential role in our global value chains, making up 70% of our employees, the majority of our customer base, and over half of the workers in our supply base. Making sure that supply chains are inclusive for women leads to better outcomes both in individual workplaces and in the wider community from which workforces are drawn. This resonates exactly with our stated aims to increase the resilience of our supply chains, and therefore the security and quality of supply."

Source: M&S website ([corporate.marksandspencer.com](http://corporate.marksandspencer.com))



Participants in M&S Emerging Leadership for Hope program in East Africa, which provides leadership training for workers in its supply chain

from their competitors. This is an important consideration for Afrifresh, given that some buyers in higher-value markets have signaled their intention to consolidate their supplier base over time: more than ever, the company needs to find new ways to raise its profile and cultivate a competitive edge. In the case of Finlays Horticulture in Kenya, the company considered that its investment in women's employment had a bearing on its ability to maintain market share with European supermarkets and to be the "partner of choice" when buyers were seeking to source a new product line (IFC, 2013). Similarly, recent efforts to stamp out sexual harassment and improve working conditions in tomato-growing companies in Florida have given participating growers competitive entry to key buyers (Espinoza, 2015).

**Both investors and credit agencies are paying increasing attention to non-financial performance, including human rights and gender.** As part of its approach to risk management, IFC requires clients to apply its Performance Standards on Environmental and Social Sustainability, which includes a commitment to ensure non-discrimination and equal opportunity throughout their operations. A series of similar standards have been established by other development-finance institutions and adopted by commercial banks. Investors increasingly see a company's ability to manage non-financial matters, such as equal opportunity and HR management, as a proxy for overarching organizational effectiveness, which serves as relevant information to evaluate its reputation, value, and long-term performance.

**Consumers may also include social considerations in their purchasing decisions, creating an additional downstream pull for investment in women.**

According to Unilever (2015a), it is clear that "consumers want responsible businesses and responsible brands." Currently, its 'Sustainable Living Brands' – that deliver social benefit as well as product performance and quality – are growing at twice the rate of other brands. Agribusiness companies can bolster their reputation for sustainability through the adoption of positive practices to support women's employment. A strong gender policy can be part of a company's corporate social responsibility strategy and even part of a product's branding and advertising (e.g. KIT et al, 2012). The converse is also true: violation of women's

rights in a company's direct operations or its supply chains can present a serious risk to an agribusiness company's reputation.

## DEVELOPING STRONGER RELATIONS WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

**Investing in women workers and their families can help secure labor supply, but also provides companies with a 'social license to operate' in the local area.** The nature of agricultural production means that primary producers and related businesses are often tied to specific, sometimes remote, locations and ongoing commercial success can be linked to the company's ability to secure good relations with local communities in the long term. According to Olam (2016), "empowering women helps to embed us in communities, where we can build greater trust and loyalty".

**Investing in the well-being of women workers and their families can have a positive impact on the future workforce.** This is particularly important for agribusiness operations in rural areas where the local community is the primary source of the next generation of workers. Women have been found to reinvest a high proportion of their income into the health, nutrition, and education of their families and, as such, play an important role in promoting development (e.g. BSR & ICRW, 2016). For Biosev, its financial contribution to the building and operation of local childcare facilities, as well as its efforts to bring vocational-training providers to rural communities, not only provides tangible benefits to its existing workforce, but also creates stronger bonds with local communities and an investment in its future workforce.

**Companies may also strengthen their links to the local community by working with supplier companies that provide business and employment opportunities for women.** Contract growers to Supreme Poultry currently provide jobs for 448 people, of whom 25% (114) are women. In 2015, Supreme brought on its first female contract grower, Nthabiseng Khuluse, who employs both women and men, and provides better than average working conditions for all staff. To date, Nthabiseng's relationship with Supreme Poultry has been very successful for both parties and she takes pride in

supporting local women as part of this. Supreme Poultry is also working with a local entrepreneur to build a laundry business which could launder factory uniforms closer to the abattoir (they are currently transported a substantial

distance for cleaning), saving on transport costs for the company, and building local business and employment opportunities.

IDENTIFYING LINKAGES BETWEEN SUPPORT FOR WOMEN WORKERS AND BUSINESS BENEFITS FOR AGRIBUSINESS COMPANIES

 **WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT**

- Present throughout global agribusiness supply chains, in range of roles (managers, supervisors, workers, smallholders, hired labor)
- Informal and formal employment
- Concentrated at bottom of agribusiness supply chains, but new opportunities due to new technology and more transparent management practices
- Precarious conditions: seasonal employment, piece rates
- Exposed to Occupational, Health and Safety hazards
- Limited access to education and training
- Remote locations
- Gender discrimination
- Sexual harassment
- Lack of voice and agency



 **EXAMPLES OF EMPLOYER INTERVENTIONS TO SUPPORT WOMEN WORKERS**

- Transparent and merit-based HR frameworks
- Actively recruiting women, especially in non-traditional positions
- Investing in training and education for women
- Reducing OHS risks
- Promoting women into management/supervisor positions
- Improving transportation to and from workplace
- Providing childcare support and flexible working options
- Supporting women's health outcomes
- Enforcing a harassment-free environment (e.g. reporting hotline)
- Providing welfare facilities (e.g. rest areas)
- Supporting women's committees and/or women's participation in elected worker committees
- Providing paid maternity leave
- Ensuring that pregnant women have access to alternative duties
- Supporting returning mothers (e.g. through breastfeeding facilities)
- Supporting local families, including education and health outcomes (e.g. local schools/childcare centers/clinics)
- Encouraging men to share women's work at home or in the community



 **BUSINESS BENEFITS**

- 'Employer of choice': improved recruitment/retention at all levels
- Access to more skilled/educated workers
- Improved innovation and problem-solving
- Stronger decision-making through increased gender diversity in leadership
- Stronger and more cohesive teams
- Cost savings through improved worker loyalty and better staff retention
- Improved productivity, yield, and product quality as a result of healthier and better trained workers
- Reduced recruitment costs (ability to promote internally)
- Increased resilience through inclusivity
- Meeting entry requirements to higher-value markets
- Improved image/reputation with existing and future buyers, customers, and investors
- Stronger relationship with local communities
- Improved compliance (national legislation/codes of conduct)

## HOW AGRIBUSINESS COMPANIES SUPPORT WOMEN WORKERS

### CREATING FORMAL EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN (AND MEN) IN RURAL AREAS

**Agribusiness companies often create much-needed formal employment opportunities for women (and men) in rural areas, where formal jobs are otherwise scarce.** In many cases, modern agricultural value chains offer opportunities for wage and self-employment with better pay and working conditions than in traditional agriculture (FAO, 2011). Larger agribusiness companies can provide access to formal employment, with relatively stable income, security of employment, and minimum statutory working conditions. The growth of large-scale agribusiness in developing countries can also provide new opportunities for rural women to migrate out of unpaid family labor on farms (Bamber & Fernandez-Stark, 2013). Even where the work is seasonal, larger companies are more likely to provide more regular, ongoing opportunities across several seasons, with better working conditions. This can help reduce women's economic vulnerability, particularly for low-wage, unskilled workers, and provide women with a degree of economic empowerment.

### **A strong company commitment to equal opportunity can support women by providing equal access to formal jobs.**

At present, women are more likely than men to be in precarious seasonal or casual working arrangements in many agribusiness sub-sectors (de Pryck & Termine, 2014; FAO, 2011b; Maertens & Swinnen, 2009). For example, some 75% of women workers in the South African fruit industry, 60-75% of women in Zambian vegetable production, and 65% of female workers in Kenya's flower industry are hired on casual or temporary contracts (Barrientos, 2007). This has a direct impact on women's pay, as permanent workers can receive up to 70% more than non-permanent workers (Maertens & Swinnen, 2009), and women workers employed on a temporary basis often have limited or no access to benefits, training, and promotion (FAO, 2011b).

### ESTABLISHING STRONGER HR MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND WORKER-MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

### **Putting in place a professional, transparent, and consistently applied HR management framework**

**Transparent and performance-focused HR policies provide a fairer working environment that benefits women and men alike.** A robust HR framework helps ensure fair and consistent treatment of all employees – permanent and seasonal – by supervisors and managers, and forms the necessary foundation to guarantee equal opportunity for women and men at all stages of the employment relationship. This requires setting out a strong commitment to merit-based people management and equal opportunity at all aspects of employment, including, but not limited to: recruitment, regularization of labor, wage levels, benefits, access to training, and promotion. At Afrifresh, women workers are confident that they will be treated fairly because of the company's consistently applied policies. As explained by one supervisor, "At Afrifresh, you always know where you stand ... It's fairer here than on other farms."

**Transparent and merit-based wage frameworks can help address the gender wage differential.** Studies have uncovered gender discrimination in wages and benefits in horticulture, although this appears to be easing and the difference tends to be less in the export sector, where companies are more likely to be subject to social audit (Bamber & Fernandez-Stark, 2013). Nevertheless, even in companies that are monitoring their compensation to ensure that women and men are paid equally, there often remains a wage gap due to gender-based occupational segregation: men often receive higher wages for jobs that require greater strength (and employ few or no women), but women do not receive higher pay for jobs that require high levels of dexterity and attention to detail (and employ few or no men). The fact that women are often more likely to be employed as seasonal, rather than permanent, workers also depresses women's earnings. Addressing this issue is not only the right thing to do, there is also an associated business gain: companies with more transparent, merit-based recruitment and pay systems are more likely to attract and retain the best workers (women and men alike) (e.g. Mercer, 2016).

**Regular awareness training for workers, managers, and supervisors on company policies can help embed positive corporate values and raise awareness of gender issues in the workplace.** Afrifresh provides annual induction training for all permanent and seasonal workers who participate in the harvest, regardless of whether they have already participated in previous sessions. The company considers this an important mechanism to reinforce messages about the company's policies and procedures. At Vinaseed, there is a strong focus on training managers, including soft skills, such as corporate ethics and interpersonal communication: the company believes that managers represent the backbone of the company and must be correctly equipped to set the right example for others. Similarly, Finlays identifies its supervisor-training program as a key element in its efforts to improve HR management and reinforce a culture of equal opportunity (IFC, 2013).

At Afrifresh, Biosev, and Supreme Poultry, all workers participate in induction training that strongly emphasizes a culture of mutual respect, free of harassment.

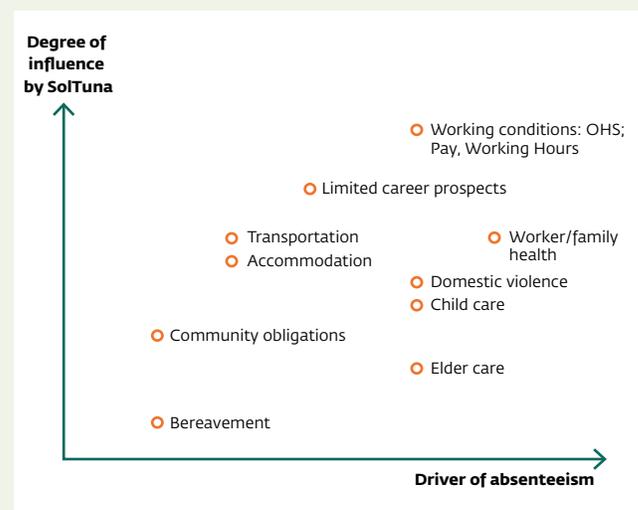
### Providing structures for worker–management communication and grievance mechanisms

**Mechanisms for worker–management communication provide a crucial two-way information channel to understand the needs of all workers, including women.** This means ensuring that all workers – women and men alike – have a voice in the workplace. On Afrifresh farms, women and men actively participate in elected worker committees, which meet regularly to discuss a range of issues with management, including: OHS, housing, and general working conditions. At Afrifresh's Berekisanang production site, women comprise 42% of worker representatives on the workplace health and safety committee, 20% on the general committee, and 40% on the housing committee. According to Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, the worker-committee system is important to anticipate and manage conflict, allowing management to detect issues before they escalate: "Our worker committees are like a pressure-releasing valve. Where there is smoke, there is usually fire – I don't want anything to turn into a blaze. I want workers to come to me and tell me when something is wrong."

## SOLTUNA: IDENTIFYING ROOT CAUSES AND PRIORITIZING ACTION ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

When designing interventions to support women workers, companies can maximize impact by considering the root causes of workforce-related challenges and the extent to which these challenges lie within their sphere of influence. This kind of analysis should always involve consultation with workers (both women and men). Companies can achieve higher impacts by targeting issues over which they have greater control.

IFC has been working with SolTuna, a tuna-processing facility in Solomon Islands, to consider how best to tackle high levels of absenteeism that are costing the company more than \$1,580,000 in lost productivity each year. An IFC diagnostic study (which included the analytical diagram below) found that one of the most important drivers of absenteeism is health: more than half (53%) of all absences are related to the ill health of workers or their families. This suggests that the company could make significant inroads on absenteeism through a program on health education. However, there are constraints on the company's influence over factors outside the workplace that have an impact on family and community health outcomes. By contrast, the company has direct control over other workplace-related factors that play a role in absenteeism, including working conditions, OHS, pay, working hours and career pathways.



Source: IFC Gender Secretariat, 2016.

### **Some companies provide additional spaces for women**

**to discuss ideas and concerns.** Globally, women's participation in institutions for social dialogue, such as labor councils and advisory boards, is limited (FAO/IFAD/ILO, 2010). In this context, companies may wish to consider introducing additional mechanisms to ensure that women's voices are heard in workplace discussions. One of Afrifresh's production sites in South Africa has started trialing a separate meeting for female worker-committee representatives, as a means of providing a space for women to raise issues of particular concern to them. At Finlays in Kenya, the company introduced elected women's committees more than ten years ago to empower women in the workplace, and these are still operating today.

### **A formal grievance mechanism provides an important means for women (and men) to raise individual and collective issues.**

It typically takes the form of an internal procedure for complaints, followed by consideration and management response and feedback. Grievance mechanisms should be tailored to the individual circumstances of each company, but should take the different needs of women and men into account. This can include, for instance, providing an option for workers to lodge anonymous grievances via suggestion boxes (such as at Afrifresh's Berekisanang production site), in case workers feel too timid to report a grievance in-person. Good practice also involves having a male and female staff member available for receiving, processing, and addressing grievances, so that employees can choose to whom they wish to speak. Biosev operates a free telephone hotline (Talk to Biosev), which can be used by any employee (or community member) to raise a grievance against the company. The line is operated by a third party, which passes all grievance and complaints to the company for investigation by a senior management team at corporate level. Grievance mechanisms should always be carefully monitored for effectiveness: the absence of complaints may be an indication that the mechanism is not trusted by workers, rather than a sign that the workplace is problem-free (IPIECA, 2012).

## ENHANCING CAREER PATHWAYS

### **Providing equal access to skills training and education**

**Companies that emphasize equal access to formal skills training and education can provide women with stepping-stones into positions with higher pay and status.** Training may be provided internally, externally, or on-the-job. At Vinaseed, women employees highly value the company's emphasis on individual professional development: the company takes a targeted approach to training, and each worker agrees on a training 'roadmap' with their supervisor or manager, based on individual training needs. In 2015, Vinaseed funded 251 places at external training events and 275 places at internal training events, across a workforce of 287 employees.

**A smart, holistic approach to training can benefit women at different levels of the organization.** Enabling all workers, through training, to proactively comply with the company's quality, health, and safety procedures is an important component of Biosev's strategic objective of becoming the world's top sugarcane producer. Biosev also invests in its future workforce by supporting 'new apprentices', a work-study program for high-school students who decide to seek vocational qualifications in technical fields of relevance to sugarcane production and processing. The children of current employees are especially encouraged to apply to this program and – although selection is strictly merit-based – a high proportion of the apprentices are young women. While Biosev does not finance workers to obtain a basic driving license, it provides training to women and men to advance to the level of tractor driver. The company held special workshops for its manual harvesting staff to encourage women, as well as men, to put themselves forward for the full tractor driver training, and the women who took up the opportunity reported a big impact on their confidence (and earnings) and have become ambassadors for encouraging other women to follow suit. Grants to pursue additional education and vocational qualifications (on workers' own time) are also available to high-performing workers and are used by several women. In one of its sites, near a small population center where Biosev is the largest employer, the company is cooperating with the national workforce development agency, SENAI,

to provide mobile training trucks. This makes training more accessible to its workers, as well as to the community at large (see also Babu et al, 2016; IFC, 2013).

**Women can benefit from additional encouragement and support to complete tertiary studies that are relevant to agribusiness.** In many agribusiness sub-sectors, women are much less likely to undertake the kind of studies or training that would allow them to access higher paid positions within agribusiness, such as agronomy or agribusiness management. Very few women complete higher education in agricultural science, despite female workers representing a significant proportion of the workforce in agribusiness sectors in several countries (FAO, 2011). In this context, targeted support for women's education and training can increase their chances for promotion and prepare them for managerial, supervisory, or technical roles. In Vietnam, Vinaseed provides support for all employees to pursue further education, such as master's degrees, including study abroad. At Biosev, several women workers have taken advantage of the company's program of grants for high-performing workers to pursue further educational and vocational qualifications on their own time, and have subsequently advanced to leadership positions.

**Skills training and development opportunities are often particularly valued by women in rural areas,** where average income levels are lower and the costs involved in accessing formal education are more difficult for individuals and families to bear. Because women are often concentrated in seasonal and/or temporary employment, they often have more limited access to training, giving them fewer opportunities for promotion and skills upgrading. Lack of general, as well as professional, education may further limit women's access to decision-making positions within companies and industry associations, as well as their confidence to assert voice and agency more generally in the workplace. Also, fertility levels are likely to be higher in rural areas (ODI, 2016), which tends to result in greater care-giving responsibilities for women, limiting the time and financial resources they can spend on pursuing formal qualifications. In this context, opportunities for formal education and training are often highly appreciated by women workers and can have a positive impact on their loyalty and long-term commitment to the company.

**Women (and men) in rural areas are more likely than their more urban counterparts to have lower levels of literacy and reduced access to basic education.** As a result, women and men alike may lack the basic education necessary to progress at work, such as being promoted to supervisory roles or participating in more advanced training. Afrifresh's Berekisanang farm provides workers with access to basic literacy and numeracy training. The courses are particularly attractive to women, who value the training: since the program began in 2011, women have comprised 84% of all participants.

**In the agribusiness context, workplace-training programs need to take into account harvest schedules and peak seasons.** Biosev has almost completely eliminated seasonal employment in its efforts to build a highly trained and committed workforce: periods between harvests or other unavoidable downtimes are used to train workers – both women and men – within their teams. Providing training during regular working hours is particularly helpful to women who may otherwise be excluded from participation because of their household responsibilities, such as childcare or meal preparation.

### Promoting women into leadership positions

**Ensuring a more representative proportion of women in management and supervisory positions can have an important transformative effect.** Women are present in a range of roles across agribusiness, but they tend to be disproportionately represented in low-skill, labor-intensive activities. This pattern is not unique to agribusiness: across a range of sectors, women tend to be under-represented at every level of the corporate pipeline (McKinsey, 2012). It has been associated with – often culturally reinforced or rooted – perceptions of women's and men's respective characteristics and corresponding professional skills.

**Agribusiness companies may need to take proactive steps to encourage women to enter leadership roles.** While a non-discrimination policy is an important tool for promoting equal opportunity in the workplace, it is unlikely – on its own – to enable companies to make significant inroads into increasing the number of women in management, given that, in many agribusiness companies, women

represent a small minority of senior managers. There are a number of reasons for this, including relatively lower levels of women with the right qualifications or perceptions that agribusiness is not a suitable field for professional women. As a starting point, companies should ensure that all internal and external advertising for management posts makes it clear that both women and men are welcome to apply. When women are appointed to lead all-male teams, they may face resistance from some team members; supporting women managers in such situations, by, for example, accepting that some men may choose to leave rather than be managed by a woman, can send important signals that the company is serious about equal opportunity and merit-based promotions.

**Higher-impact strategies to increase the proportion of women in management may involve greater financial outlay.** For some companies, this involves a direct financial investment in women with leadership potential through formal mentoring or training programs. For instance, Afrifresh provided a female junior farm manager with a loan to complete her professional diploma in farm management. The Leadership and Mentorship program (see box on page 32) is an example of a formal sector-wide initiative, including support from UK supermarkets Tesco and Asda, to enhance the gender (and racial) diversity profile of business leadership in the South African fruit industry. Biosev follows a more informal approach to mentoring: one of its recently promoted senior women managers made it part of her employment package to have a regular monthly lunch with the company's CEO, both to ensure that she is on track and to send a signal to other women that senior women are accepted at the company.

**Some leading companies introduce targets or reporting requirements on women in management in order to create more momentum and track progress.** Targets are aspirational objectives (as opposed to quotas) and have been found by many companies to be a useful tool to improve performance on a range of business issues, including gender diversity. Unilever has introduced ambitious targets: the company already has 45% of its management positions filled by women and is aiming to reach 50% by 2020 (Unilever, 2015a). Women already

hold 50% of the positions on Unilever's board. Nestlé, a global food and beverage company, reports annually on the percentage of leadership positions held by women and the figures are steadily rising, reaching 34% in 2015 (Nestlé, 2015).

**A clearer focus on performance can help improve gender balance in leadership teams.** Biosev does not have explicit quotas or targets related to gender diversity; however, by focusing on recruiting a high-performing, new management team, it has made impressive progress. Even though only 7% of Biosev's employees are female, women represent 12% of supervisors and 22% of senior managers.

**Leadership, mentoring, and skills-development programs that target women can strengthen company leadership and management.** Vinaseed has training courses for workers who are identified as potential future managers and aims to include women and men alike in these programs. In an artichoke-processing farm in Peru, management introduced a number of measures to provide women with the leadership skills needed to take up management and supervisory roles (KIT et al, 2012). At Biosev, a key role of managers and supervisors at all levels is to identify employees with the potential to grow into positions of greater responsibility; women, as well as men, are additionally encouraged to let their supervisors know that they are interested in further advancement. As well as providing more formal training opportunities, the company also uses workers' vacation periods or other absences to allow employees to gain experience in a higher level position or to rotate through different responsibilities.

## PROMOTING GENDER AND RACIAL DIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP: LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP PROGRAM IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN FRUIT INDUSTRY

The Leadership and Mentorship program has been running in the South African fruit industry since 2012. The purpose of the program is to develop leadership potential on farms and packhouses, and, in the process, transform leadership profiles within agriculture. In 2014-5, women represented 25% of training beneficiaries over two intakes.

In 2014-15 (ie. "15" instead of "5"), the course was implemented by the Fresh Produce Export Producers (FPEP) with funding from the UK's Department for International Development and UK supermarkets Tesco (an Afrifresh buyer) and Asda/IPL. These UK stakeholders see an overlapping business and social-development case for changing the leadership profile in the fruit industry, so that it reflects race and gender in a more equal manner.

The program focuses on improving the leadership of employees through mentorship, so they can graduate into positions of management. Mentorship is provided by pairing employees with existing farm and packhouse managers. This increases capacity, which fosters an inclusive and productive working environment that can keep pace with a fast-changing and highly competitive industry. The mentorship component also ensures sustainable and long-term learning.

An independent evaluation found that the program has been a resounding success. Researchers found that the problem-solving ability of participants increased by 105%, 35% of participants received promotions, and a further 30% were earmarked for promotion.

**Source:** <http://www.tgvc.com/m-amp-s-sa>; additional materials provided by Tesco, 2016.



Photo © Tesco

## Providing access to non-traditional occupations

**Improved access to non-traditional roles can help increase women's take-home pay.** In many sub-sectors, there are high levels of gender-based occupational segregation. Often, this segregation is linked to social norms and ideas about what constitutes appropriate work for women and men, but women's access to certain roles may also be restricted by gender-based job restrictions in law: this is the case in 100 economies covered by the World Bank Group's Women, Business and the Law project (World Bank Group, 2015a). Typical jobs carried out by female employees on commercial farms include nursery, transplantation, pest control and monitoring, weeding, and harvesting, while, in processing plants, women's tasks include activities such as washing, peeling, cutting, sorting, packing, and labeling (USAID, 2006). By contrast, men's tasks typically include activities involving heavy lifting, driving, and the handling and repairing of machinery or potentially hazardous chemicals.

**Remuneration for many typically male tasks is often higher than for those carried out by women.** For example, spraying, irrigation, and the operation of vehicles, all typically carried out by men, were found to be paid 20-30% more than traditionally female activities in Kenya's horticultural industry (Oxfam & IPL, 2013). Companies can address these earning discrepancies by breaking down occupational segregation; for example, Afrifresh is looking to introduce opportunities for women general workers to train as tractor drivers, enabling them to boost their hourly pay by an extra 14%.

**A simple but powerful tactic is to communicate clearly that women and men alike can apply for all jobs.** In many workplaces, traditional ideas about what constitute appropriate jobs for women and men can act as an important barrier for women's entry into certain occupations, so women may need extra encouragement to apply. These ideas are often entrenched among women and men alike and can be difficult to shift. However, once the first few women take up non-traditional jobs in a workplace, this shows others that it is possible and opens the way for broader change. For example, in many agribusiness companies, tractor driving or plant operation is typically a male job, but there are signs

that this is beginning to shift. Afrifresh has found that women farm workers have started to express interest in becoming tractor drivers and the company is now piloting the proactive inclusion of women in its driver-training program.

**The first women recruits in non-traditional occupations can provide a powerful and motivating example to others.** Biosev now employs a number of women as tractor, harvester, and truck drivers. While the company has not explicitly targeted women in recruitment campaigns, to date, in smaller communities, the novelty of having women succeed in this traditionally male occupation ensures that news spreads more widely that women are welcome in such jobs. The women who take up these roles can be important advocates for encouraging other women, as they tend to feel empowered by learning new skills and breaking into a male-dominated environment. New qualifications like a driver's license mean a lot to women for a number of reasons: they increase women's take-home pay and status in the workplace, they boost women's self-confidence in their ability to learn new skills, and they also provide women with valuable and transferable skills that increase their options in applying for new jobs and promotions.

**Providing women with access to non-traditional forms of employment in agribusiness can lead to a better working environment for everyone.** Men, too, may benefit from having more gender-diverse teams. Male co-workers at Biosev reported that the arrival of women on their teams has led to a politer and more collegial working environment. Additionally, they noted that women in agricultural operations tended to take better care of their equipment, leaving their vehicles tidier and cleaner at the end of their shifts: this was welcomed as it introduced some friendly competition, encouraging male co-workers to match these higher standards.

**Companies can also provide additional training for women to learn the new skills they need to take up jobs that are usually occupied by men.** In Kenya, Finlays Horticulture set up comprehensive training programs for its employees, including targeted support and skills development for women, enabling them to also work in traditionally male-dominated occupations within the company (IFC, 2013).

## OLAM: TRAINING PROGRAM FOR WOMEN TRACTOR DRIVERS IN ZAMBIA

Northern Coffee Corporation Limited (NCCL), Olam's coffee subsidiary in Zambia, is championing gender diversity with a training program for women tractor drivers in its coffee estates. Based in Kasama, Northern Zambia, the program aims to promote economic development and create female role models, while also tracking progress towards women's empowerment and gender equality.

The training program lasts two weeks and its main focus is training women to operate heavy-duty tractors safely. With practical instructions as a key component of the training, the women learn to handle and understand the maintenance aspects of the machines.

The coffee estates now have five fully trained women drivers and plan to hire more when they expand their tractor fleet. According to Paul Bebbington, General Manager at NCCL: "When we hired the first female tractor driver on the farm, there were a few raised eyebrows from men working at the estate... By launching the tractor driver-training program, we created an opportunity for women to become role models and an inspiration to their peers."

Sanga Prisca (see photo), one of the newly trained women tractor drivers says, "We never thought that it was fair that only men got to do this job. But now that women can also do this job, we are very happy... We think it is great. We feel very special. It is only here at Olam that women do this. My family is happy that I drive a tractor. It pays well. That's how I provide for them. I think the men are a little bit scared of us, the fact that we do this kind of job, but they respect us. The job is very challenging, but I love my job. Apart from the money, I love to drive a tractor, because being a tractor driver earns me respect."

This new initiative, set up by NCCL management, has taken steps to enhance gender diversity on the estates, which Olam considers has positive implications for the company and the community. More and more, rural women are becoming leaders and agents of economic growth by seeking jobs that increase their income and status, and promote an environment for social change.

**Source:** Olam, 2016



## CREATING SAFER AND MORE SECURE WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

### Taking a gender-aware approach to OHS

**Much agricultural work is hazardous by nature, including work allocated to women.** Tasks typically carried out by women in agribusiness, such as harvesting, processing,

cutting, labeling or packaging, often require repetitive movements, a lot of bending, or long standing hours (TPAWU, 2011). Additional hazards include the handling of machinery, and chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers, although some of these more hazardous activities are often assigned exclusively to men (Leonard

et al., 2015; Oxfam & IPL, 2013). These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that, in many countries, agriculture is often the least well-covered sector in the economy with respect to national OHS regulations and their enforcement (FAO et al, 2010). All workers, both women and men, benefit from training on safety, both related to the ergonomic aspects of their own jobs and regarding the handling of potentially hazardous materials and equipment.

**In this context, a rigorous company-level approach to OHS for all workers – women and men – is critical.** At Biosev, eliminating accidents and ensuring a safe working environment is more than mere statutory compliance. The company is focusing on OHS because it is confident that this is key to ensuring the quality and long-term sustainability of its production processes. Having daily briefings on safety for agricultural and production workers at the beginning of each shift fosters worker engagement: it leads to lower accident rates (and related costs) but, just as importantly, builds workers' trust and commitment, and creates a more participative work culture (thereby increasing productivity). Cargill Zambia, a company that trades and gins cotton, has a rigorous focus on OHS for all workers – both women and men – and regularly reinforces good working practices through training and regular feedback on how to perform tasks safely (World Bank, 2015).

**A gender-aware approach to OHS means recognizing that women and men may be exposed to different risks.** In agribusiness, women and men are often concentrated in different jobs and may face physical and psychological hazards that are specific to those jobs. Alternatively, where they face the same risks, women and men may respond differently, as a result of physiological differences, including their different reproductive make-up (ILO, 2013). Agribusiness companies can help protect women and men by conducting OHS risk assessments and mitigation measures in a way that accounts for any potential gender differences and by ensuring that all workers have equal access to OHS training and equipment.

**By taking a closer look at the OHS risk profile of different jobs, companies can improve health outcomes and attendance levels for all workers, women and men.** Many countries

in the world have different regulations on the weights that men and women are permitted to lift as part of their job (World Bank Group, 2015a). In Brazil, for example, women are prohibited from working in jobs that regularly require lifting more than 20 kg, or occasionally more than 25 kg. Such restrictions can limit women's access to higher paid jobs in agribusiness. Yet, as an agricultural manager in Biosev explains, jobs organized around such heavy lifting are also likely to have long-term adverse health impacts for male workers, particularly those who are older, leading to higher rates of injuries and higher costs in terms of healthcare and absences. Biosev is confident that, in the next two or three years, technological solutions will have eliminated the need for heavy lifting in many of these jobs, opening employment up to more women, and improving working conditions for all workers in these jobs.

**Additional safeguards and OHS requirements during pregnancy and breastfeeding are an important consideration.**

In many countries, women workers are protected against dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy and are entitled to alternative duties if their work may be of danger to their own life or that of their unborn child (World Bank Group, 2015a). For example, Afrifresh encourages women workers to report pregnancy early, so that pregnant and breastfeeding women can be kept well clear of blocks of land that have been sprayed with pesticides. (These blocks are also clearly marked with red flags.) Also, subject to a risk assessment, supervisors can allocate alternative lighter duties to pregnant and breastfeeding women. Ensuring that pregnant women are transferred to appropriate alternative duties is also standard procedure at Biosev.

**Companies can also take care to provide adequate and correctly fitting personal protective equipment (PPE) for women and men.** PPE should be provided in a variety of sizes and fits to accommodate women and men's different body shapes. Correctly fitted PPE is not only safer, but also more comfortable for workers and having a range of different sizes does not usually create extra expense for employers. Biosev is currently considering introducing uniforms for pregnant women, in line with initiatives by other ethanol producers, given that it represents a relatively low-cost initiative that is often greatly appreciated by women.

### Investing in safe transportation and on-site facilities

**Safer transportation to and from work can empower women to take up and continue employment**, especially in rural areas where the general availability of transportation is limited, or where women start or finish work at times when no transportation is available. Convenient transportation to the workplace reduces travel time, which benefits all workers, but provides particular assistance for women, who tend to face greater time pressures as a result of family and care-giving responsibilities at home. Convenient transportation can also make it easier and more comfortable for pregnant women workers to continue working during their pregnancy.

**Unsafe transportation to and from work can represent an important personal security risk for women**, especially where agribusiness companies are located in remote areas or operate night shifts (e.g. World Bank & IFC, 2014). At Supreme Poultry in South Africa, women and men alike have benefited from the company's introduction of dedicated transportation for night-shift workers, as all workers had personal safety concerns about moving through the local area at night. Similarly, workers have benefited from a travel allowance at Cargill Zambia and transportation for night-shift workers at Zambia Breweries (World Bank, 2015).

Providing sufficient on-site facilities, such as toilets and changing rooms, that are separated by gender, as well as facilities for mothers and parents, constitute an important

investment in gender diversity. In Brazil and many other countries, women returning from maternity leave are entitled to nursing breaks at work (World Bank Group, 2015a). Providing facilities such as lactation rooms, where nursing mothers are able to pump breast milk in privacy and a refrigerator where milk can be stored, are low-cost options to help women return to work after maternity leave that contribute to their healthy post-partum recovery and to the health of their babies. On-site kindergartens or childcare facilities can help ensure that babies and children are kept away from hazardous materials and equipment.

### Addressing sexual harassment

**Strict rules on sexual harassment create safer and more productive working environments for everyone.** Agribusiness companies need to be particularly attentive to sexual harassment, as it tends to be more prevalent where there is a high proportion of temporary labor and/or where there is a significant proportion of women workers on low pay who are supervised predominantly by male supervisors. Women farm workers, and particularly seasonal workers, tend to be most vulnerable to harassment, due to lower levels of education and the scarcity of jobs in rural areas, which often makes them less aware of their rights and more reluctant to report problems for fear of losing their job (e.g. Jacobs et al, 2015). Sexual harassment may also go unreported due to a lack of awareness of what it means or because of social stigma attached to discussing experiences of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment and GBV against female workers has been found to be widespread in some

## A CORPORATE PARTNERSHIP THAT IS JOINTLY ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) FOR INCREASED IMPACT

The IFC-supported Business Coalition for Women (BCFW) is a group of 54 companies and corporate leaders who are working together to drive positive change for women and businesses in Papua New Guinea (PNG). BCFW helps PNG's private sector recruit, retain, and promote more women. Member companies have exclusive access to relevant and practical tools, model policies, good practices, case studies, and other resources to support women's economic empowerment and career development, while also benefiting from women's economic participation and enhanced community efforts.

BCFW recently launched a one-of-a-kind model workplace policy on sexual harassment, which member companies can easily replicate and apply to their own workplaces. The model policy outlines the purpose, principles, and parameters of the policy, provides a clear definition of sexual harassment, highlights the complaints procedure, and gives additional guidance on formal versus informal investigations, false accusations, protection against reprisals, and recordkeeping.

**Source:** <http://bcfw.org.pg/ourwork/developing-gender-smart-workplace-policies-and-practices/>

horticulture farms in Tanzania (TPAWU, 2011) and Kenya (BSR HER, 2014; Oxfam & IPL, 2013), while in Papua New Guinea, fear of sexual violence has been found to be a barrier to women's participation in agribusiness (World Bank & IFC, 2014).

**Company policies are most effective in eradicating sexual harassment and discrimination when they are widely communicated and consistently implemented.** In many countries, there is limited legal protection against sexual harassment and GBV (see World Bank Group, 2015a). In this context, a proactive and preventative approach by employers provides a critical safeguard for women workers. This includes robust policies that are widely communicated and regular training for managers, supervisors, and workers. In South Africa, Afrifresh has a zero-tolerance approach to harassment and discrimination and requires all workers to undergo annual training on company HR policies, including communication of

its non-discrimination and anti-harassment policy (see also ETI, 2015). This provides important protection for Afrifresh's women farm workers, given that one survey of low-wage women workers in South Africa found that 40% had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, with the figure rising for those in majority-male workplaces (cited in Budlender, 2011). Similarly, multinational agribusiness companies operating in Zambia, including Cargill Zambia (cotton) and Zambia Breweries (beverages), have strict rules in place to deal with harassment and other workplace issues (World Bank, 2015).

**Effective grievance mechanisms are critical to the success of anti-harassment policies.** Unilever (2015) notes that an increase in the number of grievances was an essential indicator of progress in its work on sexual harassment in Kenya, as it demonstrated trust in the grievance procedure (see text box below).

## **UNILEVER: ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PROVIDING SAFER WORKPLACES FOR WOMEN**

Addressing sexual harassment is a key challenge for Unilever: in its 2015 Human Rights Report, the company acknowledges that, "a culture of sexual harassment is endemic in agriculture in many parts of the world and, therefore, the likelihood of this existing in our own locations and our extended supply chain is high."

In response, Unilever has created a **Safety of Women and Girls Programme**, with a focus on preventing and addressing sexual harassment its own operations and extended supply chain. The program draws on the company's experience in Kenya, where a 2010 investigation by SOMO (a Dutch NGO) and the Kenyan Human Rights Commission uncovered evidence of sexual harassment and gender discrimination at Unilever's Kericho tea estate. Unilever took the allegations extremely seriously and has subsequently introduced a range of measures to address the problem, including:

- An extensive investigation into the allegations, followed by strong disciplinary action;
- An increase in the ratio of women leaders;
- A strengthened management team, including a dedicated Welfare Officer;
- A strengthened grievance procedure; and
- Training and awareness-raising regarding what constitutes sexual harassment and how to prevent it.

In January 2016, Unilever issued a joint commitment to prevent sexual harassment with IndustriALL and IUF, the international unions that represent the company's workforce. The commitment makes it clear that sexual harassment is a disciplinary offence and that the company will not tolerate victimisation against employees who raise complaints. Unilever also committed to provide training to all its staff and managers on its sexual harassment policy. Additional awareness and training measures will be undertaken for areas of higher risk such as plantations, where high levels of temporary labor have been employed and where there are high numbers of females supervised by a majority of males.

**Source:** Unilever, 2015 & 2016; Unilever, IndustriALL and IUF, 2016; SOMO, 2010.

### Establishing electronic wage-payment systems

**Electronic wage-payment systems bring greater personal safety for women.** Only 41% of wage earners in developing countries receive their wages into bank accounts (Demirguc-Kunt et al, 2015). However, cash payments often bring personal security issues, particularly where worksites are located in rural areas far from formal banking services and workers may have to store cash for long periods of time. Ensuring that all workers are paid via electronic payment systems – and that banking services are available locally – not only improves personal safety, but can also help increase the financial independence of women by moving them from the limitations of a cash-only economy and connecting them with the financial mainstream (e.g. World Bank et al, 2014). At Afrifresh, it is company policy to pay workers' wages via electronic transfer: all of the company's permanent workers have bank accounts, as well as the vast majority of its seasonal workers. For the small number of seasonal workers who do not have formal bank accounts, wages are paid onto pre-paid debit cards.

### INVESTING IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

**Enhancing access to basic health services can make an important contribution to improving women's quality of life, while improving worker attendance.** On-site health clinics or employer-supported medical insurance can help improve women's health outcomes, and reduce or eliminate the time that women need to take off work to attend public clinics. Health interventions can be particularly powerful in remote areas, where clinics may be under-resourced and/or situated far from the workplace. In South Africa, one of Afrifresh's farms offers medical insurance to all of its workers, which is highly valued by women workers, particularly those who have used it during their pregnancy (see box). Supreme Poultry has just supported the introduction of an optional, low-cost health-insurance scheme targeting low-income employees: the scheme is paid for by employees (ZAR 250/\$17 per month), but the company has been able to negotiate a discount on their behalf. The scheme brings doctors to the worksite, saving employees from having to take time off and avoiding transportation costs related to visiting a doctor.

### MEDICAL INSURANCE FOR WORKERS AT FRUIT STAR (AFRIFRESH), SOUTH AFRICA

Afrifresh recently introduced medical insurance for permanent workers at its Fruit Star site in KwaZulu Natal. For a small monthly contribution (ZAR 137/\$9.50), workers gain access to a private health clinic, with no waiting, faster service than public clinics, and dental and eye care. As part of the program, the farm also offers free on-site testing and awareness training for HIV, and breast and ovarian cancer.

Workers at Fruit Star have reported high levels of satisfaction with the new medical insurance program. In particular, women workers who had recently given birth said that the medical insurance was very helpful during their pregnancy: they considered that the quality of care was higher and they did not have to wait for long periods to see a doctor. Other women workers also said that they valued the higher-grade care. Maya, a general worker, said, "The medical insurance is very important to me. I can go to the doctor and get professional help. You can get a sick note from the doctor, but it is much harder from the [public] clinic." Medical insurance also makes it easier for workers to get treatment when they are low on cash, because expenses are covered directly by the insurance.

The company is currently assessing the outcomes of the program at Fruit Star and will consider rolling out the scheme to more farms. So far, there are thought to have been a number of benefits for Fruit Star: absenteeism is thought to have gone down, with lower levels of days off for illness now that workers are receiving better medical care.

**Source:** Interview with Afrifresh, 2016.

**Worker health programs can provide women (and men) with information that might otherwise be difficult to access in rural areas.** At Afrifresh's Berekisanang production site, the company offers HIV training once a year for all workers and provides access to confidential testing for workers who want it. According to Melinda Dolby, Afrifresh's

Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator, the company’s open approach to HIV awareness has helped diminish the stigma regarding the illness: “We had a farm manager here who was HIV-positive and everyone knew. People talk about it more openly now and, as a company, we do [awareness-raising] campaigns.”

## **BSR HERPROJECT: THE BUSINESS CASE FOR HEALTH PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN WORKERS IN KENYAN HORTICULTURE**

HERproject is a global partnership initiative run by BSR, a global non-profit business network and consultancy dedicated to sustainability. HERproject works with companies to promote investment in the empowerment of women working in global supply chains, by providing workplace education programs on health (HERhealth), financial inclusion (HERfinance), and positive gender relations (HERrespect).

In 2012, BSR launched HERhealth in East Africa, beginning with a pilot in the Kenyan export horticulture sector. This segment has grown rapidly in Kenya and now provides much-needed formal employment opportunities for up to two million workers, many of whom are women. In 2013, horticulture exports, including fruit, vegetables, and flowers, accounted for \$1 billion in earnings.

Under the pilot, two farms in Kenya provided training on women’s health to approximately 1,200 women workers in the floriculture, fruit, and vegetable industries. Training covered a wide range of health issues, including family planning, hygiene, nutrition, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and ergonomics. Supplier involvement was sponsored by UK retailers Marks & Spencer and Sainsbury’s.

An evaluation of the pilot found that the program had clearly benefited the farm’s female workforce. For example, there was a reported 34% increase in the number of women who know how to conduct a self-administered breast examination, and a 23% increase in the number of women using family-planning products. Moreover, both participating farms saw a reduction in illness-related absenteeism – by 14% at the first farm and 12% at the second – demonstrating the positive business impacts that result from investments in health in the workplace. Other impacts included a boost in worker morale and self-motivation, as well as improved confidence, communications, problem-solving, and leadership skills among the female peer educators.

Following the success of the pilot, the HERhealth program has now grown to cover 30 sites in Kenya, benefiting more than 18,000 female and male workers, with the support of an additional seven global brands. The program has broadened to include a module on male engagement on all farms and strengthened its focus to support farm clinics and nurse training to increase the efficiency of existing health services on farms.

**Source:** BSR HERproject, 2014; further information provided by BSR, 2016.



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## PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR WORKING PARENTS

**Employer-supported childcare and flexible working arrangements can help working parents to manage work and family responsibilities.** Across the world, the gendered division of household labor means that women typically assume responsibilities related to housework, child-rearing, and elderly care (World Bank, 2014). In some cases, this limits women's participation in the labor force, while in others, it means that women bear an additional domestic burden alongside their paid work. In rural areas, family and household responsibilities may constitute a heavier time burden, because of poor infrastructure and lack of facilities and services (FAO et al, 2010). For instance, surveys from 45 developing countries show that women and children bear the primary responsibility for water collection (Grassi et al, 2015).

**Strict compliance with statutory requirements is an important starting point.** All of the case-study companies featured in this publication follow (and sometimes exceed) statutory requirements for paid maternity leave and sick leave, which is also usually available to look after sick children. While these benefits are mandated by law or collective agreement, implementing them fully and in the spirit of the law creates loyalty and support from workers.

**Additional initiatives to support working parents can provide much-needed support to women workers.** Alongside statutory requirements and government-provided childcare, employers are well-positioned to support childcare through a range of strategies. The most appropriate types of support will differ according to context, but may include one or more of the following: direct childcare services (such as free or subsidized places at workplace childcare centers); financial assistance (such as vouchers or subsidies toward the costs of childcare); information (such as providing employees with information or referrals to local childcare providers); and community childcare (such as contributions to local community childcare programs). In South Africa, Afrifresh has established childcare centers at a number of its production sites, providing subsidized childcare for permanent workers on farms, while flexible arrangements for professional staff at its head office are valued by working parents.

**The case studies show that forms of support for employees with caring responsibilities, such as childcare or flexible work arrangements, can pay off in terms of retention, attendance, and commitment.** Afrifresh provides workplace kindergartens to keep children out of harm's way on farms and to allow their parents to focus at work. Biosev invests in community partnerships on early care and education so that new mothers can return to work, at the same time as enhancing its reputation in its local community. All companies provide some flexibility for women with children in professional and managerial jobs. The case studies highlight the importance of role models, showing that women can be mothers and work in even the most senior positions.

**Supporting workers' access to childcare also leads to broader gains for economic and social development.** Evidence from both developed and developing countries suggests that investments in early childhood education and care have substantial long-term macroeconomic benefits, ranging from more productive labor markets to improved health outcomes (e.g., Berlinski & Schady, 2016; Cunha & Hecker, 2007). According to research carried out in the US, the benefits are considerable: the US government estimates a return of \$8 for every \$1 that is invested in early childhood education and care (The White House, 2014).

## ESTABLISHING GENDER-DISAGGREGATED DATA-COLLECTION FRAMEWORKS

**Robust data collection systems help companies better understand the position of women and men in their workforce and assess the short-term and long-term impacts of investment in employees.** Implementing gender-monitoring systems may in some cases require additional effort and investment, but they are crucial in enabling companies to assess how investments have benefited both women and the business, and to identify good practices, challenges, and interventions that did not produce the intended outcome (IFC, 2013; BSR & ICRW, 2016). A dedicated gender diagnostic or assessment provides a baseline for understanding the position of women and men within the company and a clearer picture for setting future goals and measuring progress over time.

**Companies that measure the position of women (and men) within the workforce are better positioned to demonstrate leadership.** It is easier for companies to promote their achievements and highlight good practice if they can provide concrete evidence of outcomes and to benchmark against – and potentially influence – good practice within the broader agribusiness sector. Better measurement can also help promote good practice internally, creating incentives for ongoing momentum and support on any existing or new initiatives to support women workers and convincing any remaining skeptics in the organization.

**Certification enables a more systematic approach and signals a clear commitment to gender equality.** Working with certification bodies can provide companies with a more structured approach to gender equality and a stronger starting point to design and implement holistic gender strategies. SolTuna worked with IFC and EDGE, a global certification standard for gender equality, to conduct a thorough gender diagnostic that combined quantitative and qualitative sources of information. Qualitative sources of data included: responses to a standardized and structured questionnaire on HR policies and practices from EDGE; key informant interviews of managers and staff; and focus-group discussions with staff and former staff. Quantitative data sources included: the EDGE Staff Survey; demographic and absenteeism data; employment statistics provided by SolTuna; and a four-week study of reasons for absenteeism for workers in the production department.

**Where possible, data should be collected on a gender-disaggregated basis** to enable a comparative assessment of women's and men's position within the organization. Relevant HR indicators that should be tracked by gender over time – most likely by the HR department – include:

- Overall numbers of workers;
- Numbers of workers in different parts of the organization;
- Numbers in management;
- Workers recruited;
- Employment status (permanent/seasonal/part-time/full-time/temporary);
- Direct employment versus indirect employment;
- Promotion rates;

- Employee retention rates;
- Employee absenteeism rates;
- Rates of return after maternity leave (women-only); and
- Median wages/wage distribution.

**Maternity return rates are an important gender-specific metric to measure how successfully a company is supporting its women workers to accommodate new family responsibilities.** Ideally, companies should track not only the number and proportion of new mothers who return to work after maternity leave, but also the number of new mothers who are still working at the company 12 months after the conclusion of their maternity leave.

**Companies may be able to gather important data from employees.** Employee-satisfaction surveys can provide evidence of workplace culture and attitudes, including changes over time. Data from employee-satisfaction surveys should be collated on a gender-disaggregated basis. Exit interviews can also provide further information: in collaboration with IFC, SolTuna analyzed staff resignation letters in order to gain insight into the range of issues that were contributing to high levels of staff turnover, including health problems of individual workers and their families, as well as feedback on working conditions.

**Companies that measure outcomes and are fully aware of the business benefits of investing in women's employment are more likely to embed it within their organization and business strategy.** This publication sets out a range of different company initiatives from the agribusiness sector, many of which are relatively low cost and some of which have involved greater investment. While small-scale or ad hoc interventions can have a high impact, benefits are likely to be amplified – both for women and the business – where companies design and implement a more targeted strategy on women's employment. The most successful interventions to support women's employment are likely to be tailored to a company's specific circumstances, with regard to its size, the nature of the work, the composition and needs of the workforce, geographic location, and the company's overarching business strategy.

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## PART II: COMPANY CASE STUDIES





CASE STUDY

# Afrifresh – Fresh produce (export), South Africa

September 2016

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## Company Background

Afrifresh is a leading South African producer and exporter of fresh fruit. The company specializes in table grapes and citrus (grapefruits, oranges, soft citrus, and lemons), with buyers in over 50 countries. It is a vertically integrated business, with activities spanning the whole agricultural value chain, incorporating farming, processing, marketing, and distribution. In 2015, the company had combined global sales of 44,978 tons of table grapes and citrus, and its total turnover was R245 million (\$16 million).

Afrifresh is representative of a new generation of large-scale, corporatized farming operations in South Africa that are emerging as smaller farms are absorbed by larger producers (DAFF, 2014). Prior to 2009, the company operated as an export agent only, buying fruit from local producers and selling it on to overseas buyers. From 2009 onward, the company embarked on an ambitious strategy to expand its operations and move into production, so that it could better control the supply and quality of its fruit. The company bought a number of citrus and table grape farms across South Africa, many of which were 'in distress' and required significant capital investment to renew and expand their production capacity.

At the beginning of 2016, some 43% of the company's crop capacity was still immature, but will reach full production by 2017, meaning that Afrifresh will nearly double its export volumes in the next two years. The company's expansion has, so far, had dramatic consequences for its workforce size and composition: the number of permanent workers increased fivefold in just over 12 months, from December 2010 to January 2011, and the profile changed from a predominantly office-based environment to a majority of unskilled farm workers, many of whom live in employer-provided accommodation on its 12 rural farms. By the end of 2015, Afrifresh provided employment for 1,220 permanent workers on 10 sites across South Africa, up from 151 in 2009, and 4,144 seasonal workers. Once the company's new plantings reach full maturity, the workforce will grow even further.

This case study focuses on four Afrifresh sites: River Fresh (Western Cape – citrus and table grapes), Berekisanang (Northern Cape – citrus and table grapes), Fruit Star (KwaZulu Natal – citrus) and the company's head office (Cape Town).



Photo © Afrifresh

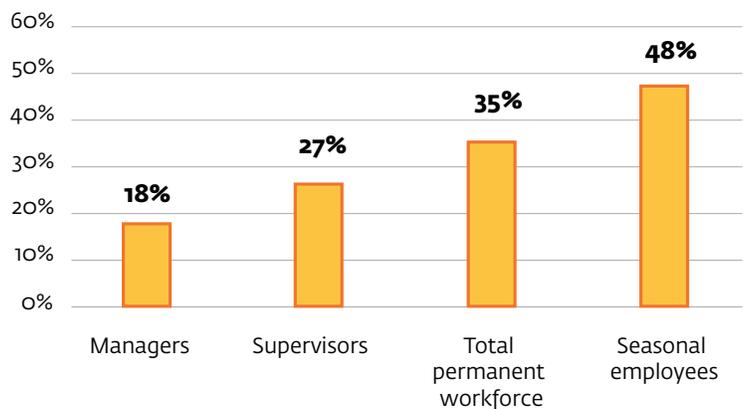
# HOW AFRIFRESH SUPPORTS WOMEN WORKERS

*Women are an important part of the workforce at Afrifresh, comprising 35% of the permanent workforce and 48.5% of the seasonal workforce. At head office, women are present in administrative, quality-assurance, and management roles, while on farms women tend to be concentrated in operational roles that require high levels of attention to detail, such as vine development, picking table grapes and smaller citrus, and grading and packing fruit (both table grapes and citrus). They are also present in farm administration. Men are more likely to occupy jobs that require greater physical strength – such as picking larger citrus, heavy pruning of vines and trees, and palletization – and those with higher skill profiles and correspondingly higher pay grades, including farm managers, supervisors, truck and tractor drivers, and machine operators. These gender-based occupational patterns are consistent with norms in the broader industry.*

Women workers at Afrifresh benefit from the company’s objectives to be a responsible employer and establish an efficient HR management framework that supports growth and competitiveness in global markets. Afrifresh’s approach is informed by three main business drivers:

- Buyers in high-value markets expect strict compliance with national labor laws and international ethical standards;
- Managers understand that a loyal and motivated workforce is good for productivity; and
- A strong policy on equal opportunity and anti-harassment helps the company draw on the talents of all workers (regardless of gender or race) and develop more diverse teams and management.

**WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE AT AFRIFRESH, 2016**



## A FAIRER, MORE TRANSPARENT APPROACH TO HR MANAGEMENT

Following its move into farm production, Afrifresh has devoted considerable time and effort to developing and implementing a clear framework of standardized HR management policies across its production sites. This has been no small task, as each site had previously operated as a discrete entity with its own independent approach to worker relations. While there are challenges associated with managing multiple of sites, it offers important opportunities to share knowledge and good practices across farms, including on women's employment, and pilot innovative practices on individual sites before rolling out across the company.

Afrifresh emphasizes transparent and equitable labor practices that are consistently applied across sites. This is not just a question of business efficiency; it is a critical tool for transforming worker-management relations on Afrifresh farms in the context of post-apartheid agriculture in South Africa. Under apartheid, farm workers had few legally recognized rights, as agriculture was exempted from most forms of labor regulation (Barrientos & Visser, 2012). Women (colored and black) were particularly vulnerable; male farm workers were employed on a permanent basis on the condition that their spouse or female relative worked seasonally (Barrientos & Visser, 2012). Employment in the sector has undergone important changes since this time, including the introduction of a number of protective laws. However, the industry as a whole is still grappling with the legacy of racial segregation on farms and historically entrenched mistrust between farmers and workers.

In this setting, the new Afrifresh structure signals a concrete change for the better: a transition from the management structure of smaller (sometimes family-run) farms without a dedicated HR function, to a larger corporate entity with the resources to think more strategically about HR management and implement new, standardized systems. This includes, for example, putting in place and communicating a transparent wage structure, so that workers with low levels of literacy and numeracy understand what their pay slip means and how wages are set within the company. A number of women farm workers said that they appreciated the new HR systems introduced by Afrifresh, noting that the approach was “fairer.”

Complementing its HR policy, the company has developed its own company-specific social standard called ‘AfriAgri’, which it uses to benchmark the performance of individual farms on social and labor standards. AfriAgri covers a range of matters, including safeguards for women workers, such as requirements on non-discrimination and anti-harassment. AfriAgri is principally based on the requirements of Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA), a comprehensive ethical-trading standard developed by the fruit industry in South Africa to respond to growing demand from international buyers of fresh produce for increased attention to working conditions. Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, explained that the farm pays very close attention to labor standards so that it can meet SIZA requirements: “Any day of the year, anyone can walk onto this farm and do a social audit at any time, and we can pass.”

“The farm rules here are strict. There is respect and discipline – I like this. Everyone has to follow the rules.”

Paulina, farm worker, Berekisanang

“At Afrifresh, you always know where you stand. Afrifresh is strict on this with bonuses and wages. It's fairer here than on other farms.”

Lena, supervisor, River Fresh



Photo © Afrifresh

## WORKER–MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

An important part of the HR framework is building and maintaining effective worker–management communication systems on all farms, through the establishment and capacity-building of elected worker committees and effective grievance mechanisms. Women actively participate in these committees, which meet regularly to discuss a range of issues with management, including occupational health and safety, housing, and general working conditions. The committees also provide a mechanism for managers to disseminate information back to workers.

Some farms have sought to create additional channels to listen to women’s views: for example, women committee members at River Fresh now have a separate meeting with a management representative to provide space for discussion of women’s perspectives on workplace issues. This could potentially include, for instance, concerns regarding childcare, harassment, or training opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

## ZERO TOLERANCE FOR DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

Afrifresh’s HR framework includes a strong policy on equal opportunity and anti-harassment, with a zero-tolerance stance on discrimination and harassment of any form (including domestic violence against workers living on farms). These policies – as well as information on working hours, wages, OHS, and other aspects of working conditions – are communicated to all managers, supervisors, and workers during their induction training, helping ensure that policies are consistently applied and workers are aware of their rights. On farms, all seasonal and permanent workers receive induction training on Afrifresh policies at the beginning of the picking season, regardless of whether they have previously attended training sessions. Afrifresh varies the format to keep the message fresh and stimulate discussion afterwards. Effective worker representation and individual grievance mechanisms are also important safeguards.

“Being part of the Afrifresh Group means that we are more corporate than other farms. It also means that we pay a lot of attention to harassment – any kind of harassment. The whole policy is communicated very clearly during induction training... Also, the worker committee is our eyes and ears. Anyone can come in and complain about anything.”

Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator, Berekisanang

Afrifresh’s proactive training and awareness-raising on harassment and discrimination provides an important protective mechanism for workers. Women farm workers tend to be most vulnerable to harassment (particularly seasonal workers), due to lower levels of education and the scarcity of jobs in rural areas, making them less aware of their rights and more reluctant to report problems for

<sup>1</sup> European supermarkets started introducing individual standards on working conditions in the 1990s, with greater emphasis on compliance in South Africa from 2007. This has resulted, in great part, from local and international civil society campaigns for improved working conditions on farms, particularly for women workers. Afrifresh has participated actively in the development and implementation of SIZA, which is based on South African legislative requirements and benchmarked against the international Global Social Compliance Programme (GSCP). See: <http://www.siza.co.za>. Other key standards in South Africa include GlobalG.A.P. and the ETI Base Code.

## THE BEREKISANANG EMPOWERMENT FARM

Berekisanang is an ambitious flagship program for Afrifresh: a 400-hectare, greenfield, citrus and table grapes operation in South Africa's Orange River region that supports local job creation and skills transfer for previously disadvantaged populations. It is one of the largest Black Economic Empowerment projects in South African agriculture.

Berekisanang ("Let's work together," in Tswana) is jointly owned by Afrifresh (39.1%), a workers' trust (17.01%), and South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation (43.89%). The workers' trust gained equity in the project by contributing 500 ha. of water rights, which it received via government grant in 2012, awarded on the basis of the historic disadvantage of the black and coloured workers in the trust. These water rights have been vital for the establishment and ongoing sustainability of the project.

As a greenfield project, Berekisanang has created new jobs for 228 permanent workers (27% women) and 270 seasonal workers (35% women), as of 2016. When the farm reaches full production, it will have created over 1,100 new jobs, as well as indirect employment in the local community.

The trust beneficiaries – comprised of 21 black and coloured Afrifresh workers (33.3% women) with more than 10 years of service – will receive dividends from the project when it reaches full production.



Photo © Afrifresh

fear of losing their job (e.g. Jacobs et al, 2015). One survey of low-wage women workers in South Africa found that 40% had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, with the figure increasing for those in majority-male workplaces (cited in Budlender, 2011).

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women represent 18% of managers and 27% of supervisors at Afrifresh. Although Afrifresh does not have a dedicated program to increase gender diversity in management, its focus on equal opportunity and identifying the best person for the job, regardless of gender, means that women have made their way into a number of key leadership and non-traditional roles in the company. These women act as important role models for others at all levels of the company, and the industry more broadly.

- Women have made some inroads into farm management. Women farm managers are still a rare sight in the industry, but some progress has been made at Afrifresh. At Berekisanang, the company's flagship site, Adri van Niekerk is one of two top-level managers and was the driving force in setting up the Berekisanang site. At Fruit Star, Anne-Marie Bartels was General Manager from 2008-2012, taking on a role that is almost exclusively occupied by men elsewhere in the industry. (Anne-Marie has subsequently moved into a corporate role to oversee systems management across Afrifresh farms.) Following in Anne-Marie's footsteps at Fruit Star is Winile Khumalo, a young black woman, who has recently been appointed as the company's first woman junior farm manager.
- Women hold influential positions in corporate management and standard-setting at Afrifresh. At head office, food scientist Susanne de Waal is part of the company's senior management team, leading Afrifresh's program on quality assurance and compliance, with more than 20 years' experience in agribusiness. Her team includes Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator, and together Susanne and Melinda oversee the company's performance on social compliance, ensuring that all production sites meet buyer requirements on working conditions. (Across the industry, quality assurance and social compliance are areas that tend to be dominated by women.)
- Women have gained board-level representation: At the beginning of 2016, Afrifresh appointed Lynne Davis to its seven-member board as its first woman non-executive director.

## WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL POSITIONS

Managers reported that women farm workers are starting to express interest in moving into occupations that have been dominated by men. For instance, tractor driving is a typically male role; this is often attributed to prevailing gender norms and the fact that women farm workers are



Photo © Afrifresh

"It's difficult being a woman. Men sometimes say, 'she can't tell me', but they have to listen, because I'm the manager. Now it works okay, but at the beginning it was hard. But part of this is also that you are new to the job and you have to learn how to work with people."

Winile Khumalo, Junior Farm Manager,  
Fruit Star

“Women and men work together well because we have the right systems in place. Afrifresh doesn’t allow any form of harassment. When you sign the employment contract, it includes everything: no drugs, no headphones, no harassment.

I tell the women on my team, ‘if you have a problem, you can tell me and I can take it forward’. If they feel uncomfortable, there is also a policy that they can write an anonymous letter to management.

You hear a lot about harassment on other farms, but not here. Maybe it’s because they have a strict policy and everyone knows about it.”

Sylvia, supervisor, Berekisanang

less likely to hold their driver’s license. However, over the last couple of years, women farm workers have started proactively expressing an interest in undertaking company-sponsored training to obtain licenses for driving tractors, trucks, and pick-up trucks.

Women’s interest in tractor driving is partly motivated by the fact that it attracts a higher hourly wage (approximately a 14% increase for general workers), along with transferable skills, workplace status, and opportunities for greater responsibility, but is also sparked by a recognition that modern tractors can be just as easily driven by women as men. Sylvia, a supervisor at Berekisanang, explained, “We want to do what men do ... At the end of the day, we already do all of the hard work on the farm – there’s no reason we can’t do this, too. We want to get our tractor licenses.”

Afrifresh now has one female tractor driver at Fruit Star, out of 16 in total (with more women lined up for training), and there are plans to roll this out across all of their other farms, including Berekisanang and River Fresh.



Photo © Afrifresh



Photo © Afrifresh

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN ACCESS TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Afrifresh encourages all employees – women and men alike – to participate in training and professional development activities. This approach often benefits women in particular, providing a stepping-stone to positions of greater responsibility and higher wages that have traditionally been held by men, such as driving. This emphasis on equal opportunity is also important given that some research suggests that men are still the primary beneficiaries of training in South African horticulture, particularly production-oriented training (Barrientos & Visser, 2012).

Since 2012, Afrifresh has provided support for 86 ‘learnerships’, national vocational training accreditation courses that involve on-the-job training and classroom learning, and result in a formal qualification. These are funded partly by Afrifresh, partly by government subsidies. Women have significantly benefited from this training, which has mostly focused on fruit grading and packing (a typically female-dominated area in the industry). So far, 46% of learnerships have been taken up by women. These qualifications enable workers to enhance their skills in relation to their current jobs and increase their prospects of future career progression, particularly in light of Afrifresh’s expansion plans.

Women have also been exposed to unique on-the-job training opportunities, including at Berekisanang and Fruit Star. In 2015, Afrifresh flew in a team of skilled citrus grafters from Spain to employ a new grafting technique (patch grafting) to promote faster productive growth of citrus trees. The grafters provided highly specialized training on these grafting techniques to predominantly female teams, making them among the first in South Africa to obtain these skills. Sylvie, a supervisor at Berekisanang, said that women were very positive about the experience: “We feel great about learning the grafting techniques. We can now go to other farms and teach people how to graft.”

Some Afrifresh farms support basic literacy and numeracy courses for workers, which are attended by a significant number of women. At Berekisanang, the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) program is run by Sylvie and Anna (see photo page 14), two women supervisors who attended Afrifresh-sponsored training in order to teach the class. Since the ABET program began in 2011, women have accounted for 84% of beneficiaries. Fruit Star also has a dedicated adult education center for workers, where government teachers provide classes in the evenings after work.

In a number of cases, the company has provided workers with loans to alleviate financial pressures so they can finish their training. For instance, Afrifresh provided Winile Khumalo –



Photo © Afrifresh

“I like that everything here is a challenge. I’m learning new things all the time... I like that there is a variety of tasks. It never gets boring.”

Lena, general farm worker, Berekisanang

“They give us so many learning opportunities here... [and] the General Manager gives us a chance and listens to us. This is different from other farms.”

Christa van Rooi, Administrative Assistant and Director of the Workers’ Trust, Berekisanang

Fruit Star's Junior Farm Manager – with a loan based on a formal training contract, so that she could finish her professional diploma in agricultural management through distance learning while working on the farm.

Some training also provides an opportunity for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their leadership potential. In February 2016, workers from Berekisanang are participating in an industry-run Leadership and Mentorship program that aims to provide opportunities for individuals from historically disadvantaged groups, including women, to gain the skills they need to be promoted into positions of leadership. Berekisanang has consciously made a decision to include general farm workers in the program, as well as supervisors, to provide opportunities for individuals with potential at all levels of the organization.

## SUPPORT FOR WORKING PARENTS

Afrifresh provides a range of benefits to support workers who are balancing paid work with unpaid care responsibilities. In South Africa, women tend to be the primary care-givers (Statistics SA, 2013).

Support for working parents includes:

- **On-farm childcare:** Afrifresh runs kindergartens for workers' children at no or very low cost at three sites: River Fresh, Berekisanang, and Galactic Deals. Kindergartens are provided on farms where it is a local industry norm, such as at River Fresh in the Western Cape, or in regions such as the Northern Cape, where workers are more likely to have young children living with them on farms.
- **Flexible working arrangements:** At head office, employees can choose staggered starting and finishing times for their working days. This flexibility is available to all staff, but is particularly valued by parents who need to coordinate school and/or childcare drop-offs and pick-ups.
- **Additional maternity payments for professional staff:** Under South African law, workers are entitled to 16 weeks' unpaid maternity leave, during which time they are eligible for benefits under the national Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). These payments are made on a sliding scale and capped for top income earners. For professional staff with more than five years' service, Afrifresh tops up the UIF maternity payments with 50% of their salary while on maternity leave.



"I wanted to teach ABET [basic literacy and numeracy] because I wanted to learn more. It's a nice thing if you can learn something and give it back to others: there are a lot of people here who can't read and write. It also helps me to teach my kids at home."

Sylvie, ABET teacher and supervisor, Berekisanang (pictured right, with Anna, ABET teacher and supervisor (left)

# THE BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY

## SOUND EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES HELP SECURE ACCESS TO HIGH-VALUE MARKETS

Afrifresh targets high-value export markets for its products: over 80% of its table grapes and 27% of its citrus are sold to the UK and other EU countries. Buyer standards in these markets are demanding, not only with respect to product quality and tight schedules, but also scrutiny of working conditions on farms. This has been a major development in food retail over the past ten years, with international buyers in high-value markets increasingly requiring fresh-produce suppliers to demonstrate compliance with international codes of conduct on labor and working conditions. This means that Afrifresh and other suppliers are required to submit to regular and rigorous workplace audits that cover a range of ethical issues, including non-discrimination and anti-harassment.

For Afrifresh, the management time and resources that it dedicates to ensure compliance with ethical standards across its operations – including non-discrimination and anti-harassment – are a prerequisite for ongoing access to EU markets: “Any non-compliance issue with workers can damage our potential to export to these markets”, said Colette Hugo, Compliance Coordinator at River Fresh. As a result, the company takes compliance with social standards, including those that relate to women’s employment, extremely seriously.

Maintaining best practice is particularly important given that some of Afrifresh’s buyers in high-value markets are looking to consolidate their supplier base; i.e. source higher volumes from a smaller number of suppliers. In this context, individual farms work hard to make sure that working conditions are compliant. According to Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator at Berekisanang, “If you got into a social audit, you know you have to walk out with a ‘gold’. You have to keep the standards as high as possible.”

In this context, Afrifresh sees a clear business case in going beyond strict compliance with social standards and investing in best practice. This helps the company stay ahead of its competitors and anticipate shifts in buyer requirements. According to Charl du Bois, Marketing Manager, there is an increasing focus on ethical compliance, including proactive initiatives to promote better working conditions, particularly in the UK: “We get asked about labor a lot ... This is really important in the UK, where buyers have big expectations of their suppliers. However, given that it wasn’t really expected ten years ago anywhere, we expect that this could increase in importance in other markets, as well”.

Even if other markets do not adopt the same high requirements, Afrifresh’s status as a supplier to EU markets can be used as part of its sales pitch to customers in other markets, where it is recognized that sophisticated management systems and quality assurance are needed to succeed in EU markets.

There is also a cost saving attached to strong performance on social audits. Suppliers have to bear the cost of social audits, which can cost up to ZAR 35,000 (\$2,430) per farm, depending on its size, and take up management time. If social auditors find that a farm has serious non-compliance issues

“Everyone is asking about what we do to uplift women workers. When a supermarket comes to visit, they will ask about this. We need to work on this so as not to be behind [our competitors].”

Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator,  
Berekisanang

around working conditions (e.g. endemic harassment), companies have to pay for more frequent audits compared to those farms who pass audits with good grades. According to Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator: “We try to stay half a step in front of the industry. That way, when ethical standards are upgraded (e.g. to include additional requirements on labor), it’s a breeze for us.”

Recruiting and promoting women can help Afrifresh meet its targets under national legislation, which requires businesses to submit annual reports on racial and gender diversity, and demonstrate efforts to increase gender and racial diversity.

## TESCO: WOMEN WORKERS AND SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAINS

Tesco is one of the world’s largest supermarket retailers, serving millions of customers each week across 11 countries. In financial year 2015/16, its annual sales reached £46 billion (\$67 billion). Tesco is an important buyer for Afrifresh.

Tesco aims to work with suppliers who provide good jobs to workers and uphold international labor standards, including non-discrimination: “By protecting human rights, we give customers confidence, as well as ensuring we are a good neighbor wherever we operate. This isn’t just the right thing to do: we also know that suppliers that invest in their workforce and create good places to work prove to be the most innovative and effective partners for our business for the long-term.”

For Tesco, women’s employment is an important dimension of sustainability. Tania Moodley, Tesco’s Responsible Sourcing Manager for Africa, says that, “As a global business, it matters to us that we have a positive impact wherever we work. Therefore, we have partnered with industries and suppliers across our global supply chains to firstly understand the challenges that women face in agriculture and [determine] how best to respond to these as part of our responsible-sourcing agenda.”

Source: material provided by Tesco, 2016.

## LOYAL AND MOTIVATED WORKFORCE SUPPORTS THE COMPANY’S GROWTH STRATEGY

Afrifresh knows that it needs to maintain a reliable core of loyal, motivated managers and workers to underpin the company’s expansion in the next few years, both in terms of permanent and regular seasonal workers. The company’s workforce is projected to grow to 2,000 permanent workers and 6,000 seasonal workers by 2020. This will create a number of additional management challenges, particularly regarding recruitment and training, which should be mitigated where there is already a strong Afrifresh ‘people culture’, underpinned by the HR framework and sound relations between management and workers. Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, explained, “We are going to be growing vast volumes of fruit here. We need to have the right teams in place by the time the big volumes come in. That is why we need to be so serious about this.”

In this context, the company will benefit from retaining employees in order to maintain institutional know-how and long-term sustainability. According to Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, this logic applies at all levels: “We want to create a culture where people want to work for us and want to stay ... Even losing a tractor driver who knows

how to spray the vines, this creates a gap”. Existing workers can help train and provide oversight of new workers. This means providing the right working conditions for women (and men), as well as opening up new career pathways for women farm workers – such as tractor-driving and management – that encourage employees to stay and strive for promotion.

Afrifresh managers identify a number of business benefits associated with providing the right working conditions that enable them to retain the best workers, permanent and seasonal alike. This includes providing a supportive environment for women that is harassment-free and gives women a voice in the workplace. Sexual harassment is not only illegal and distressing for victims, but can also be costly for business, with a detrimental impact on productivity, retention, attendance, and workplace communication (Hersch, 2015). Afrifresh’s efforts to put strong protective safeguards in place – in terms of policies, training, and consistent enforcement – are important, as sexual harassment can be difficult to detect. Limited awareness and social norms often make women (and men) reluctant to discuss experiences of a sexual nature in the workplace.

According to Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator at Berekesanang, maintaining a stable workforce generally leads to a more harmonious, cohesive, and productive workplace, with fewer problems, less conflict, and less likelihood of harassment. This means that workers are less likely to be distracted by interpersonal disputes and less management time is spent helping workers resolve the issues. In addition, permanent employees help manage the seasonal workforce, according to Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekesanang: “We need a rock-solid core of permanent workers here, so that they create the right culture when seasonal workers come in.”

There is also a recognition that women are good workers who help the company meet its production and quality targets. According to Dirk Lategan, General Manager at River Fresh: “We like to use women workers because they are simply better with the grapes, which are delicate fruit that need careful handling. Women are more detail-oriented.” This is one of the reasons why women represent the vast majority of workers in packhouses, where fruit is graded and weighed. Increasingly, producers in the industry need more productive and skilled workers in packhouses to manage the complex quality requirements of different supermarkets and improve efficiency (Barrientos & Visser, 2012). Buyers have low error margins regarding many aspects of product quality, so attention to detail is critical. For example, whole batches of table grape shipments can be rejected if the weight of individual plastic punnets does not meet the buyer’s required measurements.

Women’s sense of responsibility and care for equipment is one of the reasons why managers are listening carefully to women’s requests to start driving tractors. As observed by Colette Hugo, Compliance Coordinator at River Fresh, “We think that they will probably take better care of the equipment [than men]. Tractors typically cost between 700,000 and 1,000,000 ZAR (\$49,000-70,000), so it’s definitely worth taking a look at”.

“My blood and sweat is in the ground here. It’s like it’s my own farm. I can’t see myself working elsewhere. These people are like a family to me.”

Lena, supervisor, River Fresh

## MORE DIVERSE MANAGEMENT LEADS TO BETTER DECISION-MAKING AND MORE INNOVATION

Large agribusiness companies like Afrifresh increasingly need more skilled people and cannot afford to overlook the talents of half of the workforce; i.e. women. Historically, farming in South Africa has been a male-dominated industry, with farm ownership based on patrilineal inheritance structures. However, modern agriculture operates in a very different world and, in order to be competitive, farms need to increase in size and draw on more diverse skill sets, including business management and scientific knowledge. As agribusiness companies grow, there is increasing competition among producers for the most capable managers who can deliver the best results. Furthermore, many of the farms are based in remote areas where it is difficult to attract the right people, providing yet another reason for broadening the talent pool and ensuring that women can advance at all levels of farm management.

By including women's voices in management discussions, Afrifresh benefits from new perspectives that strengthen company systems and practices. A number of women managers at Afrifresh said that their curiosity and persistent willingness to ask questions are some of their key strengths. As observed by Melinda Dolby, Afrifresh's Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator: "We are not afraid to ask questions. We bring the 'Why?' to the table." Similarly, Adri van Niekerk, Project Coordinator at Bere किसानang said: "Sometimes male egos get in the way of asking questions: they feel like they should know the answers already and will look stupid if they don't. Women are less concerned by this." Having more female voices in management can also help broaden the scope of discussions, raising issues like work-life balance that affect all workers, but which men are typically less likely to raise (also see IFC, 2013).

As Afrifresh continues to expand its operations and workforce, it intends to adopt a more proactive approach to developing its internal management pipeline, providing an important opportunity to support historically disadvantaged groups, including women, and introduce more diverse voices in management. This means identifying talented individuals in the workforce and providing the training and mentoring support they need to step into new leadership roles as the company grows. In addition to the benefits associated with greater diversity, there will be other advantages: internally recruited supervisors and managers will be equipped with valuable company know-how from their first day on the job and the existing workforce is more motivated if they see opportunities for future career progression. To date, the company has been growing too fast to develop talent internally and has relied more on external recruitment. This has led to large recruitment costs: over the period 2013-2015, Afrifresh spent R1,958,544 (\$133,398) on external recruitment, a figure that it hopes to reduce in the future by developing a stronger internal pipeline.

## A REGULAR SEASONAL WORKFORCE UNDERPINS HIGHER PRODUCTIVITY AND LOWER COSTS

To remain competitive in global fruit markets, Afrifresh strives to deliver the greatest possible volume of fruit, at the highest possible quality and the lowest cost. Labor is one of the company's major costs, so in order to be as competitive as possible, the company needs to operate on the basis of a lean, decentralized structure, with high levels of efficiency and productivity on all farms. While Afrifresh benefits from economies of scale, it still faces a number of cost pressures, including inflation, a severe drought in South Africa, and competition from other growers, both within and outside South Africa.

Afrifresh aims to take on the same seasonal workers each year, providing some certainty of income for these workers and their families. For Afrifresh, there are clear productivity gains attached to ensuring that its best seasonal workers return each year to pick and pack fruit during peak season. Experienced seasonal workers can work faster and require less oversight from supervisors. High labor productivity is particularly critical for table grapes, a more labor-intensive crop than citrus, that needs to be picked and packed within a short time frame (six to eight weeks). The seasonal workforce is critical for making sure that this work is achieved within the shortest possible time frame at the lowest possible cost.

Afrifresh managers say that it takes a whole season for workers to achieve optimum productivity, as this is the time it takes to gain the experience of the full harvest cycle. At the beginning of the season, many new seasonal workers will already have some experience from previous work on other table grape or citrus farms in the region, but each farm has its own practices that workers need to learn. For instance, Berekeisanang packs table grapes in the vineyards, rather than in packhouses, an unusual practice that requires a different way of working.

Afrifresh's River Fresh farm, in the Western Cape, has direct experience of the business case for retaining the best seasonal workers. In 2014, River Fresh suffered a poor harvest as a result of a severe hail storm that damaged almost all its fruit. Consequently, as a result of extremely low volumes, River Fresh was not able to offer work to many of its regular seasonal workers, who went on to seek work elsewhere. In the following season, when River Fresh had returned to regular production, it struggled to attract back many of its previously regular seasonal workers and had to hire a new cohort of seasonal workers. This led to a significant drop in productivity, with the new workers picking and packing fruit at a slower rate. As a result, the farm had to hire 150 additional seasonal workers to compensate, adding to the wage bill for that season and taking up additional management time for training and supervision.

"It's very important to get the same seasonal workers coming back. We lose production time and training time. Also, you can give experienced seasonal workers more responsibility and let them grow more... You can find labor easily, but you have to work harder to keep on attracting them back."

Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

While there are new opportunities opening up for women in the South African fruit industry, gender norms in the sector will take some time and effort to shift. Although Afrifresh has had some important successes in encouraging women's participation in leadership and non-traditional roles, managers recognize there is still considerable scope for further progress within Afrifresh operations and a number of challenges remain that will require proactive effort and creative thinking.

One of the challenges is finding women with the right qualifications and skills. South Africa has a comparatively high rate of women in agricultural research and higher education, with women accounting for 62% of graduates in the field (Beintema & Marcantonio, 2009). The problem is that these women are not using their qualifications

“When I was growing up, I said I wanted to be a farmer and my dad said that I couldn’t, because I was a girl. But I found my own way of being in the industry...

Being a woman is hard in agriculture. It’s hard to convince men to listen. It took a long time... Your first year is the most difficult, then people start to listen more. Once you have earned that respect, it’s okay.”

Melinda Dolby, Sustainability and Compliance Coordinator

“My dad used to think that I wouldn’t make it, but he’s really pleased now that I can do what I say I can. My mum believes in me, that I can do whatever.”

Winile Khumalo, Assistant Junior Manager, Fruit Star

to apply for management positions on farms. According to Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, Afrifresh has not received a single application from a woman for a general manager position. Instead, it is thought that women prefer to use these qualifications to apply for positions in government or other office-based jobs. At lower levels, there are similar challenges: women farm workers are more likely to lack certain basic qualifications (such as driver’s licenses) that they might need to take up non-traditional roles.

Overcoming the qualifications gap may require some creativity in approaches to recruitment, but also proactive investment in skills development for women (and men). In some instances, it may be possible for Afrifresh to think more flexibly about the requirements of the job. Dirk Rabie, Project Manager at Berekisanang, observed that men tend to get appointed to farm management positions because of their technical knowledge and experience, but this is not insurmountable: “You can learn [these skills]. If you get the right technical advisers, this can help bypass this requirement.” Additionally, Afrifresh may benefit from replicating its assistance to Winile Khumalo at Fruit Star, by identifying motivated women within its workforce and providing financial

support and/or encouragement to individuals. It may also involve greater participation in industry training schemes, such as the Leadership and Mentorship program.

Another challenge is to shift mind-sets. Often it takes time to persuade women that they should enter the industry or try to take up new roles, partly because of widespread social norms about the respective roles of women and men in agriculture. Colette Hugo at River Fresh said that it took time for women to start speaking up about driving tractors, “Because they were initially embarrassed to express an interest.” Colette said that women were concerned about whether their male colleagues would listen to them and take them seriously. Other women in the business testified that it can take time and perseverance for women to be accepted in new roles, but it does happen eventually.

So far, the company has made significant capital investments to get distressed farms up and running. However, the challenge for the company in its next phase of growth will be to invest more in its workforce, including women, despite ongoing cost pressures. This may, for instance, involve investment in training, worker health and social infrastructure, such as worker accommodation and communal areas. Some of these investments may require considerable outlay (such as upgrading accommodation), but other, smaller investments (such as targeted

investment in training) can potentially make a vast difference. Johan van Wyk, HR Manager, observed that: “We have come a long way, but it’s a continuous process. We know that we still have challenges and need to keep improving.”

## CONCLUSIONS

The face of fruit production in South Africa is changing, with new doors opening for businesses and the women in their workforce. The industry is increasingly competitive, with pressure to increase productivity and efficiency and control costs. There is a trend toward fewer, larger farms and production has shifted to high-value export commodities, including table grapes. Export producers like Afrifresh need to demonstrate good employment practices in order to sell to high-value markets, such as the EU, but also need to have a highly effective approach to HR management to get the very best out of their workforce at all levels of the organization. The Afrifresh experience shows that being a good employer has a positive impact on its bottom line, helping the company meet its objectives on quality, cost, and volume of produce.

“There is a huge opportunity for us to do more to empower women. They are the breadwinners in families in many cases. Can we create more opportunities for women to enter the business? With our existing women, how can we support them more? These are strategic questions for us. I’d love to see us giving more opportunities to women.”

Roy Fine, Development Director, Afrifresh



Photo © Afrifresh

Women workers at Afrifresh value the support that the company provides for those with childcare responsibilities, but women at all levels benefit primarily from its efforts to be a fair employer that emphasizes transparency, consistency, and equality of opportunity, and that provides a workplace that is free of any form of harassment. The company's focus on transparent employment decisions provides access to wider opportunities for women workers in an industry where employment options can be restricted by traditional gender roles. Afrifresh's emphasis on equality of opportunity is laying the foundations for the development of a motivated and qualified workforce for its future expansion.

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CASE STUDY

# **Biosev** – Sugarcane production and processing, Brazil

September 2016

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## Company Background

Biosev S.A. is the world's second largest producer of sugarcane, with crushing capacity of 36.4 million tons, 348,000 hectares of directly managed land, and additional cane-processing capacity from 190,000 hectares managed by third parties. The company's product lines include sugar, ethanol, electricity, and animal feed, which are sold to the food, beverages, cosmetics, pharmaceutical, and fuel distribution sectors. In 2016, Biosev had net revenues of approximately \$1.5 billion (Biosev, 2016). The company was founded in 2000 by the Louis Dreyfus Commodities Group, its controlling shareholder, and listed on the Brazilian stock exchange in 2013. The company has been an IFC client since 2015.

The Brazilian sugarcane industry has experienced turbulent times over the past 15 years. It expanded strongly during the early 2000s, as a result of new investments and technological innovation focusing on ethanol production as a 'clean' alternative to fossil fuels. This was followed by several years of crisis and excess capacity from 2008 onwards. In response to an increase in gasoline subsidies by the Brazilian government, coupled with the impact of the global financial crisis, more than 80 out of 300 sugar mills were closed. More recently, the Brazilian sugarcane industry has returned to profitability (Almeida, 2016; Wernau, 2015). Having weathered this difficult period, Biosev's management is optimistic about the future of the company and is now focused on its strategic goal of becoming the world's leading sugarcane producer. Most of Biosev's senior management has joined the company during the last two years.

Biosev is a conglomerate of 11 different mills, organized into five clusters, and it employs 16,800 workers, including 1200 women. Biosev has grown mainly through acquisitions; integrating and modernizing its corporate culture is an important strategic goal. Many of the mills and plantations acquired were previously family-owned. The company is pursuing a strong training and employee-engagement program with an overarching focus on quality and safety.

This case study focuses on two of Biosev's sites: Leme in the São Paulo region, Biosev's first acquisition in 2000, and Rio Brillhante in Mato Grosso do Sul, a greenfield site built in 2006. While the two sites are making progress toward integrating women into management and operations, both represent different points along the spectrum of modernizing operations. Leme relies largely on the training and advancement of workers already employed by the company. Rio Brillhante is building a new, mostly externally recruited, workforce.



Photo © Biosev

# WOMEN WORKERS AT BIOSEV

*As of 2016, women represent 7% of Biosev’s permanent workforce. This figure is consistent with the Brazilian sugarcane industry overall, which is heavily male-dominated. Across the sector, women account for 10% of all workers (2014 figures from UNICA 2016). Almost all employees are employed on permanent year-round contracts and women represent only 1% of Biosev’s 800 temporary workers.*

The largest number of workers in the sugarcane industry work in soil preparation, planting, and harvesting, but this work is also least likely to employ women. Some 70% of Biosev’s workforce and 35% of its female employees work in agriculture, but overall women constitute only 3.3% of Biosev’s agricultural workforce. This work involves driving tractors, harvesters, and trucks, as well as planting and pest control.

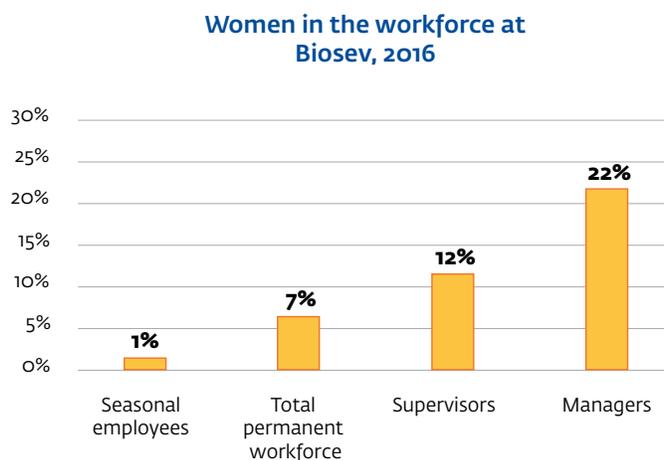
Harvesting and planting of sugarcane used to be done manually but, during the past decade, these operations have become almost completely mechanized, in line with broader industry trends.

While mechanization has greatly reduced the need for manual harvesting in Biosev – only 600 of its workers are still engaged in manual harvesting. This is primarily in the Northeast Region, characterized by a hilly topography which is unsuitable for mechanized harvesting. The work is still hard, often requiring work outdoors in high temperatures and in isolated locations far from modern amenities. Field workers can easily be 50 miles or more from the nearest town or the main mill, working with small teams of co-workers.

A fifth of Biosev’s workers, and 19% of its women workers, are industrial workers engaged in the processing of sugarcane into sugar, ethanol, and biomass. This work employs a high share of engineers, mechanics, and technicians, including laboratory technicians responsible for quality control. Laboratory workers are mainly female. It is much less common for women to work in other positions. Women make up a higher share of production workers than of agricultural workers, but overall represent just 6% of Biosev’s industrial workforce.

Some 10% of Biosev’s workforce, and just under half of women workers, are in administrative positions. One in three administrative workers in Biosev is female.

While women are only a minority of Biosev’s employees (7%), women are proportionately almost twice as likely as their share of total employment to be in supervisory positions (12%) and more than three times as likely to be in management positions (22%). This is a result of Biosev’s active pursuit of meritocratic recruitment and promotion policies.



## HOW BIOSEV PROVIDES A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN WORKERS

As a publicly listed company, Biosev is an employer of choice in many ways, offering the prospect of secure employment and good terms and conditions. Female (and male) workers report that they appreciate Biosev's investment in safety, as well as its reliability as an employer: wages are paid promptly, there is no expectation of unpaid overtime (or of overtime at short notice), and shift schedules are adhered to. Workers report that these practices are not as common among other employers in this industry.

Women and men particularly appreciate the company's family healthcare plan, which provides benefits beyond industry standards. The family coverage is particularly helpful to single mothers. In line with Brazilian law and collective agreements, the company has clinics on each site which are staffed around the clock by paramedical staff. A doctor is available during the daytime shift and is on call at all times for emergencies, as well as twice a month during the night time shift to address routine medical check-ups. For non-work-related complaints, the healthcare facility helps workers with referrals to local medical practitioners. The company has invested to improve working conditions in the field, providing air-conditioned buses for the often long drives to the field, offering air-conditioned hubs, and providing mobile, covered lunch facilities to provide shade for workers in the field.

Overall, the company is perceived as committed to its employees, supporting them through training and development, and following fair and performance-based principles when deciding career advancement.

## A MODERN AND TRANSPARENT HR MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Biosev has implemented a modern and transparent HR management system; policies and procedures are codified in writing and readily available to workers. As part of the formalization of its HR policies, the company has conducted a comprehensive salary and grading review, and it now has a coherent and uniform compensation system across all grades. This includes clearly stated criteria for performance-based pay.

Biosev is currently rolling out a new performance management system, based on key performance indicators, which will apply to all levels of staff. The new approach is informed by the 'Biosev Spirit', a set of corporate values that guide all of the company's activities and establish expectations for individual behavior, respect, team-based work, and capacity building and learning. While both women and men benefit from these explicit criteria for professional development and promotion, arguably this is particularly important for women. They are less likely to have access to existing (male-dominated) networks to gain access to jobs and promotions, and more likely to be held back by bias about their capabilities (Williams & Dempsey, 2014). The Biosev Spirit highlights respect for differences as a fundamental value of team work, providing the basis for actively integrating gender and diversity management into expectations for teamwork and performance.

Both female and male employees report that they feel that the culture at Biosev is fair and performance-based and that those who were identified for advancement deserved their promotions. While some women reported knowing some men who informally indicated that they would never hire women, such attitudes were reported to be the exception rather than the rule. Both women and men reported that individual qualification and performance – instead of criteria such as gender – were the overwhelming factors influencing decisions related to recruitment and advancement.



Photo © Biosev

## A CULTURE OF RESPECT: PROTECTION FROM HARASSMENT

Women, and men, confirmed that the company provides a safe and respectful place of work. Beyond basic safety, women, and men, appreciated a very collegial working environment, including for women who may be in a minority of one in their teams.

Biosev's code of conduct states that: "All collaborators must act with dignity and respect toward the individual values of their co-workers and avoid any situation which might be described as moral or sexual harassment." This code of conduct is discussed at the induction training of all new workers, strongly emphasizing a culture of respect within the company. Any worker can report any incident of harassment (Brazilian law protects workers from sexual harassment, but also more generally from 'moral harassment' from supervisors) on the company's national toll-free phone, 'Talk to Biosev.' The Talk to Biosev line is operated by an independent third party and also allows people in the community to raise potential concerns, about pollution for example. The toll-free phone number is communicated to all workers and all interviewed for this study were aware of it. All reported incidents are investigated by a team at the corporate office.

The Director of Human Resources reported that since the 'Talk to Biosev' line was established, there had been no confirmed case of sexual harassment. A small number of complaints had been received but, upon investigation, concerned inappropriate behavior that was not necessarily sexual harassment. As an indication that the procedure is taken seriously by the company, one supervisor was fired when complaints about workplace harassment of workers reporting to him were substantiated during investigation.

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Women are present at all levels of leadership in Biosev, from team leader and first line supervisor to the C-Suite. The directors of Human Resources, Corporate and Legal Services, and Sales and Marketing are women, for example, and two of the 11 plants are managed by women.

At senior levels, Biosev has typically recruited women externally, as part of its recent focus on developing a new management team following the listing of the company. As Luiz Enrique Cerqueira Valverde, Corporate Manager for Investor Relations, explains: "If you want women in management, you have to hire them from outside, because the talent base is still too low inside the company."

Some women leaders have risen through the ranks. The supervisor responsible for quality control in Leme, for example, has been with Biosev for 13 years and began working as a laboratory analyst. At least in recent years, advancing through the management hierarchy in the plants has typically involved moving to other plants to gain experience and exposure. While this can be hard, particularly with young children, the company's supportive attitude and encouragement has made it easier for young parents, including women, to pursue this path.

Women in senior positions serve as role models for other employees and the broader community – not just as women in leadership positions, but also as women who have young children. The Corporate Director of Sales and Marketing, Dorothea Soule, received a major promotion while pregnant and intends to return to work promptly at the end of her maternity leave. This example is seen as inspiring by workers and managers within the company.

"During the first phase of working for Biosev, I was able to absolutely dedicate myself to the company. Now, in the second phase, as a mother, I can show that it is possible to be both a good mother and a good supervisor."

Manager of quality control, and a single mother, Leme plant



Photo © Biosev

Women leaders report being respected by their teams. One female supervisor, brought in to supervise an all-male administrative team, reported that some team members were less enthusiastic about having a female manager. However, the company, with its clear commitment to her, encouraged these men to simply leave the company and work elsewhere.

## WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL POSITIONS

The shift from manual to mechanized agricultural operations has resulted in job losses in the industry. It has also opened up new opportunities for women to work as tractor, truck, and harvester drivers. As Dalmo Carlos, Agricultural Manager at Leme, explained: “There have always been women working in sugarcane, but it has only been in the last five years that there have been women tractor drivers.” In Leme, many workers have family members who also work for Biosev and this may have increased the acceptability of promoting women into new operator opportunities.

In Leme, new operational positions are filled by promoting existing workers to the extent possible. Drivers must obtain progressively higher levels of training and licensing as the move from operating trucks and tractors to heavy equipment, such as harvesters. The highest level of driver’s license is required to drive large trucks. It requires at least two years’ driving experience with an already experienced driver, making it more difficult for the company to promote from within.

“When the first women were employed in these jobs, men stopped and stared, it seemed so strange to them. Now it is more common.”

Leandro Kaster, General Manager, Leme

Women, and men, working in manual harvest can apply for training to become a tractor driver, following brief introductory training sessions. In Leme, one woman now drives a harvester; she was the first woman to be selected to be a tractor driver. She invested in gaining the required license, and advanced to the senior harvesting position. She reported her pride in being the first woman to drive a tractor, but also her happiness at now no longer being the only woman doing so.

Still, only 2% of agricultural workers in Leme are women. Progress toward increasing women’s share of these jobs has been relatively slow, in part because there are few women who have the required licenses in the local labor market. During the last two years, less than 1% of newly hired workers in agriculture in Leme were women. Dalmo Carlos, Agricultural Manager at Leme, reports that he previously worked in other regions, including some closer to mines which have also opened up opportunities for women in non-traditional jobs, and that there it had been easier to hire qualified women drivers.

Unlike the Leme plant, Rio Brilhante was established on a greenfield site and, as a result, most of its workforce joined the company relatively recently. Women represent over 7% of agricultural operators and, in 2015/16, close to 9% of newly hired agricultural workers. One woman tractor driver reported learning of job vacancies for drivers at Biosev, while listening to her clients chatting in her previous job as a sales assistant in a bakery. She reported that she initially lacked the confidence to apply, but when her husband dared her to do so, she overcame her nervousness and succeeded. Both her pride in herself and her salary have increased substantially since she started her new career. A male co-worker reported that once jobs at Biosev opened up, it became much harder to find women willing to work as nannies and babysitters.

“We are working to promote the women who already work in Biosev – to show that you can be both gorgeous and drive a tractor!”

Maria Paula Curto, Corporate Director of Human Resources



Photo © Biosev

Rio Brillhante's agricultural workforce also includes women trailer truck drivers, including one woman who gained her license through working with her father and brothers, who are also truck drivers. Being petite, just 5'3" in height, her presence is a constant reminder that women are just as able as men to drive a large machine.

Women are also working in most aspects of the production process, as mechanics, technicians, and engineers, although it is rare for teams to have more than one woman and several teams are all male. The exception is laboratory technicians, the majority of whom are women. Women are working on each of the three shifts. On the whole, women reported being accepted by their colleagues. However, some also reported feeling under constant scrutiny and having to be at the peak of performance all the time, because of a perception that any mistakes they may make will be noted more than those of a male colleague, as women are still a minority in these roles.

## A FOCUS ON TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The company is committed to training and developing its staff. All operational staff are trained in the company's health and safety program, Prisma, which sets out clear procedures, encourages staff to report any problems, and suggest improvements and solutions. All operational teams begin their shifts with a short safety briefing, encouraging both a team and safety culture, a practice that was positively noted by several women, and men, workers.

The company also invests in the further education and vocational certification of its staff. It cooperates with SENAI, Brazil's national vocational training and education association, to develop targeted training programs for its staff. Where such training is directly needed for the work, it is provided during working hours. Additionally, Biosev provides grants to high-performing employees to advance their education in their own time. Several women, and men, reported attending college after work; typically, this involves enrolling in private educational institutions, at considerable expense.

In Rio Brillhante, a small town with few opportunities for vocational training and education, Biosev is cooperating with SENAI to bring mobile training centers to the town. While SENAI directly trains Biosev's workers, these training facilities also make it more feasible for the local population to gain qualifications necessary to find work in Biosev or other local employers. The initiative was developed in collaboration with the local mayor, who approached the company about options for increasing local economic development.

As part of its investment in a quality workforce, Biosev also supports several 'new apprentices.' Apprentices are high-school students, 16-17 years of age, who are incentivized to take technical vocational courses while at school. They receive a stipend for working 20 hours per week, paid at half the minimum wage. While there is no guarantee that Biosev will employ the apprentice after his or her graduation and, likewise, no obligation on behalf of the apprentice to work for Biosev, this is an important initiative to develop the pipeline of skilled workers. Although selections for the apprenticeship scheme are competitive and there are no gender quotas or rules that specifically favor girls, 18 of 25 apprentices are young women in Rio Brillhante. The children of employees are encouraged to apply. In Leme, a single mother who drives a harvester reported that her daughter is the recipient of one of the apprenticeship grants. She is pursuing technical qualifications with the hope of following her mother's trail-blazing path into non-traditional employment.

## SUPPORT FOR WORKING PARENTS AND OTHER CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

Many workers in Biosev, women and men, have children. Pregnant workers are entitled to be moved to light duty, and this is adhered to by the company. The company offers general uniforms for women, and those who are pregnant improvise by wearing their own clothes in combination with the company-provided uniforms. There

are plans to provide specifically designed uniforms for pregnant women. Biosev offers the statutory 120 calendar days of paid maternity leave to women, and five calendar days paid paternity leave to men. The company does not offer lactation rooms. Under Brazilian law, women returning from maternity leave are entitled to two 30-minute breaks for breastfeeding until the child reaches six months (Sorj, 2015). It is common for women who return from maternity leave to combine the lactation periods to extend their full-time maternity leave.

Under Brazilian law, part-time work is highly restricted and there are only very limited options for workplace flexibility. Under the sugarcane industry collective agreement, agricultural and production workers work shifts on a '5/1 system': five days at work, followed by one day off. This rotating rest-day system can complicate family life. Work is conducted around the clock, in three shifts of seven hours. While women are found on all shifts, they are more likely than men to work the day shift (starting at 7 a.m.). Administrative workers and workers in management work on a 5/2 system. The company offers some flexibility, letting workers swap shifts during personal emergencies, but such practices cannot be introduced more widely because collective agreements set 36-hour rest periods between shifts and require 30 days' advance notification of proposed shift changes. The shift system allows some parents to split childcare responsibilities between them by working consecutive shifts, so that one parent is always available to take children to school or the doctor when needed. Yet while flexibility is limited, strict adherence to announced shift times and the corresponding departure of the company-provided buses that take workers to and from work, means that working parents can at least plan their time. Shift patterns (i.e. morning, evening, or night shifts) are set annually.

For women in management and professional roles, long working hours, coupled with lengthy commuting times, can be a source of work-family conflicts. A woman professional at the company's corporate headquarters announced that she was ready to quit, because long São Paulo commuting times added to a long working day meant that she rarely saw her two-year-old daughter. The company agreed to pilot a new arrangement where she will be able to work from home two days a week and temporarily reduce her working time. This is the first time the company is embarking on such an arrangement; part-time work and home-based work are very rare in Brazil's formal sector (Lobel, 2009).

The company does not offer workplace childcare at any of its plants. However, in recognition of the crucial role of childcare, both for its workers and the development of the next generation in Rio Brilhante, the company has provided resources to build two childcare centers. In total, the community has seven early childhood centers. The centers are run and operated by the municipality and provide full-time early care and education for children ages four months through three years. Once children turn four, they automatically transfer to public, pre-kindergarten classes. While Biosev workers do not have preferential access to places in the centers, children of many of its employees attend them. One of the childcare centers is in the process of being expanded and will be able to care for 150 children.

Under the collective agreement, workers are entitled to paid sick leave and to use the leave to care for their sick children, or other family members, as long as they have a doctor's certificate. Taking such leave was reported as fully supported by Biosev management and employees. For workers in the fields, who frequently work 50–100 km from the nearest town, being so far from their children can be of concern. When one child had an accident and needed to be hospitalized, the company sent a car to pick up the mother and take her to her child.

"In the field, when women use the equipment, they leave it clean. When they see something wrong – even something little – they insist on having it fixed. The men don't care as much."

Male maintenance worker, Leme plant



Photo © Biosev

# HOW BIOSEV BENEFITS FROM WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

## SUPPORTING A SAFETY CULTURE

Women play an important role in Biosev's goal to reach best-in-class standards in safety. Biosev's challenge is to move from a culture focused on short-term output and profit maximization to long-term sustainability. As part of this goal, Biosev is committed to achieving zero accident rates, for which detailed safety protocols have been developed and are rigorously implemented.

Supervisors report that women are more likely to directly adhere to such rules and procedures, as they are typically new to the tasks, while men are more likely to display a lax attitude, as they may have not been held to strict standards in their previous employment in the sector or believe that they can improvise based on previous knowledge and experience with technical work. Male co-workers, likewise, report that having women on teams leads to more respectful and less 'rowdy' behavior, and thus potentially better compliance with the spirit of safety protocols.

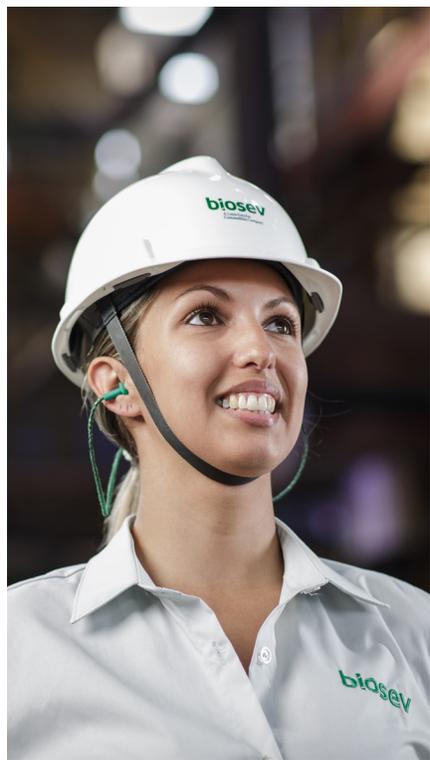
Supervisors and male co-workers observe that women machine drivers and operators tend to be more careful with their equipment, leave it cleaner, and more promptly note and insist on maintenance if they notice something wrong. Male workers report that receiving a perfectly clean machine at the beginning of their shift encourages them, too, to take better care of machines. As a result, the company saves on maintenance costs and has shorter periods of machine downtime.

## RECRUITING AND RETAINING THE BEST STAFF

Offering good working conditions, and being seen to be a desirable employer of both women and men, is essential if Biosev wants to build and keep its well-trained and motivated workforce. Training a worker (who already has the appropriate driver's license) to be a tractor driver

"The women here have one thing extra compared to the men, they really want to work here. They are more motivated than the men."

Leandro Kaster, General Manager, Leme plante



Photos © Biosev

at Biosev takes, on average, about three months. High levels of retention ensure that the company will benefit from its investment in training.

“Retaining good workers is a big issue for us, at all levels of staff,” explains Tatiana Moura, HR Manager for the Rio Brilhante plant. “While Biosev is the biggest employer in the area, we are not the only large employer, and the salaries we offer are similar to those offered by our competitors.”

Biosev’s investment in the training and development of its workers makes retention even more of a business prerogative. Because of the current Brazilian labor market, labor turnover is comparatively low (less than 2% in the most current year at the Rio Brilhante plant, for example), but Biosev managers do not expect this low rate to last. Offering opportunities to women, and ensuring that women are treated equally and are able to advance professionally like men, is likely to increase women’s loyalty to the company. Having more women at all levels of the company reportedly also has a positive impact on the workplace culture, making the company a more desirable place to work.

“Promotion is the biggest communication tool to show that everyone can advance based on performance.”

Rodrigo Jonko, Manager of Production, Rio Brilhante

## PROJECTING AN IMAGE AS A MODERN SUSTAINABLE COMPANY

The recruitment and promotion of women plays an important role in Biosev’s goal of modernizing the company’s culture. While the recent Brazilian recession has improved hiring conditions for skilled professional staff, Biosev’s CEO, Rui Chammas, is aware that the company has to work to secure this human capital in the longer term; the challenge is “to change enough to make it attractive for them to stay once the labor market heats up again.” These challenges do not only apply to well-educated women and men in professional and managerial roles. Biosev is increasingly hiring only workers who have at least completed high school and, ideally, pursue further vocational qualifications. Women in this target group have many options and may not see the sugarcane industry as their first choice.

Having women in positions of leadership where there were previously only men in itself sends a signal that the company is changing: “The women are new: they can have the role of change agents,” suggests Dalmo Carlos, Agricultural Manager at Leme. Apart from this demonstration effect, women supervisors and managers are also reported to have a different management style: they are more explicit and communicative, a quality that the company is seeking to promote as it moves away from the previous, top-down management style in place in many of the farms taken over by the company.

Investing in the support that makes Biosev a desirable company to work for, such as early childcare and education, and facilitating access to vocational education and training, is helping Biosev remain an employer of choice, at the same time as it is investing in the quality of its potential future workforce.

In addition, as a global listed company, Biosev’s employment practices are under considerable scrutiny with investors, including its historically low employment levels of women. Commodity sustainability standards like Bonsucro, which requires producers (mills) to demonstrate compliance with non-discrimination requirements, are increasingly the norm to access high-value markets.

By recruiting, supporting, and promoting women, Biosev can demonstrate to all its stakeholders – current employees, potential future employees, the local community, and the broader financial and compliance community – that it is a modern company and serious about performance.

# CHALLENGES

While women have made impressive advances in Biosev, particularly in the area of management, they remain a small minority of Biosev’s overall workforce. Biosev faces a number of challenges in further advancing the position of women in the company. There are a limited number of vacancies and staff turnover is very low, given the current weak Brazilian labor market. This reduces opportunities for quick increases in women’s numbers in Biosev, whether through internal promotions or external recruitment. Yet, even when there are vacancies, there is a limited supply of women workers with the qualifications needed to apply for operational positions. This is a particular issue for the drivers of heavy trucks and harvesting machines. While the company provides industry-specific training, it expects workers to already have the required licenses to operate a harvester or large truck. Yet women are much less likely to have these qualifications than men, and even basic driving licenses can require a considerable investment for a woman on a low salary.

More broadly, Biosev’s efforts to recruit women are hampered by the image of the sugarcane industry as one that is dirty, heavy, and old-fashioned. While Biosev is rapidly modernizing facilities, the perceptions of the industry are changing more slowly. Added to this potential image problem are gendered assumptions about appropriate work for women. Even though Biosev is reported to have an excellent record on preventing sexual harassment, the sugarcane industry does not have a reputation for providing a safe working environment for

“The company could reach out more to change the thinking of men. People outside think that there are problems with sexual harassment, they do not want their wives or daughters to work here; but when you enter the company, there really are no such problems.”

Male agricultural worker, Rio Brilhante plant



Photo © Biosev

women. In addition, especially in the Northeast Region, – though the problem is not unique to it – husbands and other relatives are often more reluctant for women to work in isolated areas with other men. At the same time, social norms regarding parenting responsibilities limit the labor supply of mothers with young children. Biosev's women tractor and harvester drivers are, in themselves, good ambassadors for the company's commitment to women. However, the company would also gain from a proactive communication strategy to further convey its commitment to women.

One of the barriers to women's work in production is the occasional need to lift heavy objects. Under Brazilian labor law, companies are forbidden from assigning work to women that regularly involves lifting of objects weighing more than 20kg (or more than 25kg on an occasional basis). Yet, the presence of at least some women in all types of production jobs suggests that such weight restrictions are more a perceived than a real barrier.

As Rodrigo Jonko, Manager of Production, Rio Brilhante, explains: “The men all think: the difference between women and men [and the reason for women's under-representation] is physical strength. But muscles are less and less important. In a couple of years, tools will have replaced the need for physical strength. Moving away from relying on physical strength is a general health prerogative, but it will also make clear that women are able to do all jobs, just as men [can].” Any task that is too physically strenuous for women is likely to also have adverse health effects for men, particularly for those men who have worked in such positions for many years.

Work for women, and men, with caregiving responsibilities can be challenging. Round-the-clock shift work, not having a regular rest-day as part of the 5/1 shift arrangement for operational workers as per the collective agreement, and working in remote locations, can all make parenting difficult. While some workers reported the benefits of some informal flexibility, options for more formal flexible working time arrangements, such as allowing workers to swap shifts in emergencies, are limited by legislation and collective arrangements. Once workers reach the supervisory and managerial level, requirements to be at work typically grow. Options to temporarily reduce working hours, shift to part-time work, or work from home are very limited under Brazilian law, potentially pushing some women out of paid employment when their children are young. More broadly, although Brazilian society is changing, there still is an expectation that women will be the main caregivers of young children (Lobel, 2009). Within Biosev, several male workers reported taking their children to and from care, or even being the one to take time off when their children were sick, but overall still primarily care responsibilities rest on the shoulders of women.

# CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, the Brazil sugarcane industry has experienced significant changes that have opened up new opportunities for women. In particular, the large-scale mechanization of the harvesting process means that women are increasingly likely to enter non-traditional occupations, such as tractor and harvester drivers. Biosev's emphasis on modernizing company culture and practices – including the introduction of a transparent HR framework and merit-based approaches to training and development – provides an environment in which existing women workers feel supported, respected, and have access to opportunities that they need to progress in the industry. The company's visible commitment to equal opportunities for women, and its outreach to the next generation of young women in its apprenticeship and vocational training programs, is laying the foundation for the continued integration of its workforce.

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CASE STUDY

# SolTuna – tuna processing, Solomon Islands

September 2016

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## Company Background

SolTuna, based in the town of Noro in Solomon Islands' Western Province, is the country's only tuna processing facility. An IFC investment client since 2013, SolTuna employs over 1,800 workers, 64% of whom are women.

SolTuna is a significant private-sector employer in Solomon Islands, a country with a population of 540,000, spread across more than 1,000 islands, and covering an area of over 28,000 square kilometers. The country experienced violent ethnic conflicts from 1998 to 2003. The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has been stationed in Solomon Islands since the end of the conflict, but is expected to leave in 2017. The conflict left the country with very low public-sector administrative capacity, and its health and education systems with serious deficiencies.

Solomon Islands is a lower middle-income country with a GNI per capita of 1,800 PPP dollars. The tuna industry accounts for 18% of Solomon Islands' GDP. In addition to SolTuna, the other major private-sector employers include a palm-oil plantation, various forestry operations, the banking sector, retail, and a small but growing tourism industry. However, the vast majority of the working population are found in informal businesses. Of those formally employed, the public sector accounts for 20%.

Most of SolTuna's output is exported as tuna loins to the European Union. SolTuna also sells a substantial amount of canned tuna domestically, significantly contributing to food security in Solomon Islands.

SolTuna's comparatively small size and its remote location in a lower middle-income, post-conflict country present the company with significant operational and cost-management challenges. Many of these challenges are common to the other small tuna producers based in the Pacific Islands, such as Papua New Guinea. All Pacific Islands producers are disadvantaged in comparison to major tuna processors in Southeast Asia – primarily Thailand and the Philippines – in regard to the availability of relatively cheap and productive labor. Pacific island producers also face relatively high energy costs, inconsistent fresh water supply, relatively high-cost and less available shipping, and poorer supporting infrastructure. However, the company does benefit from access to large and plentiful fishing grounds in Solomon Islands' territorial waters



Photo © SolTuna

# HOW THE COMPANY IS ADDRESSING GENDER ISSUES

*SolTuna has a strong commitment to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the workplace. Non-discrimination policies and practices are in place, and the company has taken proactive steps to support women workers and promote greater gender equality through initiatives such as investing in training women forklift drivers and supporting community efforts to address gender-based violence (GBV).*

Nonetheless, the company is operating in an environment of severe gender inequality, where businesses face considerable challenges in attracting and retaining the female human resources they need to operate and grow their business. There are significant inequalities in men's and women's economic opportunities in Solomon Islands. Men are more than twice as likely as women to hold a wage job in the formal sector (23% men compared to 9% women nationally). Unequal sharing of household responsibilities and other unpaid labor is also a major contributor to inequalities between women and men.

Solomon Islands also has one of the highest levels of GBV in the world: almost two-thirds (64%) of women aged 15-49 report having experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Women who hold a wage-paying job are just as likely to have experienced violence as those who do not.

In this context of gender inequality and relative labor scarcity, the challenges faced by women translate directly into challenges for business, including at SolTuna. Employee retention and consistent attendance at work is a key competitive issue. The company has implemented a number of measures to support women workers and plans to do more. IFC has supported the company in these efforts with an advisory project to further analyze gender-related issues, and provide guidance on appropriate and effective measures to address them.

## FINANCIAL LITERACY TRAINING

Employment at SolTuna is the first formal job for many workers, who are likely to have come from subsistence agriculture and informal work. Many workers have low levels of literacy and numeracy. In addition, most employees support numerous extended family members. All of these factors make it difficult for workers to effectively manage their money. In order to get cash for immediate needs, for example, some forego a significant attendance bonus by selling in the market, instead of working their shift at SolTuna.

Recognizing this, SolTuna worked with a World Bank Group-funded project, Training Women In SolTuna (TWIST) to offer financial literacy and other life-skills training. Between November 2015 and April 2016, six modules of financial literacy, life-skills, and gender training were delivered to nearly 300 production workers at SolTuna, 75% of whom were women (consistent with the relative composition of the production department).

The training contributed to significant improvements in financial attitudes and behavior, as well as an increase in staff attendance at work:

- The proportion of workers reporting that they ‘always’ had money left the day before payday increased by 120%, from 14% at baseline to 31% at the end of the training.
- There was an 81% increase in workers having a savings goal.
- The proportion of workers reporting they made a household budget more than tripled, from 12% at baseline to 39% at completion of the training.
- Absenteeism among trainee participants reduced from 19% on average before the training, to 13% after the training.

Workers also learned how to communicate with their partners and family members about money. During the sessions on banking, borrowing, and lending, the local branch of Solomon Islands’ largest bank, Bank South Pacific, set up tables to help workers open savings accounts. Almost all workers already receive their fortnightly pay into a bank account, and SolTuna regularly arranges for local banks to come to the plant so new workers can set up bank accounts. This helps keep women’s earnings safe from being ‘taken’ by their husbands or male relatives in a context where women often fear being seen as ‘greedy’ or ‘selfish’ – or made an outcast among their extended families – if they do not share their earnings with relatives.

In addition to the measured changes in understanding and behavior related to financial management, many workers shared stories of positive impact on their lives (see box below).

### **Empowering Women with Financial Literacy Training**

Beverly Micha had worked for SolTuna for four years when she was selected to participate in the pilot financial literacy course. Beverly lives with her husband, their two children, and four other family members in a settlement near the SolTuna plant. Her husband was not initially supportive of her participation in the course, crumpling up the piece of paper with the household budget template she showed him after the first session. But after Beverly saved enough to buy a bale of second hand clothing and sell it at a SBD 3,500 (about \$450) profit, he started paying attention. Now with her husband convinced, the couple pools their income, works together to create their household budget, and works towards a savings goal: a family house in their home village.



Beverly Micha, SolTuna employee

Photo © SolTuna

A key aspect of the training is helping workers understand their paychecks and drawing the link between the number of days they show up to work and how much they are paid. A session on reading pay slips goes over how to calculate overtime at time and one-half, double time, and triple time. Overtime is quite common for production workers, particularly during night shifts when staff continue working until tuna thawed that day has been processed. Overtime pay makes up a meaningful proportion of total take-home pay for many workers, so understanding how it is calculated is important to ensure that staff remain motivated when working overtime.

There is also curriculum on the SolTuna incentive-payment scheme, which rewards workers with perfect attendance during the four-week incentive period with an extra day's pay. An even larger bonus – up to six full days' extra pay – is possible when workers reach a series of plant-level productivity and efficiency targets. This bonus is only available to workers who are absent for one day or less. Evidence from labor-intensive garment manufacturing in East Asia indicates that workers' understanding and trust on how they are paid is a key contributor to both well-being and productivity (Brown et al, 2014).

## EFFECTIVE WORKER–MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

The SolTuna Employees Consultative Committee (SECC) was formed in 2014. The SECC has ten members: four women and six men, with representatives from each department. The SECC has played a pivotal role in keeping communication lines open between management and workers. A notable success in early 2016 was an agreement to spend the 5% wage-bill increase approved by the Board of Directors on raises for the lowest-earning three grades, mostly low-skill production workers. Remaining employees would have a wage freeze for the year.

In addition to the SECC, SolTuna has a number of committees with representatives of workers and managers to discuss key issues and policy decisions, such as the Disciplinary Committee that reviews decisions by the HR manager regarding employee misconduct. Another is the Occupational Safety and Health Employee Implementation team, which works with the technical committee and policy team to implement safety and health measures.

Another committee that has been particularly active in improving opportunities for women is the Housing Committee, which is responsible for allocating and overseeing the sought-after company-provided housing. In 2013, it came to the attention of management that male staff members were far more likely than female workers to have access to housing. SolTuna sought to correct the imbalance by establishing a committee with a female chair, and men and women members, as well as adding gender balance as a criterion for housing allocation. Of the 128 housing units, women employees now have 42.

## WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL POSITIONS

The Production and Maintenance & Engineering departments at SolTuna had been actively seeking female recruits and apprentices for some time. They were able to hire a woman mechanic, but failed to get an adequate supply of female apprentices or applicants for other jobs they advertised. In August 2015, management took the initiative to identify and train 10 female staff from the production lines to become forklift drivers.

The women volunteered for the training, via a self-nomination process from across the production department, and were then selected by SolTuna management. The training was delivered by a New

### **Expanding opportunities for women in non-traditional jobs**

As the first female employed as a forklift operator at SolTuna, Salome Batir is proud to be breaking the stereotype of working a traditionally male dominated job.

*"I'm really enjoying the job, my family supports me and is really happy about what I'm doing,"* says Batir. Not only is Batir proud, but her children love her 'unique' line of work, asking daily questions about her job and driving the forklift.

Batir is *"very proud as a lady to be doing [this] job, [having] never experienced any other woman doing this job."*

Zealand-registered training provider on-site at SolTuna. Following the training, the women participated in practice sessions on weekends led by current SolTuna forklift drivers. Within a few months of completing the training, two women have been promoted to full-time positions as forklift drivers (see box on page 7). The women who completed the training were extremely appreciative that SolTuna had provided the opportunity to learn a new skill, opening up a new and much more lucrative and rewarding career path. They and their families demonstrated great pride in the achievement of becoming qualified forklift drivers. Other female production workers also expressed a desire to complete the training and have the opportunity to work in a job such as forklift driving.

Reaching these women, and expanding the current pipeline of female talent in non-traditional roles, is helping ensure SolTuna, “becomes a long-term sustainable business, supporting the local community and provincial economy, and significantly boosting job opportunities in our community” says General Manager, Jim Alexander.

## DEEP DIVE GENDER ANALYSIS: DATA SOURCES

- 1. EDGE (Economic Dividends for Gender Equality) Assessment:** Global benchmarking and assessment tool which collects data on the following five topics: Equal Pay for Equivalent Work; Recruitment & Promotion; Leadership Development Training & Mentoring; Flexible Working; and Company Culture. Each area is assessed by analyzing the following three sources of information:
  - Statistics. Gender-disaggregated statistics covering the period July 2014 – June 2015.
  - Infrastructure. Information on the level of implementation of policies and practices that constitute the institutional framework around gender equality in the company.
  - Experience. Employee survey capturing the workplace experience and perceptions surrounding it.
- 2. Analysis of SolTuna HR Data to Understand Causes of Absenteeism:** IFC analyzed attendance records and associated employee demographic data for an eight-month period in 2015 to identify patterns related to absenteeism.
- 3. Absenteeism Tracking Study:** SolTuna line managers collected data from production staff who were absent, recording the stated reasons for their absence on the day the staff member returned to work. A total of 818 responses were recorded during a four-week period and analyzed by IFC.
- 4. Resignation Letters Analysis:** IFC analyzed a sample of 26 letters of resignation received by SolTuna from January to June 2015 to identify and catalog reasons for departure stated by resigning staff. Employees are not required to provide resignation letters and only a small subset of all resigning staff do so.
- 5. Focus Group Discussions:** To understand more about the results of all of the above data analysis, eight focus groups, with a total of 137 current SolTuna and six former employees, were created. Employees were selected using a random sample technique, stratified by roster, gender, and position. Topics discussed included health and wellbeing; care responsibilities; transportation; income and compensation; occupational safety and health; and career and promotions.

# GENDER DIAGNOSTIC

To understand what more they could do to attract, retain, and engage women workers, SolTuna launched a comprehensive diagnostic project with IFC in mid-2015.

The key objectives of the project were the following:

1. Understand root causes of absenteeism and turnover among production staff, and propose solutions.
2. Identify opportunities to benefit from greater gender equality, including:
  - a) Supporting emerging women leaders to move into management roles.
  - b) Implementing a structured approach to address GBV involving employees.
  - c) Improving access to jobs for women in non-traditional roles.
3. Improve financial literacy, household budget management, and life-planning skills of employees.

The project began with a thorough diagnostic, combining quantitative and qualitative data received from SolTuna management, staff, and other sources. The core of the women's employment diagnostic was the Economic Dividends from Gender Equality (EDGE) benchmarking tool. SolTuna is only the second IFC client to complete the EDGE gender analysis, and is among the few emerging-market companies globally to have done so. Qualitative sources of data included: responses to a standardized structured questionnaire on HR policies and practices from EDGE; key informant interviews of managers and staff; and focus-group discussions with staff and former staff. Quantitative data sources included: the EDGE Staff Survey; demographic and absenteeism data; employment statistics provided by SolTuna; and a four-week study of reasons for absenteeism for workers in the production department (see box on page 8 for details).<sup>1</sup>



Photo © SolTuna

<sup>1</sup> Launched at the World Economic Forum in 2011, the EDGE methodology triangulates these sources of information to examine the alignment and gaps between them, so that a more holistic and effective gender-equality strategy can be designed and implemented. EDGE allows companies to benchmark themselves against global market players, including 2,500 companies listed in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. The EDGE gender certification can only be granted by an approved third-party auditing and certification body. The EDGE Certified Foundation is currently working with more than 100 companies in 31 countries and 21 industries.

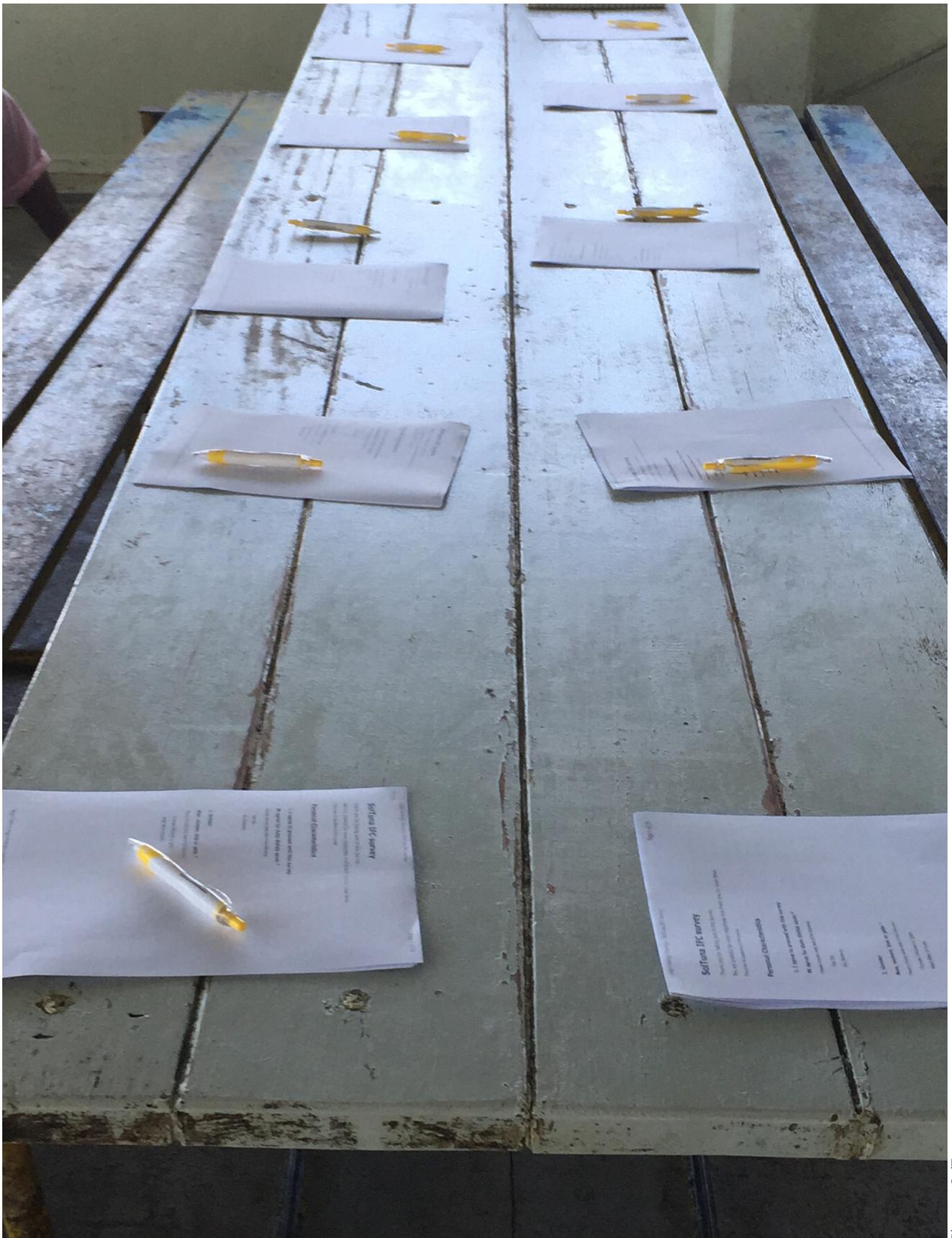


Photo © SoITuna

# FINDINGS FROM DATA ANALYSIS

All of the data sources were analyzed individually and in relation to one another, to give SolTuna management a comprehensive understanding of the key issues facing women workers, as well as some potential entry points for taking action. Key results of the data analysis are presented below.

## RESULTS OF GENDER-EQUALITY BENCHMARKING

Women comprise the majority of SolTuna's workforce – approximately 1,200 out of around 1,800 staff. However, women are highly concentrated at the operational level and significantly under-represented across all levels of management. Women make up 67% of all operational staff, but this share reduces significantly at junior management level (26%), middle management (14%), upper management (0%), and top management (20%). This puts SolTuna above the global industry peer group average for the share of women in the total workforce, but below the industry peer group average for the share of women in management positions. SolTuna also has an entirely male board of directors. While the proportion of female managers is relatively low from a global perspective, it is notable among businesses in the region, with many women in positions of authority in the Quality Assurance and Sanitation Department. Furthermore, women in senior management, including one of two shift production managers and the Quality Control and Sanitation Manager, perform business-critical roles.

The majority of SolTuna staff surveyed believe that gender equality is important for SolTuna to remain competitive in the market. Yet there are opportunities for this commitment to be more fully reflected in relevant policies and practices. For example, gender is not reflected in the performance measures of any managers. Similarly, while the company does take gender into consideration for succession planning in some key leadership positions, it does not yet use gender-sensitive language or visuals in job advertisements or conduct any awareness training on potential gender bias. While the company has proactively looked to hire women into non-traditional jobs, there are no set targets or objectives for the gender composition at management level. In addition, based on responses to the recent diagnostic, SolTuna plans to review its policy and approach on workplace safety and employee conduct, including strengthening the procedure for reporting and recording grievances.

It is clear that the process of undertaking the diagnostic raised awareness among SolTuna employees and management. A number of male managers wrote comments in response to the survey calling for more attention to hiring, training, and promoting more women at senior levels, so that the management better reflects the overall employment demographics.

Going forward, SolTuna plans to strengthen performance-management systems with greater attention to creating more opportunities for women to move into different roles. Formal education requirements for certain jobs may be an unnecessary barrier that can be reconsidered, especially in light of the educational system in the Solomon Islands that can fail to reach and adequately educate students that are many past primary levels.

SolTuna should "provide opportunities for women in supervisory roles, as more than 60% of workers are females.

Training opportunities need to be balanced as [there is evidence that] most training on-site is dominated by male and recommendation to participate normally comes from department heads."

Male, Deputy Assistant Manager

## UNDERSTANDING ABSENTEEISM AND TURNOVER

IFC analyzed attendance data for all SolTuna employees for the period January 1–September 11, 2015, to identify and catalog reasons for absenteeism. Further analysis was conducted using a range of demographic indicators, such as age, home island, tenure, and gender, for a subset of employees, with a sample size of 1,200–1,350 (the sample size varied depending on the demographic metric).

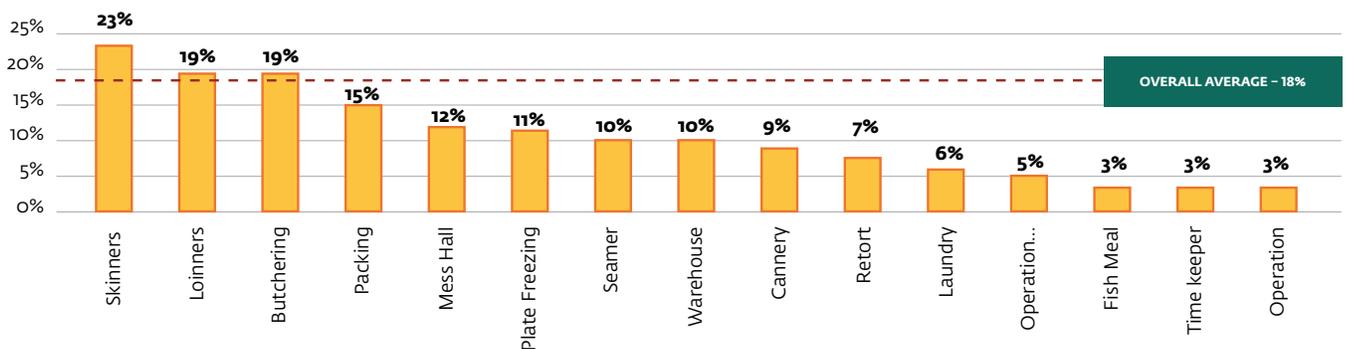
### LEVELS OF ABSENTEEISM

Like many other employers in Solomon Islands and tuna processors across the Pacific, SolTuna experiences extremely high absenteeism rates among production staff, with staff absent 32% of the time on average. A portion of absenteeism is accounted for by statutory and pre-approved forms of leave such as maternity leave, holiday leave, or approved sick leave. This type of leave accounts for 14% of workers' absenteeism on average. Under Solomon Islands' law, women are entitled to a minimum of six and up to 12 weeks of maternity leave, paid at 25% of their salary, and to two one-hour breaks when nursing. Paternity leave is not provided for under the law.

A significant percentage of leave, however, is taken without permission. The analysis focused on this type of discretionary or 'controllable' leave. On average, workers are absent for unexcused and unknown reasons 18% of the time. Reducing the level of this controllable absenteeism could significantly improve SolTuna's productivity and cut staffing costs. Those absent without permission are not paid for days they do not work, but the absence of a reliable workforce causes SolTuna to employ far more workers than would be necessary and this entails significant fixed costs. Currently, the company overstaffs each shift to account for this absenteeism. Controllable absenteeism is the focus of the following analysis:

There is a clear pattern of higher absenteeism at the beginning and end of each week, with 20% absenteeism on Mondays and Fridays, dropping to 17% on Tuesdays and 16% on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Staff are also significantly more absent on payday and the days either side, with controllable absenteeism of 29% on average on payday, 24% the day before, and 31% the day after. There are also clear patterns by department (see graph below). Skinners (23%), Loinnerers (19%), Butchering (19%), and Packing (15%) have the highest rates of absenteeism, while Fish Meal, Time-keeping, and Operations have the lowest rates (3%).

### CONTROLLABLE ABSENTEEISM BY DEPARTMENT by department



## WHO IS MOST ABSENT?

Further analysis using demographic data identified that absenteeism is not equal across employees. Some 20% of employees are responsible for 50% of controllable absenteeism. The most absent workers are young, married, and local women, who are absent around 24% of the time on average. The least absent are married men over 30 who have above-average education and whose home islands are further away (3% absenteeism). Single women over 30 with less education are also among the least absent (10% absenteeism). These results, coupled with information obtained through focus groups and the mini-study on absenteeism, suggest that, to some extent, absenteeism is related to care responsibilities of younger women who have children and are living with family.

Absenteeism rates tend to drop as workers get older, with younger workers significantly more absent: workers under the age of 25 are absent 21% of the time on average, compared to 14% for 30- to 35-year-olds, and only 7% for those above 50. Longer tenure also tends to reduce absenteeism, but only after staff have been with the company for some time. Staff with less than one year and up to five years of tenure are absent between 19% and 17% of the time respectively. By the time staff have been with the company for more than seven years, absenteeism drops to around 9%. This is likely also a feature of age, and the reduced likelihood of having below school-aged children at home. Where workers come from also impacts their rate of absenteeism, with workers from closer islands being more absent.

### GETTING TO WEDNESDAY: WHAT SOLTUNA COULD SAVE AND EARN WITH AVERAGE ABSENTEEISM AT 15%

Recognizing that getting to zero absenteeism is likely unrealistic, IFC modeled the potential additional revenue and cost savings if SolTuna were able to bring absenteeism to the level experienced on a typical Wednesday, rather than a Monday or Friday. There are at least three sources of business gain:

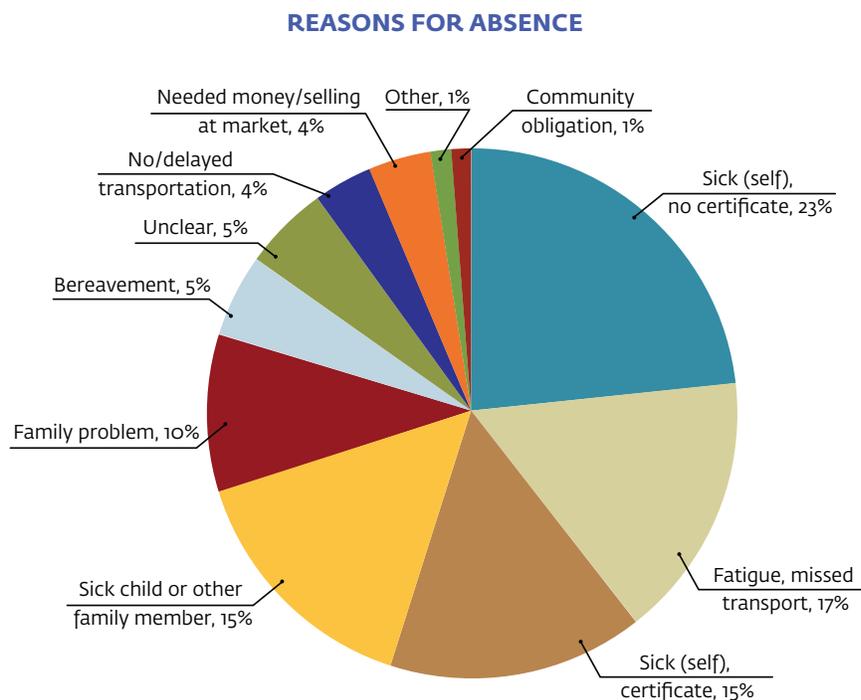
- 1. Additional revenue from added productivity.** Based on the average productivity measured in metric tons of tuna processed per day in 2015, if SolTuna could reach 15% absenteeism each day, the daily average production levels would increase to 125 metric tonnes. With the current price of skipjack tuna at around \$1,500/metric tonnes and assuming full operation for 40 weeks a year, SolTuna could earn an additional \$1,580,000 in annual revenue by bringing absenteeism down.
- 2. Savings from reduced staffing.** SolTuna hires additional workers to ensure sufficient coverage due to absenteeism. While employees are not paid wages for days on which they are absent, they do receive annual benefits including housing subsidies and school fees. If absenteeism is reduced to Wednesday levels, overstaffing could be reduced by 5%. Not taking into account the additional recruitment costs of overstaffing, SolTuna could save more than \$45,000 a year in fixed staff-benefit costs associated with overstaffing.
- 3. Savings from reduced overtime.** High levels of absenteeism also contribute to higher than necessary levels of overtime. Reducing the overtime wage bill in proportion with a potential reduction in absenteeism to Wednesday levels would save SolTuna over \$121,000 per year.

## WHY WORKERS ARE ABSENT

Absenteeism is persistent for both male and female staff. However, in diving deeper into the causes of absenteeism, it is clear that gender-related issues and gender roles are a significant factor. By triangulating data from the EDGE gender assessment and the demographic analysis discussed above, as well as the results of a study tracking reasons for absenteeism over a four-week period and focus groups with staff, the following were identified as major contributors to the high rates of absenteeism and turnover among SolTuna production workers:

1. Poor worker and family health, including due to poor community water and sanitation, and high rates of GBV;
2. Lack of quality childcare; and
3. The need for immediate cash, including low financial literacy and insufficient savings.

The primary reasons for production-worker absenteeism were recorded during a four-week period in August–September 2015 (see chart below). During this period, over half all absenteeism was health-related, either a result of the worker’s own illness (23% sick without a certificate and 15% sick with a certificate), or time needed to care for a sick child or family member (15%). An additional 16% of absences were due to problems with transportation, which focus groups suggest includes staff missing transportation because they slept late or were hungover. In focus groups, workers reported tiredness due to working long hours and late nights as one of their biggest challenges.

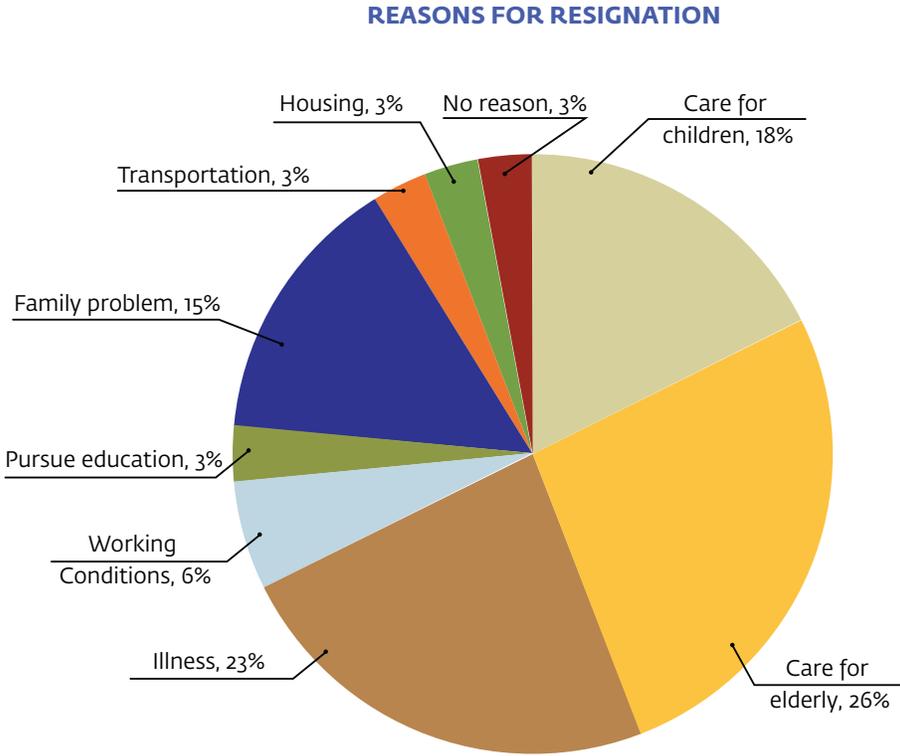


A significant share of workers also indicated they were absent (10%) or resigned (15%) due to family problems. Many workers reported that family problems, including physical violence, threats, and other forms of domestic violence, affect their ability to get to work and to work productively when they are there. Laws against domestic violence and sexual assault were passed only in 2015 and 2016 respectively, so legal remedies are new and may not always be available. Noting the dearth of services available, SolTuna has actively supported the development of a safe house in the town and has sent many staff to be trained as peer counselors in order to support their colleagues, family members, and neighbors facing violence. In cases where they are requested to do so by staff, SolTuna management may intervene to help, which may include bringing in the police.

In focus groups, workers discussed other concerns they had about the workplace that had not been directly cited as reasons for absence, but which may play a role in weakening employee engagement. These included concerns about male workers’ ‘horseplay’ on the shop floor and safety concerns such as slips and falls or cuts. SolTuna is responding with increased training on equipment and emergency preparedness, as well as adding expertise and staff to address OHS concerns.

**ANALYZING TURNOVER**

SolTuna does not always receive advance notice when workers leave their jobs, but in some cases they receive a resignation letter. A review of 26 resignation letters received by SolTuna between January and June 2015 found that more than one-quarter (26%) of all workers who provided a letter resigned to care for elderly family members, while almost 23% resigned for health- or illness-related reasons. A further 18% of resignations were to care for children (see chart below). Two workers cited working conditions as reasons for resignation, one being bothered by the smell and another reported being cold.



# MEASURES SOLTUNA IS TAKING

*In light of the analysis undertaken on the root causes of absenteeism and turnover, SolTuna has launched a number of initiatives and reforms, and has more planned. For example, SolTuna has tightened its response to chronic absenteeism, ensuring HR records and attendance are closely monitored. As discussed, the company has also raised wages for the bottom tier of earners, increasing the incentive to come to work regularly and keep their jobs.*

## THE NEXT FRONTIER FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN WORKERS AT SOLTUNA

The financial-literacy course will be rolled out to the remaining SolTuna workers and is expected to significantly improve worker perceptions about their pay, resulting in greater loyalty and attendance. Other improvements to worker–management dialogue, such as the changes discussed above related to the SECC, are expected to have similar results.

These efforts are already paying off for SolTuna, with dramatically reduced absenteeism rates in 2016 compared to 2015. Total absenteeism between January and May 2016 was 18%, compared to 32% for the same period in 2015, and controllable absenteeism reduced substantially from 16% in 2015 to 12% in 2016.

Going forward, additional incremental reduction in absenteeism may well be tougher to achieve, but there are further avenues to pursue. Four are discussed below: healthcare, GBV, childcare, and expanding career pathways. As previously discussed, poor worker and family health is a key driver of absenteeism at SolTuna, with 23% of absences due to sickness where no medical certificate was provided, a further 15% due to sick leave with a medical certificate, and 15% related to caring for sick children or family members. Almost one quarter (23%) of resignations were also due to illness. During focus groups, staff emphasized water and sanitation as a major concern, especially for those with young children and those living in private accommodation.

SolTuna is developing plans on worker healthcare initiatives, even though the company is in less direct control of many health factors. To date, the company has analyzed the most frequent complaints at its health clinic and identified a prioritized list of health issues to target with community and workplace campaigns. It is considering other options for partnering with government or non-government organizations to conduct a deeper study on community health and then develop cost-effective implementation plans to help address the causes of poor health. A likely target of this work will be efforts to improve access to clean water and sanitation. Another top priority is likely to be reproductive health services.

A related driver of absenteeism is family. Some 10% of absenteeism was reportedly due to family problems, while 15% of resignation letters reported family problems as the primary reason for leaving SolTuna. During focus groups, women reported family problems having a range of impacts on their work, including partners restricting their ability to go to work and issues arising when they return home late after working overtime or on the night shift.

While the company has already invested in supporting the development of a safe house in the community, as well as sponsored training for staff members in peer counseling, the company has yet to establish a structured approach and policy for how it addresses domestic violence among its staff, in terms of the support that could be offered to victims of violence. Implementing a policy and associated training on GBV as a workplace issue could bring various benefits to the company (see box below). A model policy road-tested in several Papua New Guinea businesses will be adapted for use at SolTuna.

## BUSINESS BENEFITS TO A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO ADDRESS FAMILY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND THE WORKPLACE

Evidence from businesses in Papua New Guinea, where rates of gender-based violence are similar to those in Solomon Islands, has indicated that such violence can cost up to 10% of an annual wage bill in lost work time and reduced productivity.

### **Benefits of proactively and effectively addressing the effects of violence on the workplace could include:**

- Reduced costs and increased savings;
- Fulfilling employers' duty of care;
- Improved staff health, safety, and wellbeing; and
- Positioning the organization as socially responsible and an employer of choice.

Supporting employees who are victims of violence to maintain their employment can improve long-term productivity, safeguarding institutional knowledge, and offsetting potential termination, recruitment, and retraining expenses. Further, organizations that appropriately manage employees who are perpetrators of violence will reduce the risk of vicarious liability and reputational damage – particularly if these employees are perpetrating violence on work premises or in accommodation, using work resources, or during paid work time.

Employers will be fulfilling their duty of care to employees, contractors, and clients by providing a safe workplace where foreseeable risks are removed or mitigated. This, in turn, could reduce insurance premiums and other security costs, and enhance the health, safety, and wellbeing of all staff.

A remaining challenge for SolTuna workers is that of reliable and suitable childcare. Given the demographics of the SolTuna workforce and the impact of unreliable childcare on absenteeism, there is a strong business case for SolTuna to consider investments to improve access to childcare. However, many of the solutions that have worked for other employers – from providing workplace childcare centers, vouchers or subsidies toward the costs of childcare, and information or referrals to childcare providers – are likely to be difficult to implement, given a lack of government support for childcare services and the absence of any existing childcare providers in the communities where SolTuna workers live. With no obvious solution in sight, the team plans to further study what options there might be for improving care at the village or broader community level, or via potential public-private partnerships.

Finally, SolTuna will continue to invest in getting more women into non-traditional jobs, and launch a targeted effort to improve female representation at management levels to capitalize on the benefits of a more diverse leadership team.

SolTuna has firmly embraced the business case for investing in its female workforce and is taking clear steps toward implementing an effective strategy for supporting women as employees and leaders across the organization. The proactive approach that SolTuna is taking on issues such as GBV and training staff on financial literacy are positioning it as a clear leader, not only in Solomon Islands but across the Pacific region. SolTuna and IFC will continue to monitor progress in all the areas outlined above to enable continual improvements and to identify those areas with the greatest impact for both women and the company.

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CASE STUDY

# Supreme Poultry – poultry processing, South Africa

September 2016

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## Company Background

Supreme Poultry is a subsidiary of Country Bird Holdings (CBH) Ltd, which produces broiler chickens (those bred specifically for meat production) and animal feed, as well as operating poultry-hatching and -breeding sites. CBH is headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa, and has several subsidiary companies, with operations in Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Supreme Poultry is South Africa's third-largest poultry producer, with a range of frozen and fresh chicken products under various brand names for wholesale and retail. The company also supplies own-brand products to major South African supermarkets and, increasingly, to the quick service restaurant sector, including to Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and Nando's. Supreme's flagship broiler slaughter and processing site at Tigane, North West Province forms the subject of this case study. The site processes 48 million chickens per year and has a total annual turnover of R852 million (\$54 million).

Broiler production and processing is significant for South African agriculture by volume (17% in 2013), and South Africa produces 80% of broiler chickens for the wider Southern African region (DAFF, 2014). Domestic production and consumption of chicken products has been increasing steadily in recent years in South Africa and the wider region. While the bulk of Supreme Poultry products are consumed in South Africa, where it has around 9% market share, the company aims to provide affordable chicken products to customers throughout southern Africa and currently exports around 4% of production. Supreme Poultry's operating context is strongly affected by the price of grain for feed, currency fluctuations, national regulations on brine added to chicken, and by changes in international trade agreements, which have increased competition from cheaper imported chicken.

Nationally, Supreme employs approximately 3,500 people in its breeder farms, hatcheries, abattoirs, cold-storage facilities, and retail outlets, with operations based mainly in the Free State and North West provinces (CBH Operational Review, 2013), accounting for around 65% of CBH's overall employees.

The Tigane plant employs a total of 842 permanent employees, and 80 temporary workers. Supreme outsources the growing of live birds to a number of contract growers, who have substantial technical support from the company and are supplied with day-old chicks and chicken feed. Supreme's contract growers supplying Tigane provide employment for a further 448 people.

"Here, there are opportunities for growth and promotion for women, as long as you are open-minded and determined. We women are not afraid to take the lead."

Female Training Officer, Tigane



Photo © Supreme Poultry



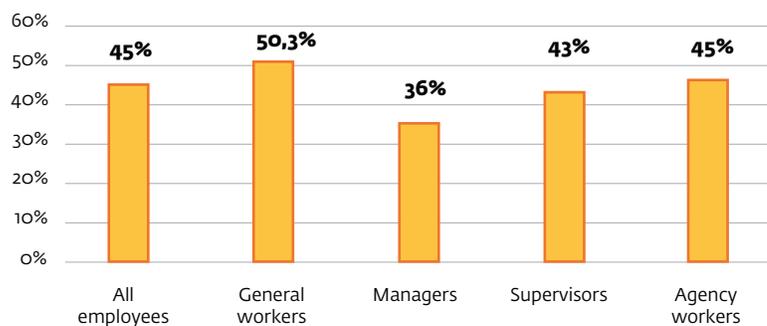
Photos © Supreme Poultry

# HOW THE COMPANY SUPPORTS WOMEN

*Women are present throughout the company at Supreme Poultry, from the head office to the production sites, and represent 44% of total employees at the company. At the Tigane site, they represent 45% of employees overall and are found at the on-site management office, at the front-line of production, and beyond the site at contract-grower level. While some female staff have been employed for over a decade, historically there were far fewer women at the site. The Tigane workplace is unionized: 40% of the women workers are union members (against 73% overall worker membership), with a number elected as shop stewards.*

In front-line production, most roles involve both men and women. Women make up 50% of employees across both permanent and temporary positions. There is a higher presence of women in jobs seen to involve a greater attention to product quality (quality department), presentation (sorting and packing), and detail (cutting). The dispatch section of production (which involves working at very low temperatures) is exclusively staffed by men but managed by a woman. Company interviewees indicated that, based on their experience, these gender-based occupational patterns appear less prevalent at Supreme than they are in the wider industry in South Africa.

**WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE AT THE TIGANE PLANT, 2016**



The majority of the main workforce, including women, come from Tigane township, opposite the worksite, but also from further afield, including other provinces (Northern Cape, East Cape, Free State, KwaZulu Natal, and Transkei) and other countries, such as Zimbabwe and Malawi. In common with many township communities in South Africa, Tigane experiences social-development problems, with challenges including access to basic services, high unemployment, few opportunities for young people, and problems with crime and violence. An estimated 15% of the workforce is functionally illiterate. Many women are single parents and several support a number of dependents. Working parents use nannies and relatives to assist with childcare. Tigane clinic staff indicate that HIV/AIDS is also prevalent among the workforce at around 35%. Health issues in the community include hypertension, diabetes, and tuberculosis, as well as alcoholism, mental health problems, and concerns associated with domestic violence.

There are some key drivers for the company to increase investment in the workforce, including women. Globally, the industry is recognized as being one of hard, low-wage work in a demanding physical environment and under high competitive pressure to keep costs low. In many countries labor conditions in poultry processing have been subject to poor and unfair practices, as well as high accident rates. In South Africa, the poultry industry is facing a highly competitive period and a tough operating context. Against this backdrop, Supreme Poultry is keen to maximize efficiency and productivity at production level, and ensure high-quality and consistent products.

South Africa has well developed labor laws, including regarding Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity, which also recognize that women are a vulnerable group in their own right. The requirement to demonstrate legal compliance has been a driver for the company to further professionalize HR management.

## CLEAR, FAIR HR MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

The company is now in the ongoing process of adopting a more rigorous approach to HR management, which has included ensuring equal opportunities for men and women at the company, alongside various activities to improve employment equity according to South Africa's Employment Equity legislation.

Following the professionalization of senior HR management, the HR function is now seen as a strategic partner in the business without which operations could not function. The professional HR approach includes the view that all staff must be promoted based on competence and performance, with no room for discrimination on the grounds of race or gender. It has led to greater implementation and enforcement of existing policies, and the development of new policies. All of these have led to improvements in the workplace and a number of specific initiatives benefiting both men and women.

## WOMEN'S PROMOTION AND LEADERSHIP

This fresh, more meritocratic approach in the workplace has helped increase and open up opportunities for women, including their movement into supervisory and management roles over the last few years. At the Tigane site, women make up 50% of the workforce at operational level (across permanent and temporary employees). Women are present in management (36%) and supervisory levels (43%), including holding positions of substantial responsibility, such as quality management and deputy shift management. Unusually in rural agricultural industry, this involves women managing men as individuals and in groups. While some male staff still prefer to discuss issues with a male line manager, the majority have accepted the situation without difficulty.

"Previously, it was, 'get on with it and do what you're told'. Now, there has been a mindset shift regarding HR's function. HR is much more involved and seen as a strategic partner in making the business work."

Herman Spamer, HR Manager

"Here, women are given responsibility and the opportunity to grow, more than where I used to work. Women can walk a long way here if we [hold] hands together and are a good team."

Female Training and OHS Manager

Men and women workers' indicate that these increased opportunities have helped build women's confidence. Female staff report that they are not afraid to speak with a strong voice, literally and metaphorically. They feel their voices are heard on equal terms with men and that the opportunities for growth and promotion are there for open-minded, determined women who can see themselves in leadership positions. Female staff in supervisory roles value the increased independence and responsibility that promotion brings. General workers feel that the presence of female supervisors increases the overall understanding of issues women face in the workplace – for example, recognition and respect, and the need for lighter duties in the workplace during pregnancy, including more frequent bathroom breaks.

## CLEAR RULES ON BEHAVIOR - INCLUDING NO TOLERANCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT - AND SUPPORT FOR PERSONAL SAFETY

The company has a defined Code of Conduct which governs behavior in the workplace, helping embed fair treatment. All staff are trained on the Code of Conduct at induction, including a simple '20 Rules' summary. While this was introduced a few years ago, more recently it has been more firmly implemented and enforced, and staff feel that it is a valuable, easy-to-understand tool which has created a unity of purpose and treatment at the site.

This consistent communication and implementation has helped make the workplace culture one of recognition and respect, with no tolerance for sexual harassment. The company has had past instances of known sexual harassment which resulted in the dismissal of staff members, including white members of staff. With the cultural legacy of apartheid (which increased impunity for white people), this is significant in the South African context.

"We have people from many provinces and even other countries. Here, once you walk through the gate, it doesn't matter what you do at home or if you have another culture in your place or your country, here we follow certain rules."

Female Training Officer

The company has also introduced night transportation following attacks on staff traveling home after completing a night shift at the worksite. While this is paid for by a negotiated pay increment on staff salaries, the nighttime minibus service is organized by the company. Both men and women value this service, since the threat of attack in the area is experienced equally by men and women and both participate equally in night shifts.

As a result of such measures (reinforced by the presence of CCTV cameras in some areas of the processing plant) staff members feel secure during and after work, and confident that complaints of sexual harassment are taken very seriously.

## TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Historically, the only external training provided was that which was legally mandated. However, over recent years, the company has increased its levels of training, acknowledging that South Africa's legislation to support Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity has also been a driver for this activity. Employees' training needs are assessed and women and men have equal access to training opportunities, differing from the past where men would likely have had more access to training opportunities and training was focused on

production only. Now the company has a strong focus on OHS, and food safety and hygiene training (such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, HACCP) for all staff, as well as quality training for quality team staff, many of whom are women. There has also been Strategic Business Management training for several staff, including men and women line managers.

The South African Poultry Association has been working to develop standard qualifications for the poultry industry, in order to introduce 'learnerships' for staff. These are national vocational training accreditation courses aiming to provide qualifications of certified competence for those with informal education, but without qualifications. They involve training at the workplace, as well as in the classroom, and are paid partly by the company and partly by government subsidy. These types of formal qualification are particularly important in an industry that handles food products and in which company customers have high food-safety and quality specifications. While not yet in place, the site HR manager believes these will be agreed upon shortly and introduced across the industry in 2016. Once the standard is introduced at Supreme, there are plans for 150 shop floor staff at Tigane to undergo an accredited Quality Training scheme.

Beyond vocational training related to food safety and hygiene, and OHS, some staff also received training on supervisory skills and environmental awareness. Given the company's promotion of women into supervisory and management roles, women have been beneficiaries of these courses and will be included in equal numbers at the general workforce level in the future learnership schemes. Women at the company reported that they especially value training and any other educational opportunities. Participation in training courses increases their knowledge and skills, and the sense of respect and recognition they feel in the workplace.

The company has also introduced internships for people undertaking work placements while in tertiary education. This internship scheme has mainly benefited women – currently all four 2016 interns are women – though men were also represented. There are also benefits for the company: interns often remain with the company, they can provide access to some of the university facilities, and their work and ideas generate valued innovations and improved processing operations, which can create substantial savings.

## ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES BENEFITING WOMEN

Supreme has a number of initiatives to support staff who are parents. It offers optional enhanced maternity leave of two additional months beyond the statutory minimum of four months, and, anecdotally, reported 100% maternity return rates. Staff at management level can request flexible working times to accommodate family responsibilities such as school/childcare pick-ups and drop-offs.

At Tigane (and other processing sites), the company runs a shop selling chicken products on the edge of the worksite premises, which is open to all staff and to any nearby residents of the township. The factory shop is valued by employees, since it offers lower prices than in the nearby town and saves staff time in shopping (typically done by women).

There is a health clinic at the worksite, offering support for physical and mental-health issues. This includes dispensing of controlled medication and counseling services. The clinic offers services tailored to women; they can undergo breast examinations and cervical (PAP) smears on-site. The clinic can also refer staff experiencing domestic abuse (typically women) to a local NGO able to offer further services. Feedback from employees shows that, on the whole, these health services are valued – they can save staff time that would otherwise be spent

## CONTRACT GROWER NETWORK EXTENDS EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Supreme Poultry has an extensive outgrower operation, with 48 contract growers (including one woman) providing live birds to the processing site at Tigane. The largest grower has over 1.5 million birds. The Contract Grower Manager is a woman, and women are present at a ratio of four women to six men in the team, including in technical roles (such as in an on-farm technical advisory capacity). Contract-growing operations will typically be registered in a man's name, though many will be family farming operations in which some women will also be involved.

Contract growers to Supreme currently provide jobs to 448 people, of whom 25% (114) are women, showing that there are substantial employment opportunities for women at broiler-rearing level. Contract growers interviewed indicated that women do seek work opportunities on farms and are given equal consideration as men. However, women workers are more common on the large contract growing farms than on small ones, as, on small farms, workers often have other tasks that are seen as male work, such as construction. Women are present at farm level across the board, for example, tending chickens and managing chicken sheds. One contract farm supervisor with extensive industry experience reported that most women are comfortable working on night as well as day shifts, contrary to some of their male colleagues' expectations.

For contract growers, a committed and present workforce is very important for healthy chicken production. Women workers are seen as disciplined, determined, and able to organise their workloads and handle the chickens well. Health and hygiene are also very important at farm level, so farm workers who uphold standards are valued. Having mixed teams at farm level helps create a good working environment.

Supreme's contract growers are helping provide a number of employment opportunities for women. The company can build on its technical relationship with growers to encourage growers to employ women in non-traditional jobs on farms, using examples from existing growers to spread the message.

"For me, employing women is a matter of personal pride. I like encouraging the independence of women. One woman started out helping in the kitchen and is now an assistant poultry manager."

Female Contract Grower



Photo © Supreme Poultry

In 2015, Supreme brought on its first female contract grower, Nthabiseng Khuluse. Her farming operation has been very successful. She employs four men and two women (slightly more women than other growers), and provides better than average working conditions, such as higher pay and a performance bonus for all staff. She believes this creates higher productivity, lower turnover and absenteeism, and smoother operations in general.

“Initially I was sceptical about women on a chicken farm, but actually they did an excellent job, plenty were even comfortable working on the night shift, which I didn’t expect.”

Male Farm Supervisor



Photo © Supreme Poultry

visiting a doctor off-site – and, in some cases, these health services may even be a motivation to come to work. Increased training and awareness of safety importance, improved personal protective equipment, and supervision at the abattoir have helped reduce the Serious Injury Related Accident (SIRA) rate over recent years.

The company is also now introducing a new health-insurance scheme with a low monthly fee where doctors will be brought to the worksite, facilitating easier access for staff and sparing the time (and lost wages) of a visit to a doctor. This will be open to all staff, but will target those on low incomes. The company also supported the studies and qualifications of the female clinic manager during her substantial service at the company.

## THE BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY

The company’s improved HR management, meritocratic approach, and attention to women workers’ personal safety and health have created a range of business benefits. In particular, the company’s improved performance and excellent product quality mean it is now well-placed to support a strategy of growth, based on site expansion at Tigane and development into new markets.

### IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY AND HIGHER PERFORMANCE WITH MIXED TEAMS

Staff at Supreme Poultry, from senior management to general workers, hold the clear belief that a more mixed workplace with fair opportunities for men and women leads to better business performance. Research supports this view, as extensive studies have shown that greater gender balance produces better decision-making and more resilient businesses (McKinsey, 2015). In particular, women are considered to bring:

- *Ambition and desire to rise to challenges, including tough production targets;*
- *Good operations management, resulting in smoother production;*
- *Empathy and good people skills, including addressing staff personal issues at work;*
- *A systems approach, with understanding of what works in practice;*
- *Excellent technical and organizational skills; and*
- *Ability to follow and enforce production instructions and wider company rules.*

There are direct business benefits from traits which women are seen to bring to the workforce: improved skills at work; savings on decreased wastage of product, packaging materials, water, and electricity; and savings from smoother and faster implementation of change and new standards.

Following increased investment in staff at Tigane during 2015, via training programs (where women made up 49% of staff trained), the company was able to improve productivity, producing more chicken products with a lower staff ratio. Smoother operations and adherence to standards also means the company passes customer-compliance audits (such as KFC's supplier-audit program), reducing the potential for fines and saving management time in dealing with non-compliance and customer complaints.

## SUPPORT FOR COMPANY STRATEGY OF EXPANSION AND INCREASED ACCESS TO HIGHER VALUE MARKETS

For Supreme Poultry, the current, highly competitive market means the company is likely to pursue a plan of improved efficiency and new product development. For this, retention of existing, trained staff and developing higher staff skills will be crucial. Given the industry's price squeeze owing to cheaper imports, the company's plan for affordable skills development is to invest in their own staff via training and development, rather than recruiting different staff.

Company strategy is to increase selling chicken to the quick service restaurant market, as well as potentially supplying fresh product (currently, Tigane produces only frozen product), both of which are higher value markets. The company is also considering new added-value products (such as crumb and cooked chicken). All of these require specific staff skills in terms of highly consistent quality, production to clear standards, and attention to detail – traits which women are considered to bring to the workplace and which is supported by their prominence in the Quality and Cutting departments. Tigane's reputation within the Supreme Poultry and wider CBH group is one of being the “flagship plant – very efficient, with a can-do attitude and a great team – [where] staff are very helpful from top to bottom”, reported a Sales & Marketing team member. According to HR staff, the plant has better workforce relations and higher productivity than other Supreme plants, and is likely to feature more strongly in the company's overall expansion plans as a result.

## REDUCED ABSENTEEISM

Alongside the general improvement in HR management practices governing areas such as planned absences, in recent years the company has focused on preventative health, rather than dealing with health matters on an ad hoc basis. Both elements have generated better management of sick leave and reduced average absenteeism rates – 2.32% for 2016 (to date), reduced from 2.57% in 2015 – creating substantial annual average savings of ZAR 240,600 (\$16,800), according to company calculations. Having health services at the workplace enables employees to work productively; for example, having a qualified clinic sister who can treat people on-site and authorize sick leave where necessary. This has helped reduce lost production time and absenteeism for doctor's visits and sick leave. Increased safety and health awareness training has also reduced overall OHS incidents, including serious injury-related accidents.

## FARM SHOP OFFERS INCREASED SALES POTENTIAL

Employees at Tigane value the cheaper price of products available at the farm shop and, for the company, this is a profitable operation. Company strategy is now seeing the factory-shop sales channel as a more serious revenue opportunity, and is considering increasing such direct sales and taking further advantage of the market of direct employees and residents neighboring processing plants. This could involve marketing strategies, such as further staff discounts and increased promotions.

## REMAINING CHALLENGES

Supreme Poultry has not set out with the explicit objective of investing in women directly. However, the company's improved overall HR and workforce management has indirectly helped end discrimination toward women, with the result that they have derived increased benefits compared to men. Going forward, an explicit focus on women could help the company realize even greater benefits for their overall workforce and overcome some of the remaining challenges.

## CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT APPROACH

Professionalizing HR management at the company is an ongoing process. There is scope to build on existing improvements by adopting a continuous improvement approach. This will be especially important given the competitive future of the poultry industry and the proposed expansion at Supreme's Tigane site. For example, this could encompass improving worker-management communication, such as regularly surveying employees to harvest ideas, improve employee engagement, and address any workplace issues.

The company has moved to a preventative healthcare approach, where possible, and has invested in training staff and assistance with workplace healthcare schemes. Women workers, in particular, may benefit from assessments which focus on common health considerations in the poultry industry, such as managing production to ensure regular toilet breaks, rotating staff around different tasks and departments, and limiting standing for long periods.

## SPACE FOR WOMEN'S FURTHER PROGRESSION INTO SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Women workers at Supreme Poultry have benefited from the company's meritocratic, competence-based approach to HR management in recent years, creating opportunities for them in roles which were predominantly a male preserve. Since 2010, fourteen women have been promoted to key high-level and supervisory/management positions. This has had clear business benefits in terms of product quality and smoother operations (as outlined above), and should pave the way for similar progression throughout the company, including more women at senior management and corporate level (the five board directors are all men, though the company secretary is a woman).

## FURTHER INVESTMENT IN SKILLS AND EDUCATION

The company has made some investments in skills development at the workplace, partly as a result of the range of employment-equity legislation which resulted from South Africa's apartheid legacy. Women workers, alongside male colleagues, show a clear commitment to building their qualifications and skills, and the company could

invest further in upgrading skills and assisting with education for already skilled workers (such as through the planned learnerships). A revolving loan fund that workers could use to further their education could be investigated. For workers with poor literacy, the company could consider offering basic literacy and numeracy skills which could help maintain a loyal, motivated workforce, equipped to help the company expand. Currently, tenure is the same for men and women: an average of seven years over the past decade.

There may also be community groups, local NGOs, or government programs with whom the company could partner to improve educational resources, such as teachers in the community. This would generate business benefits in the form of improved literacy, which aids food-safety compliance and high workplace standards across all business operations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Globally, the industrial poultry industry is characterized by hard work in a demanding environment and is under pressure to keep costs low. South Africa is no exception. This has led Supreme Poultry to adopt a continuous improvement approach, maximizing efficiency and productivity, and working to ensure a high-quality, consistent product range. In recent years, the company has changed its mindset with regard to HR management. It is now a critical function as part of the drive to overall improvement and, in turn, has created a meritocratic approach, which ensures equal opportunities for men and women at the company.

The company is now reaping the benefits of its fresh approach: improved productivity and quality, reduced absenteeism, and increased sales potential back to staff themselves. Outgrower broiler producers also see additional value in having women workers, where once such jobs would have been traditionally seen as men's work. Women workers value the increased employment opportunities and the chance for promotion, as well as training and other educational opportunities.

Going forward, the company can build on the work to date by further action to address common industry OHS issues; making ongoing investments in workforce skills and education; continuing to improve current HR management systems; encouraging employment of women (and good HR practices overall) at outgrower level; and driving increased progression of women into senior management roles. This will provide additional opportunities for women workers and help reinforce Tigane as the flagship company site, fully equipped for Supreme's efforts to build market share and develop new products.

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CASE STUDY

# Vinaseed - Seed production, Vietnam

September 2016

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## Company Background

Vinaseed is one of the largest seed-production companies in Vietnam. It produces, trades, and exports seeds (rice, maize, and vegetable) and rice for household consumption. The company sells the vast majority of its products through 1,200 distributor companies across Vietnam, but also exports seeds to Laos, Cambodia, and South China (Vinaseed, 2015). Previously a state-owned enterprise, Vinaseed was privatized in 2004 and publicly listed in 2006. Its major shareholder is the PAN Group, which is an IFC client. In 2011, Vinaseed was the first agribusiness company to achieve the status of a Science and Technology Enterprise in Vietnam.

Vinaseed has been expanding rapidly, with average annual growth of 25–30% in revenue and profit over the period 2010–2015. In 2015 alone, its revenue increased 74% over the previous year (from VND 719 billion/\$32.2 million to VND 1,248 billion / \$56 million, as per information provided by Vinaseed). The company has plans for further expansion in coming years, by increasing the depth of its product offering in seeds and the quantity of rice sales.

Vinaseed operates in a highly competitive and rapidly changing sector, with an estimated 200 seed producers across the country. The company is in a strong financial position, but faces some important challenges. In the domestic market, Vinaseed will soon be exposed to higher levels of competition from multinational seed companies, as a result of the recently concluded Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal. The impact of climate change on Vietnamese agriculture is also a major concern. Although Vietnam is currently one of the world's largest producers of rice for export (FAO, 2016), it has also been identified as one of the five countries most likely to be negatively affected by climate change, as a result of low-lying agricultural land.

Vinaseed directly employs 287 workers, who are dispersed throughout its head office, eight regional branches, and two research centers. The company employs another 500 staff indirectly through three subsidiary companies, including the Southern Seed Company (which has 15 branches). Vinaseed also engages a network of more than 10,000 contract farmers throughout Vietnam to grow the seeds and rice that are sold under the Vinaseed brand.



Photo © Vinaseed

# HOW THE COMPANY PROVIDES A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN

*Overall, women represent 27% of the total permanent workforce and 18% of management. Women and men are evenly represented in the company’s research (48%) and accounting (48%) departments. There is a high proportion of women in quality assurance (81%) and administration (67%), but women are under-represented in sales (5%), marketing (22%), and production (15%). Vinaseed’s workforce is highly educated: more than 80% of all staff have a university degree.*

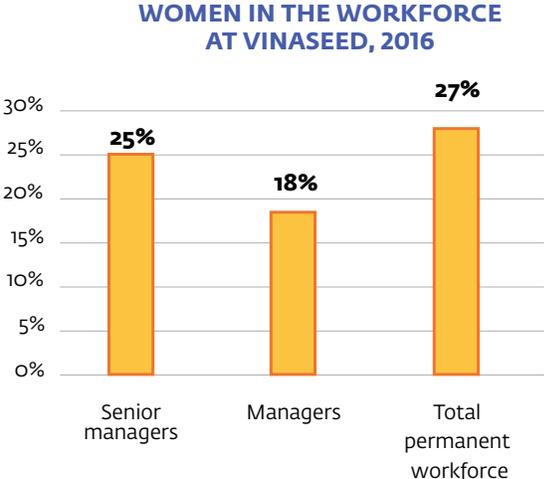
Women at Vinaseed benefit from the company’s goal to be a good employer for all workers, by maintaining a positive and cohesive team environment that is conducive to the company’s business goals of innovation, resilience, and future expansion.

## STRONG FEMALE LEADERSHIP

Since 2004, Vinaseed has been led by Chief Executive Officer, Tran Kim Lien, who serves as an important female role model for women in the company. Vinaseed also enjoys strong female representation on its company board: three out of seven directors (43%) are female (including the CEO).

Having female role models in areas that are mostly male-dominated – in management and on boards – can help encourage other women to pursue these career pathways. This is important in the context of Vietnam, where there is a high rate of women’s labor-force participation (73.3%), but much lower rates of women in leadership positions. Only 23% of all managers in Vietnam are women (ILO, 2014).

A number of women employees at Vinaseed said that the company is more understanding of women’s needs as a result of CEO Tran Kim Lien’s leadership. According to one female manager: “I feel like I am listened to here. Ms. Lien shows me both how to develop professionally and also how to maneuver through life’s difficulties.”



“I made a conscious choice to work for Vinaseed. I used to be very successful in my position at a bank and when I came here, a lot of people were surprised. But Vinaseed was a client, and I really admired Ms Lien and her staff... I thought I could learn a lot from working here. Everyone is so open at Vinaseed. It feels like a family to me now.”

Nguyen Thi Chau, Deputy Manager, Agricultural Product Sales



Photo © Vinaseed

## AN HR MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK THAT PROMOTES EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AT ALL STAGES OF THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

Vinaseed prides itself on its commitment to equal opportunity for women and men, both in policy and practice. This applies with respect to all stages of the employment relationship: recruitment, training, promotion, and provision of wages and benefits. In particular, Vinaseed places considerable emphasis on the quality and transparency of its recruitment process, as it aims to attract employees who will make the most positive contribution to the company and stay for the longer term, regardless of gender. As such, the company makes a conscious effort to recruit “the most suitable – not the best – person” for each position, taking into account a range of attributes beyond technical skills, such as interpersonal skills.

The strength of Vinaseed’s commitment to equal opportunity makes a real difference in the context of ongoing gender discrimination in the labor market in Vietnam. A recent study found that one in five job advertisements still includes gender requirements, in contravention of national legislation on non-discrimination (ILO, 2015). Some 70% of these gender-targeted advertisements aimed to recruit men, mostly into higher-skilled and better-paid positions (ILO, 2015). In particular, up to 83% of management job postings indicated a preference for male applicants (ILO, 2015).

Vinaseed aims to attract the best people by providing an attractive remuneration and benefits package for all employees. Wages at Vinaseed compare favorably to other companies and sectors: the average monthly wage at Vinaseed is VND 16 million (\$800), compared to the national average of VND 3.8 million (\$180), VND 2.63 million (\$130) in agriculture, VND 12 million (\$600) in banks, and VND 18 million (\$900) in science and engineering.

Pay equity is a critical element of equal opportunity. Importantly, individual salaries at Vinaseed are calculated on the basis of a transparent, merit-based system, which helps eliminate discrimination and decision-making on the basis of personal bias. This system provides for generous bonuses for workers according to a formal procedure that is clearly communicated to employees, whereby individual performance is tracked and assessed on the basis of clearly defined and achievable targets that are agreed between the employee and his/her manager. Those who meet their targets can earn the equivalent of an extra six months’ pay and those exceed their targets can earn up to 12 months’ extra pay. A grievance mechanism is available for workers who do not agree with the final

management decision on their performance pay. Vinaseed regularly offers job sharing options for key staff, high-potential staff, and agricultural experts. The company also provides a life-insurance program for employees with more than three years' service and health insurance for workers that enables them to access medical care in the best clinics. This includes access to antenatal medical care, a benefit which is valued by women workers.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH

Vinaseed enjoys near gender parity in its research and development (R&D) function, where women represent 48% of staff. There is also one woman on the panel of six independent experts (17%) that are engaged by the company to advise on R&D. This is considerably higher than the figures on women's participation in science and technology in Vietnam, according to which women researchers are under-represented in both the private (37%) and public (39%) sectors. These both tend to offer better salaries and opportunities for advancement than academic institutions, toward which women researchers are more likely to gravitate (46%) (UIS, 2011). Across the world, women are estimated to make up only 28% of science and technology researchers (UIS, 2014).

Vinaseed is not only giving important opportunities to the women who work within its research centers, but is also providing an example to other science and technology companies. One of the greatest obstacles to attracting women into careers in science and technology is thought to be the lack of female role models in occupations that are seen to be predominantly male (OECD, 2011).

## A CORPORATE CULTURE OF RESPECT, COOPERATION, AND ENGAGEMENT

Vinaseed places considerable value on cultivating a positive corporate culture. This includes a culture of worker engagement, in which workers at all levels are encouraged to voice their ideas and concerns, including suggestions for innovation. This is influenced by the Japanese concept of 'kaizen', where employees work together to achieve ongoing innovation through regular incremental improvements to a company's performance. There is also a strong emphasis on teamwork and building trust between management and staff, in order to build internal cohesion and connections in the workplace.

Women employees described a "listening culture" at Vinaseed, where they feel like they have a voice in the workplace and their opinions and concerns matter. Women say that CEO Tran Kim Lien has played an important role in creating this environment, by adopting a management style that involves listening. One manager observed that: "We feel like we can talk to Ms. Lien. She is attentive and caring... Not every company has this kind of culture".

"Vinaseed is not just a good company for women to work at, but for all employees. The company makes it possible for everyone – women and men – to excel at work, if they want to."

Nguyen Thi Chau, Deputy Manager, Agricultural Products Sales

## ACCESS TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

As a science and technology company, Vinaseed invests heavily in training and professional development, as it strongly believes that its continued success relies on the knowledge and skills of all of its workforce. Tran Kim Lien, the CEO, said that, "Vinaseed aims to give all workers – women and men, at all levels – the right

opportunities to develop and excel in their careers”. To this end, each worker has a ‘training roadmap’ that is agreed with his/her manager, which is based on individual training needs. Women value the company’s ongoing investment in training and development opportunities for all staff, and the encouragement and support that they receive from managers to participate in training.

Vinaseed provides support for a wide range of training and development activities. This includes short training courses: in 2015, the company funded 251 places at external courses and 275 at internal training sessions. Vinaseed also provides financial support for employees to pursue further education, such as part or full funding for master’s degrees (depending on the level of seniority). Over the last five years, the company has provided full funding for three managers (including one woman) to undertake master’s degrees in the US and Australia. Vinaseed also organizes study tours, both within Vietnam and abroad.

The company is particularly focused on management training, because managers are perceived to be the ‘backbone of the company’ and play a key role in maintaining a positive corporate ethos. Management training courses cover a range of matters, from technical skills, such as understanding spreadsheets, to soft skills, such as business ethics and corporate culture. The company also has targeted training courses for those it identifies as potential managers.

## SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR WORKING PARENTS

Women workers at head office describe a culture where the company’s principal focus is on results achieved, not hours worked. They consider that this approach is particularly beneficial for women, who are less likely to be able to work long hours, given that they tend to take primary responsibility for childcare. Women say that Vinaseed’s results-oriented work culture makes it easier for them to return to work after maternity leave, because they can leave work earlier if they have to attend to family responsibilities or take time out to take sick children to the doctor. According to Luong Mai Phuong, Deputy Manager of Investment and Project Management: “We are evaluated on the work that we do, not the time that we spend on it”.

Vinaseed’s collegial environment means that co-workers – women and men – step in to support each other, including when it comes to dealing with family emergencies. According to Le Thi Huong, Quality Assurance Manager: “We back each other up if someone has a sick child – this can happen at any time. Normally, this is a mother’s responsibility and we can ask for a few hours off to deal with it.”

“Women do experience the industry differently, even as a top manager. We need to do everything as well as a man does, but we also need to excel in both our working and family lives. This can be difficult. You need to have the right support from your family and husband.”

Tran Kim Lien, CEO

# THE BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY

## MORE GENDER DIVERSITY LEADS TO BETTER DECISION-MAKING AT THE TOP

Vinaseed benefits from gender diversity in senior management, which brings a greater diversity of perspectives to top-level discussions and decision-making. Currently, 42% of board members (three out of seven) are women. Recent research presents compelling evidence that gender diversity in a company's top ranks drives higher performance. A 2016 review of the business performance of more than 21,000 companies across 91 countries found that, on average, companies with greater gender balance in top management and on boards have substantially better financial results than those with no women (Noland, Moran, and Kotschwar, 2016). These benefits are not derived from women outperforming their male peers, but rather, that more diverse leadership tends to deliver better outcomes.

For CEO Tran Kim Lien, the benefits of gender diversity in leadership are clear. She says that having both women and men in the company's top management deepens the quality of discussions, providing a "yin-yang balance."

## CREATING A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR INNOVATION

Ongoing technological innovation is a must for Vinaseed, as the company's profitability and future growth depends in great part on its ability to create successful new seed varieties. The commercial pressure to keep on improving the company's offering is unrelenting, as observed by CEO Tran Kim Lien, "innovation has a short lifespan in this industry."

In the quest to drive ever higher levels of innovation, Vinaseed is acutely aware that its employees are its key asset and that the company's ability to maintain its recent stellar performance relies on their motivation, skills, and know-how. In this context, all employees need to be encouraged and supported equally to contribute to the company's innovation process. Cultivating a 'listening culture' not only helps make women employees feel more valued and supported, but also makes all employees feel more confident and empowered to voice new ideas and provide input on improving existing company processes. According to Nguyen Quang Truong, Director of Investment and Project Management: "Our intangible assets – our people and their knowledge – are becoming more and more important. Building our corporate culture and investing in our people is how we aim to differentiate ourselves from others and build a competitive edge."

Higher levels of diversity on research teams, including a more even balance of women and men, can help spark technological innovation. Gender balance in Vinaseed's research team is clearly paying off, as this is an area where the company has been achieving excellent results in recent years. Over the period 2010-2014, the company has researched, selected, and transferred 30 new varieties of seed, increasing company revenue from technical and scientific products from 0% to 52% (Vinaseed, 2015). These outcomes are consistent with a recent study of more than 4,000 companies with R&D teams, which found that the probability of innovative developments significantly increased when there were higher levels of gender diversity on teams (Diaz-Garcia et al, 2013). The researchers attributed this to different perspectives, leading to a wider range of ideas and greater creativity.

Employee perception that the remuneration system is fair can also help drive innovation. The Vinaseed system, which is applied equally to women and men, creates greater incentives for workers to stay motivated and perform at their best, knowing that their pay is assessed objectively on the basis of individual performance relating to formal criteria, rather than personal characteristics.

## ATTRACTING AND RETAINING THE BEST AND MOST COMMITTED WORKERS

The company's recruitment process, which focuses on hiring the most suitable person for the job, regardless of gender, means that the company chooses the right person for the job. According to Vinaseed, the process of hand-picking high-caliber and loyal staff is not compatible with gender discrimination; the company cannot afford to screen out the talents of half the population.

This careful recruitment process also enables the organization to maintain its much-prized cohesive team environment, reinforcing a respectful and supportive environment for women and men alike. This environment is not only conducive to innovation, it also makes it more likely that employees will stay at the company for a longer time, allowing the company to retain their knowledge and reap the full benefit of its investment in training. Currently, the average length of service for non-managerial staff is 6.8 years and 13 years for managerial staff. CEO Tran Kim Lien says, "We want our employees to feel proud to work for Vinaseed. We think that there is long-term value in this for the company."

"I was born into a rural family. When I was little, I saw that the farmers around me worked very hard and I had a dream that I would help to relieve their hard work. This is why I chose agricultural studies."

Ms Huong, Quality and Assurance manager



Photo © Vinaseed

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In order to be most effective, Vinaseed's future efforts to enhance gender diversity in the workplace need to carefully consider how to address the challenges that Vietnamese women face in balancing paid work with family responsibilities. Strong gender norms in Vietnam mean that household and care-giving responsibilities fall disproportionately on women's shoulders. As such, women workers at all levels of Vinaseed – including CEO Tran Kim Lien – experience significant social pressure to “excel both at work and in the home.” National statistical data indicates that women and men undertake a similar amount of paid work, but 44% of men do not contribute to housework at all (compared to only 21% of women, as per World Bank, 2011). Of those who contribute to housework, men provide 1.5 hours per day, while women provide 2.2 hours. However, these figures are likely to underestimate women's unpaid work in the home, as the definition of ‘housework’ does not include childcare, which is traditionally considered to be a woman's responsibility.

Strongly entrenched gender roles mean that the company needs to think strategically about how to increase the proportion of women in areas of the business where they are currently under-represented, particularly management (18%), sales (4%), and production (15%). At present, these roles are thought to be attracting lower

“When I first took the position as CEO, my son was still in high school. I would get up in the morning and make his breakfast, and I would prepare meals before any travelling. Housework is typically a woman's responsibility in Vietnam, you can't compare it with Western cultures. This is why at Vinaseed we try to support women with young children.”

Tran Kim Lien, CEO

levels of applications from women, because they are perceived to be incompatible with women's family obligations. Management positions may be perceived to involve longer hours in the office, while sales and production typically require extensive travel, sometimes involving trips away from home for weeks at a time. Some production roles, such as manual workers in processing plants, also require heavy lifting, which may be less attractive for women.

There are important hurdles to enhancing gender diversity in sales and production, but these could be addressed by a proactive, multi-pronged approach. This could include revising all current job descriptions in these departments and consider whether aspects of the job that may be unattractive to female candidates (e.g. heavy lifting or extensive travel) can be modified. Perhaps new technology or certain adaptations could

make such jobs more appealing to women. For example, assumptions about women's ability to drive forklifts may be out of date in light of new equipment and vehicles.

As the company expands its production of rice for consumption, there is an opportunity to recruit more women into its sales function. The company only started selling rice as food in 2015, but this is expected to represent 20% of the company's sales by 2020. Sales of rice as produce are less likely to require travel, as clients are based in urban areas. Thinking about how to make sales a more family-friendly job may not only make it more likely

that women apply, but might also make it more likely that men stay longer in the job. Currently, sales is one of the departments with the highest levels of staff turnover, as a result of demanding sales targets and the need to travel to rural areas to sell rice seed for farmers. Vinaseed may also enhance its profile with women consumers by positioning itself as an ‘employer of choice’ for women.

Even where job requirements are amended to be more attractive to women, Vinaseed may need to overcome fixed mindsets about what constitutes an appropriate job for women. As a first step, this means including text in job advertisements (internal and external) to make it clear that women and men are welcome to apply for all jobs. Even if wording of a job advertisement is gender-neutral, women sometimes assume that they cannot apply for certain jobs as a result of strong gender norms. This may be addressed by providing training to managers in charge of recruitment so that they do not automatically assume that women cannot do the job. Sometimes there is an assumption that women cannot or do not want to do certain jobs, but this is not always the case.

There is a real incentive for the company to consider how to get more women into management, as the company is potentially missing out on significant financial gains associated with higher levels of gender diversity in management. As a starting point, the company may wish to conduct a structured diagnostic to identify the key barriers for women in gaining access to management positions, and then put together an action plan. This could include an employee survey, to gain direct insight into employees’ needs and concerns, both women and men. Part of the solution may include stronger discouragement for all managers – women and men – from working excessive hours. This is likely to attract more women candidates for management roles, but may also make the jobs more attractive to men, who can also benefit from more flexible working hours. This may be relatively straightforward, given that women workers already report that the company has a results-oriented culture (as opposed to a focus on hours spent in the office).

## CONCLUSIONS

Through its emphasis on fairness, transparency, and individual performance, Vinaseed has succeeded in creating a cohesive and motivating team environment for women and men, where workers feel listened to and valued. As the company’s CEO, Tran Kim Lien has been an important role model for women within the company, while also playing a key role in developing a corporate culture that is understanding of women’s needs.

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