

Criterion Africa Partners – placing the spotlight on gender

The African Sustainable Forestry Fund, the first dedicated forestry fund in Africa is managed by Criterion Africa Partners (CAP). The biggest South African company in the group is the MTO Group, with previous other forestry companies in Eswatini, Tanzania, Uganda and Gabon. The fund strives to set a benchmark in sustainable forestry management, striking a balance between meeting the needs of society and industry while preserving forest health and integrity. Their objective is to build a profitable forestry enterprise in Sub-Saharan Africa that can not only fill the growing wood supply gap within Africa, but help preserve natural forests, enhance biodiversity and improve the lives of local workers and community stakeholders – if managed correctly.

Across the globe, more emphasis is being placed on the contribution that women’s economic empowerment makes to gender equality, inclusive growth and poverty eradication. At an international and national level, targets have been set to address gender inequality and increase levels of investing in women’s economic empowerment that will not only improve gender equality but will also have spill-over economic effects in the household and at a workplace level, according to UN Women.

When it comes to women’s economic empowerment, the private forestry sector can play a significant role across a variety of pathways; from

providing decent work opportunities and access to markets through the value chain, to workforce equality policies, career mobility opportunities and access to the basic products and services.

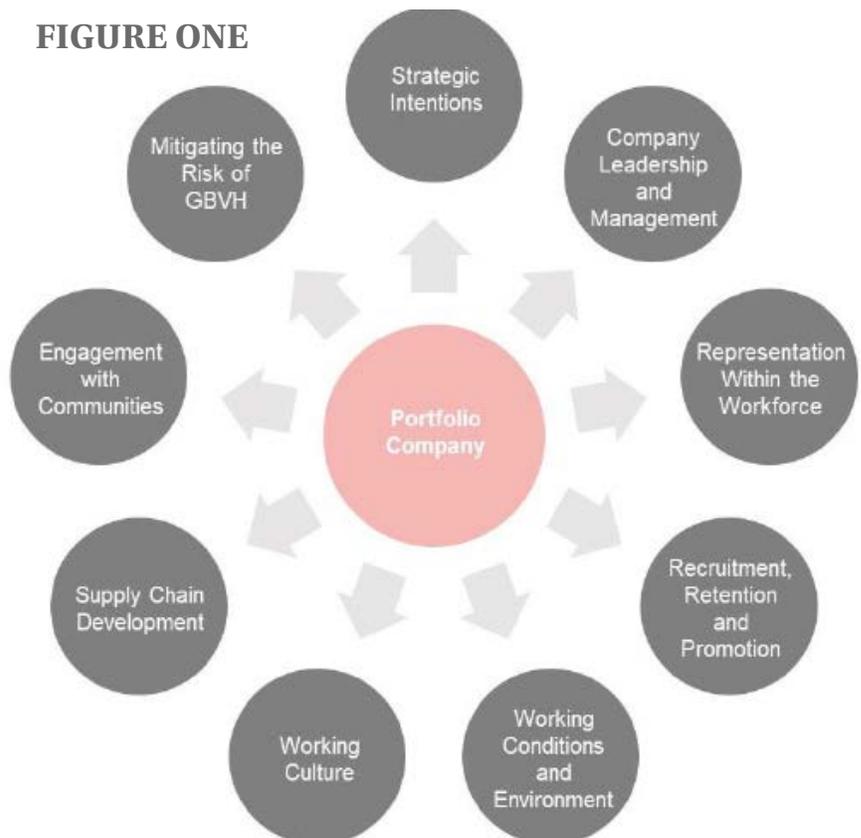
To understand the lessons that could be learnt from past actions and initiatives to address gender, CAP initiated a study with the help of IBIS Consulting to assess the gender programmes of Africa Sustainable Forestry fund members, as well as, to identify key lessons and recommendations which will support gender transformation and the integration of gender investment considerations.

The assessment was based on a combination of the UN Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) tool and the Canadian 2X Challenge Criteria. Using a mixed methodological approach of document reviews and qualitative interviews, the assessment analysed themes across four areas at both a portfolio company and investor level.

1. Women in Leadership
2. Women in the Workforce
3. Women in the Supply Chain
4. Women in the Communities

At the portfolio company level, cross-cutting lessons were learnt across the following nine themes (figure one).

FIGURE ONE





The assessment identified the need for:

1. Strategic intentions – the development of implementable action plans based on formalised objectives that are integrated into company policies and procedures. Objectives need to be collaboratively developed, between those responsible for decision-making at a strategic level and those implementing them at an operational level. These objectives should be effectively communicated to all stakeholders through repeat messaging.

2. Company leadership and management – there is a need to overcome the “glass ceiling” effect, a key barrier to women advancing to senior positions. Working towards gender diverse leadership teams with women occupying impactful roles (especially those not typically fulfilled by women – operations etc). As well as women in middle-management operational level positions, who will act as role models for junior female employees wishing to progress to similar positions in the future.

3. Representation within the workforce - there is a need to proactively increase gender representation across all occupational categories and levels of position. Identifying champions for gender performance at strategic positions who can help drive decision-making at a management level and support the implementation of such decisions at an operational level. Companies need to also be aware of multiple forms of discrimination and how these intersect with gender, as well as actively monitor, analyse and report on gender-disaggregated workforce

data.

4. Recruitment, retention and promotion – looking at what is needed to both attract and retain women employees, in particular ensuring their safe access to basic services. Also need to look at how the growth of female employees within a company can be enabled through mentorship and coaching programmes to address lack of confidence issues in the workplace. Remembering that this needs to be done in a sustainable way. To ensure the recruitment, retention and growth of women employees in the company should be legitimately earned, based on skills, experiences and the potential for growth as opposed to doing so because the employees are female.

5. Working conditions and the environment – identify and mitigate

potential gender-related risks by prioritising the implementation of gender-related risk assessments for all operation and occupational categories. Adapting the working environment to address women-focused issues, including allocated female ablution facilities in field / PPE that considers women’s needs / healthcare services that offer pap smears and breast cancer screening in addition to HIV, malaria, and TB treatment – thus creating an enabling and inclusive environment for women.

6. Working culture – addressing unconscious bias through awareness programmes and gender-related forums for transparent communication.

7. Supply chain development – proactively identify and select women-owned businesses as suppliers for each procurement opportunity, potentially providing training and support to upskill the business in line with the company’s requirements.

8. Engagement with communities – targeted community-level interventions by companies can help



MTO | group





broaden the limited pool of skilled women employees in the sector. It will help build awareness amongst community members on the broad array of careers that women can pursue in the sector, provided they possess the relevant skills.

9. Mitigating the risk of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) – exercise a proactive approach (as opposed to reactive) to manage the consequence. This can be done by working with suitable partners that are trained and capable of providing relevant GBVH support to employees and communities.

CAP, who commissioned the study, believes that these findings are not only relevant to the five Africa Forestry Fund members, but the Forestry sector as a whole, as well as many other industries. They provide key lessons that can be used across companies to fast-track improvements in gender performance. CAP is now working them into Fund-level and Portfolio Company-level objectives that will enhance gender performance across the African Forestry Fund.



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SUMMARY REPORT

Gender Assessment and Gender Responsive Action Plan: Africa
Sustainable Forestry Fund

Criterion Africa Partners

