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Sasini's focused strategy brings gender balance and more profits

In four years, a visionary MD at the helm has steered the agricultural firm from a loss-making position to a billion-shilling net profit giant

MANAGEMENT AGATHA GICHANA

Martin Ochieng', the man at the helm of Sasini PLC as Group Managing Director, is what many would describe as a visionary.

In just four years, Mr Ochieng' has steered the agricultural firm from a loss-making position to a billion-shilling net profit company. In that same period, the previously male-dominated organisation has promoted women into making decisions and implementing growth strategies at different levels. This too, is thanks to deliberate actions to achieve a far better gender balance.

Today, Sasini is an agricultural giant dealing in tea, coffee, avocado and macadamia, with a market reach that spans from South East Asia, Asia, North Africa, Europe, the Middle East and North America.

"When I joined the company in 2019, Sasini was having a tough year. That year, we experienced a loss of Sh337 million after tax due to various reasons. Furthermore, the company's strategic direction wasn't very strong and, therefore, the operational situation was not where it needed to be," recounts Ochieng'.

By the end of the 2020 fiscal year, the company managed to break even, and in 2021, it posted a net profit of Sh 573.2 million. By September 2022, Sasini registered a net profit of Sh1.17 billion. This was more than double what it had made in the previous financial year.

Mr Ochieng's strategy did not just focus on bringing in the money, but also the necessary feminine touch to the business. He believes this action has contributed to the turnaround the company is witnessing and credits his push for inclusivity in the workplace to his upbringing.

"I was raised in a family full of influential women and girls. I am the only son in a family of four children. We also had female cousins who lived with us. My father did not treat us differently based on our gender. He drummed into me that there was nothing different between my sisters, cousins, and I," says Ochieng'.



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And so, even though his father died quite early, this message stuck with Ochieng', to the extent that when he got his first job as a medical representative in a global company that marketed pharmaceutical products to medical facilities, he immediately noticed the huge gender gap.

"I worked in an all-male team, and when I asked the hiring manager why that was the case, he told me that women could not handle the constant travelling that the job required. I thought that was a feeble reason to not have women on the team," he recalls.

From that point, Ochieng' vowed to change the pattern. True to his word, when he got into management four years after he started working, he championed hiring of female medical representatives. Decades later when he joined Sasini, he set a target of 40 percent representation of women in top management and across the business.

"When I'm interviewing people who have the same experience, skill-set, and potential, I struggle to find

Workers at Sasini tea plantation: Across the firm, female employees now occupy 30 percent of the positions.

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Sasini MD Martin Ochieng' has focused on bringing in the money and feminine touch. FILE

examples where men are better than women just on the basis of their gender," he says.

Before his tenure at Sasini, women occupied only nine percent of senior management positions. In fact, the entire employee structure was heavily skewed against women. They occupied only 12 percent of the positions across the business.

Following his sustained, deliberate, and strategic gender mainstreaming, Sasini's top management is now 39 percent female. Across the organisation, female employees now occupy 30 percent of the positions.

"We are so deliberate when recruiting. That is why we have a moratorium that stops recruiters from employing men without due consideration for ladies in the same role. In certain roles, we require an exemption from head office to proceed. That is how deliberate we are. This stops recruiters from perpetuating sexist biases in hiring processes," explains Ochieng'.

He also points out a hard-hitting

reality seen in many organisations, but which he has made efforts to avoid.

"There is no reason for boasting of 60 percent of your staff being women when they work at the lowest wage band," he says. "In some of our units, like our avocado and macadamia businesses, we have an almost all-female component from the General Managers downwards. We do not encourage mainstreaming of women only at the lower wage levels."

Before embarking on his gender mainstreaming efforts, Ochieng' met with the top 40 leaders of the company and drew a consensus on purposeful inclusivity. "For that reason, I didn't meet any resistance in Sasini because when we were setting up the strategy, every leader owned it and the implementation was, therefore, smooth. I don't think the culture in the entire private sector will change overnight, but I believe, we can make steps towards achieving gender equity," he says.

In its vast estates in different counties, including Nyamira, Kericho, Bomet, Kiambu, and Nyeri, Sasini has ensured that basic amenities such as schools, hospitals and nursing centres are available for all their workers.

Commenting on a recent BBC expose titled, "Sex for Work: The Cost of Our Tea", which implicated some managers in two British-owned tea estates of sexual harassment, Mr Ochieng' says: "I believe the agriculture industry needs more sensitisation on sexual harassment of women in the workplace. That exposé needs to be taken seriously. That is why we need strong policies that address sexual harassment in the industry and in the nation at large. I can confidently say that at Sasini, we have set up measures, including a hotline where anyone facing sexual harassment can report this gross misconduct."

Additionally, the business has a code of ethics and a sexual harassment policy that binds all its employees.

For a leader who believes that everyday should be an opportunity to celebrate women, he has proven that gender equity is good for business, and has provided a model for other private sector leaders to emulate.

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