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International

Promoting gender inclusive practices in the Congolese financial sector

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last months, ELAN DRC helped raised awareness of businesses and financial institutions of the commercial benefits of integrating considerations for women as employees, customers, suppliers and cooperatives members across its different sectors of interventions. The results have been an increased commitment towards GESI with several partners engaging efforts to reinforce gender inclusive practices within their organizations.

The Access to finance sector' partners expressed a particular high level of interest for GESI capacity building activities for their staff and have undertaken actions afterwards to improve their existing practices. The present report summarizes the different activities that were conducted since 2020 by ELAN GESI Team, the outcomes and the lessons learnt from those experiences with the different financial institutions. It also provides recommendations for the wider financial sector, public, private and development actors, to foster the adoption of gender inclusive practices among the local institutions operating in DRC and the lending to women-owned/led businesses in the context of COVID-19.

Background

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion are cross-cutting priorities for ELAN RDC because poor women and socially excluded groups like people with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged in accessing and benefiting from economic opportunities in DRC, although they can represent important business opportunities for the Congolese private sector. To that end, the ELAN GESI team has been supporting selected partners in the agriculture, energy, finance and cross-board trade sectors to better understand the benefits of better understanding the opportunities and constraints facing women (as employees, producers, members or clients) and adopting gender inclusive practices at different level of their organizations.

To improve the perception of its partners on the commercial benefits of having inclusive practices within their business activities, the ELAN GESI team used one of the three following approaches:

1. Collecting data and sharing market insights, which highlight new or overlooked opportunities;
2. Encouraging businesses to use market segmentation as a tactic to seize opportunities to generate revenues from the women customers segment through differentiated marketing or products and services tailored to their needs;
3. Empowering women employees and members, by bringing evidence and trainings on the benefits of building a more inclusive organization/association;
4. Highlighting the importance of representation in marketing and communication material, for female users/clients to feel taken into account.

In the context of COVID-19, ELAN raised its partners' attention on the disproportionate adverse effects that the crisis has caused women and, after consultations with other key stakeholders (professional organizations, women leaders), delivered several capacity building activities to raise awareness and reinforce GESI knowledge and practical skills among the partners' operational staff.

Activities

Between October 2020 and March 2021, ELAN RDC launched a series of workshops with select partners from the access to finance sector. These partners provide traditional and digital financial services to local businesses and entrepreneurs.

The activities gathered over 80 participants. They were conducted in mixed teams, men and women, most from the management and operational departments of the different institutions (project managers, heads of risks, credit and SME departments, CEO and Human resources managers).

Partner	Event dates # Participants	Topics covered	Key outputs
Ensemble pour la Différence Financial and Advisory firm	15 th & 16 th of October 2020 10 participants	Gender inclusion Women Economic empowerment	Expansion of advisory services to women entrepreneurs
Infofet Digital Financial provider	11 th November 2020 25 participants	Gender inclusion Strategies for the adoption of digital payment services by women	Recruitment of female sales agents Targeted commercial strategy to reach more women merchants
Maxicash Digital Financial provider	3 rd of December 2020 7 participants	Gender inclusion Strategies for the adoption of digital payment services by women	More gender balanced composition of staff
Baobab Microfinance institution	5 th of March 2021 18 participants	Gender inclusion Access to Financial services for Women	Improved staff awareness on MFI practices and how better serve women clients
Fonds pour l'inclusion financière Financial and technical assistance provider for local MFIs and banks	16 th of March 2021 22 participants	Gender inclusion Access to Financial services for Women	Support to local MFIs to adopt gender inclusive practices

Results

Participants feedback

Although many participants were new to the concepts of gender, the discussions were dynamic and showed a real interest in the subject matter. Indeed, the participants' feedback, collected after the training through evaluation forms, revealed the importance for the participants of applying the knowledge gained during the training, both at home and workplace. Thanks to a better understanding of gender equity considerations, many managers admitted that they will communicate more openly with their teams.

Below are few comments from participants:

"It was a good training. Good reflection of reality and knowledge of how to overcome issues and challenges faced by women";

"More workshops like this should be proposed to our staff to raise awareness on the benefits of considering better women employees and clients for the overall business";

"It would be better to have in person sessions for such training, in order to have more time to discuss the case studies and to share experiences from our microfinance institution".

It is important to note for future workshops that some participants expressed concerns about the format of the workshop, one hour and a half session being considered as too short to cover such a wide topic, and virtual session limiting interactions between participants and facilitator.

Overall, feedback from the participants confirmed that the series of workshops were relevant, easy to implement and an efficient way to engage with staff and raise their awareness on the benefits of gender inclusion and ways to improve financial services provision to women.

Outcomes

The workshops helped the partners to reflect on their current practices and areas for improvement, such as working for a more gender-balanced organization, increasing considerations towards women staff and talent management or providing services that cater better to women businesses' needs.

It is worth noting that some encouraging initiatives and practices already exist within those institutions (advisory services offered to women clients, women candidates encouraged to apply for senior positions), however most are not yet formalized and embedded in the organization's policies and procedures.

The outcomes of the ELAN GESI workshops were positive with several partners taking actions after the training or adding gender equity in their strategic orientations for the coming months, including

- Analysing customers database and getting insights on the behaviours and needs of women clients to be able to develop smart sales focus and appropriate marketing strategy as well as the right support for their growth over time;
- Recruiting more women candidates in the commercial teams, to both balance the staff gender composition and prospect more women clients;
- Developing communication campaigns targeted at women prospects (using differentiated marketing);
- Providing advisory services to women entrepreneurs, and women-led/owned businesses;
- Conducting gender assessment to identify gender gaps and set gender targets in the financial institutions' longer-term strategy;
- Developing a gender policy to incorporate gender equity considerations at corporate level.
- Looking for external expertise to reinforce the institutions staff skills in gender equity and appointing a dedicated person in charge of overseeing the gender inclusion process.

Training Topics

All training workshops followed the same agenda, which was divided in three main topics alternating between the facilitator presentation and group discussions on experience sharing and reflection on the institution's current practices and procedures around gender inclusion.

Prior to the training, some institutions went through a gender audit which helped to support the presentation with disaggregated data and offered an overview of bank's positioning with regards to gender considerations including gaps and or imbalances such as the gender composition of their staff or the institution's portfolio of products or sectors or the breakdown between women and men clients.

Gender Concepts

Participants were introduced to key concepts about gender, including equity and equality, access versus control over resources.

The training introduction highlighted the importance of understanding the roles and the responsibilities of women and men, how they can evolve over time or how the perception can change from a culture/country to another. Understanding how stereotypes and gender biases are created and can be harmful for the society and how promoting gender equity is an inclusive process involving both women and men were the primary concepts covered.

After reminding the participants of the major challenges women are still facing in terms of rights and representation in the society and their workplace, the training placed a particular focus on the opportunities of better "considering women". Evidence-based cases on the benefits of gender equity at different levels, public or private (e.g. positive correlation between financial performance and gender diversity in the companies boards) were also shared.

Gender equity inclusion in practice

Participants were then introduced to the principles of gender inclusion at the organizational level (e.g. human resources related, such giving equal treatment and opportunities to women and men employees) and at operational level (collecting and analysing disaggregated data, using market segmentation to better reach women customers and to increase the institution's market share). The participants were introduced to the different steps to conduct an internal gender audit and how to identify and address internal gender gaps.

The objective of this component was to deepen the participants' understanding of the business case of having a gender inclusive organization, and serving more and in a better way women clientele, as well as its long-term outcomes (reputation, market share & revenues increase, access to women-dedicated funds).

Financial services to women

In this last part of the workshop, the characteristics and the diversity of profiles of Congolese women entrepreneurs and women-owned/led businesses were discussed, as well as the common obstacles faced by women to access credit in DRC. The trainer shared successful initiatives conducted by financial institutions from different regions of Africa to overcome those challenges, and the best practices as regards to financial and non-financial services provision to women. The workshop ended with a list of key strategic actions that can be implemented by financial institution over the short and medium terms.

Challenges & Lessons learnt

The lack of consideration and limited understanding of gender equity is among the most important challenge to fostering local partners to adopt gender inclusive practices. In a complex operating environment, gender inclusion doesn't appear as a priority for many businesses. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has affected many of ELAN partners' operations, which have prioritized core activities and focused the companies' management and teams' efforts on running contingency plans. Therefore, undermining progress towards organizational change projects such as gender inclusion.

Another challenge related to the partners' limited efforts in collecting data. At the end, most of them often overlook the growth potential of reaching women customers. Limited available data and evidence-based cases or success stories from the DRC that can be put forward are part of the limitations, however examples from other African countries (Kenya, Ethiopia, Mali) were used and resonated well with the participants.

In the Congolese financial industry as many other regions in the world with respect to gender inclusion, there is a prevalence of financial institutions with a men-dominated workplace (predominance in management roles and credit front-officers), with few considerations for women as a distinctive segment that requires tailored services, products or marketing approach. Therefore, starting with the basic concepts, developing the training gradually around the proven benefits of gender inclusion for the private sector then bringing the commercial case for banks, has proven to be successful to capture attention from participants and a true interest/traction to apply the good practices in their workplace.

Although some financial institutions have good practices in place (e.g. gender-balanced workforce, gender responsive recruitment) they are not always formalized and embedded in their corporate strategy. The lack of knowledge, engagement and often-needed technical support to implement or formalize gender inclusive strategies, are the common challenges encountered by those institutions.

Providing such training opportunities helps formalize what has been already initiated or improve the ways financial institutions and their staff consider women employees.

Recommendations

The series of trainings provided by ELAN to Financial Institutions' staff to increase their understanding of gender inclusion revealed opportunities to better serve women-owned businesses. It also showed that:

1. For a more gender inclusive environment and for the partners to be more gender inclusive, businesses need guidance;
2. The workshops fostered the idea of going further to support the financial institutions' women employees and clients. More should be done, including sessions planned for senior management and staff at each hierarchical level as well as specific sessions for human resources, communication and marketing teams;
3. Raising awareness is not enough but it can initiate behaviour change of staff, help financial institutions to reflect and improve their current practices, and adopt more inclusive strategy;
4. Providing technical assistance to improve understanding and enhance the local financial sector commitment towards gender equity is crucial for now and the coming years, to keep lending to women businesses during the ongoing crisis and building their resilience to other potential crises, sanitary, politico-social or economic.
5. Public stakeholders, financial institutions and development partners should keep the momentum and continue raising awareness on gender inclusion and its benefits for the Congolese financial industry.



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