

Accelerating Professional Growth *for Women in* the Agribusiness Sector

A Fruitful Partnership with United Exports



*Findings from Piloting IFC's
Gender Equality and Returns
(GEAR) Program in South
Africa's Agribusiness Sector*

March 2026



About IFC

IFC — a member of the World Bank Group — is the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in emerging markets. We work in more than 100 countries, using our capital, expertise, and influence to create markets and opportunities in developing countries. In fiscal year 2025, IFC committed a record \$71.7 billion to private companies and financial institutions in developing countries, leveraging private sector solutions and mobilizing private capital to create a world free of poverty on a livable planet. For more information, visit www.ifc.org

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Summary

FROM APPAREL IN ASIA TO AGRIBUSINESS IN AFRICA

Agribusiness is vital for creating livelihoods in Africa, with 66 percent of women's employment tied to agrifood systems in Sub-Saharan Africa.ⁱ The growth of large-scale, export-oriented agriculture has contributed to a rise in women's formal employment in production and processing roles, making it an important source of income for many rural women.ⁱⁱ However, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, which limits the sector's ability to facilitate their economic empowerment.

With funding from the World Bank's Jobs Umbrella Multi-Donor Trust Fund, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) adapted and piloted its Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) Program in Africa's agribusiness sector. The initiative was intended to enable GEAR's expansion in the agribusiness industry and inform how employers can promote professional growth and job quality for all employees.

GEAR was originally developed to advance women's professional growth in Asia's apparel sector. The program equips women with the leadership and technical skills required to advance to supervisory and management positions while also improving companies' operational productivity. GEAR has demonstrated measurable success in the apparel sector, achieving a promotion rate of around 65 to 70 percent for trainees and average productivity gains of approximately 4 to 8 percent.

ADAPTING AND DELIVERING GEAR IN AGRIBUSINESS

The GEAR pilot in agribusiness involved customizing and implementing the program with an IFC client, United Exports, a large producer and exporter of fruits in South Africa.

At United Exports, 60 percent of the workforce are women, yet many are in entry-level or temporary roles.

IFC collaborated with United Exports and with the Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre to implement GEAR across six of the company's farms to advance women's career progression.

The customized GEAR Program provided a four-month learning journey that involved training modules, workshops and one-on-one coaching for 34 women employed in roles such as team leaders and supervisors. The aim was to develop their leadership abilities so they could assume greater responsibilities, particularly during the harvest season when they lead large teams of seasonal workers.

RESULTS OF THE PILOT PROGRAM

Training graduates expressed greater self-confidence and self-awareness, increased initiative and ownership of their roles, and a greater ability to lead.

Compared to the previous harvest season, the vast majority of graduates reported improved capabilities and enhanced operational productivity. Specifically, all graduates noted improvements in their problem-solving and conflict management skills, while 96 percent observed gains in their own productivity or in the productivity of the teams they supervised. Additionally, many experienced professional growth through greater responsibilities and promotions.

Senior managers who engaged with the program gained insights into the challenges women employees face and how to support their growth. Due to the graduates' enhanced leadership abilities – especially a greater sense of ownership and autonomy – their managers were able to become more supportive and oversight focused.

Lucy Blackburn, United Exports' Learning and Development Manager, said the project had "unearthed the depth and wealth of women's talent and wisdom at United Exports by engaging with people at a deep and meaningful level".

IN 2022-23, IFC PARTNERED WITH UNITED EXPORTS AND THE KOUE BOKKEVELD TRAINING CENTRE TO ADAPT AND DELIVER A TAILORED VERSION OF THE GEAR PROGRAM ACROSS:



IMPROVED CAPABILITIES COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEAR'S HARVEST SEASON

MOST PARTICIPANTS REPORTED STRONGER CAPABILITIES:



- SOLVING PROBLEMS
- MANAGING EMOTIONS
- HANDLING CONFLICT
- PLANNING & ORGANIZING



- ACCOUNTABILITY
- SELF-CONFIDENCE
- EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

PRODUCTIVITY IMPROVEMENTS¹



93%

PARTICIPANTS IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY IN OPERATIONS, AS OBSERVED BY THEIR MANAGERS



96%

PARTICIPANTS OBSERVED PRODUCTIVITY GAINS IN OPERATIONS, INCLUDING HIGHER QUALITY OUTCOMES

CAREER DEVELOPMENT



67%

PARTICIPANTS ASSUMED GREATER RESPONSIBILITIES OR TOOK ON NEW ROLES DURING HARVEST

(WITHIN 3 MONTHS OF PROGRAM COMPLETION)



12%

PARTICIPANTS WERE PROMOTED TO HIGHER-LEVEL ROLES

(WITHIN 6-8 MONTHS OF PROGRAM COMPLETION)

1. Productivity improvements – both in training participants' own operations and in those of the teams they supervise – are based on behavioral changes and outcomes observed and reported by the participants themselves, as well as their line managers. However, these improvements have not been validated by IFC using farm-level data on harvest yield and quality. These figures are intended to offer an indicative overview of the training's results.

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following insights and lessons learned are drawn from the United Exports pilot, previous GEAR experiences in the apparel sector, desktop research, and stakeholder interviews. They identify key success factors for initiatives designed to enhance gender equality, boost productivity, and develop technical and leadership skills in the workplace.

Build Critical Socio-Emotional Skills

Personal abilities such as self-awareness, self-confidence, social awareness, and relationship skills are essential ingredients for success in today's job market. Programs like GEAR help participants to develop the intra- and inter-personal skills needed to lead effectively, benefiting their professional and personal lives.

Recognize the Demanding Roles of Supervisors in High Season

During peak seasons in agriculture, supervisors lead large, diverse teams in high-pressure environments. Cross-cultural communication, adaptability, problem solving and conflict resolution are key skills needed to succeed in these roles.

Leadership Starts with Oneself

GEAR's "inside-out" approach nurtures self-confidence and helps participants to strengthen their self-worth, trust their abilities, take ownership of their growth, and align it with their values. The approach forms a solid foundation for effective and authentic leadership.

Tailor the Learning Experience

Customizing programs to align with company goals, participants' objectives and training needs, and cultural contexts ensures their relevance and impact. Starting with a thorough assessment ensures the program meets real needs, builds early buy-in and strengthens engagement, leading to more sustained results.

Work with Managers to Create a Supportive Environment for Women's Career Progression

Engaging program participants' line managers to create supportive workplaces, and encouraging open communication and collaboration across hierarchies, is essential for women's career progression and team productivity.

Support the Integration and Practice of Skills through Coaching

Personalized coaching complements formal training, helping participants to apply their skills practically at work and in their personal lives.

Integrate Tools and Practices for Continuous Improvement

Lean Management and Kaizen methods enhance workplace productivity and employee empowerment, encouraging continuous improvement and proactive problem solving. Such methods – which proved their success in GEAR's apparel sector programs – can be valuable additions to leadership development programs in agribusiness.

Drive Professional Growth Company-wide

Advancing women's careers and fostering a supportive work environment where all employees can thrive requires a comprehensive approach. Interventions like gender assessments, inclusive HR policies, childcare support, and mentorship should be deployed to complement leadership training programs.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES AT UNITED EXPORTS

Following its collaboration with IFC, United Exports continued to support GEAR graduates' professional growth, enrolling many in a two-year Diploma in Plant Production. The work with IFC complemented and enriched United Exports' existing programs, highlighting the importance of socio-emotional abilities and open communication for effective leadership and productive workplace collaboration. The company has also expanded soft skills and leadership training to more of its employees.

BROADER APPLICABILITY OF GEAR IN AGRIBUSINESS

GEAR's successful adaptation from Asia's apparel industry to Africa's agribusiness sector demonstrates its broad applicability and benefits in a new context. By applying the insights acquired so far, scaling GEAR could benefit even more employees and enterprises in Africa's agribusiness sector.

Expanding Career Growth Opportunities for Women in Agribusiness Employment

Women's representation in supervisory and management roles in formal agribusiness employment remains limited, as highlighted by the GEAR pilot's desktop research. Delivering programs like GEAR, particularly in large-scale commercial agriculture, can contribute to women's economic empowerment.

Promoting Professional Development, Productive Employment, and Job Quality for all Employees

As companies increasingly look to reskill and upskill their workforces, GEAR provides an innovative solution to facilitate this growth while advancing diversity in leadership roles and improving workplace productivity. The program can be designed to develop the leadership and management skills of employees – regardless of their gender or level – with a particular relevance for first-time supervisors and those transitioning into more demanding roles.

Adopting a Holistic Approach to Promote Women's Leadership

Education, socialization, and societal norms significantly influence women's decisions and behaviors. Addressing deeply rooted barriers that hinder women's advancement in the workplace require broad societal efforts. Companies can contribute their part through deliberate corporate actions. These include conducting gender assessments; strengthening policies to recruit, retain, and promote women; implementing targeted programs like GEAR; and delivering gender-awareness initiatives for all employees at all levels, in addition to broader societal efforts. IFC is committed to promoting economic inclusion and job quality and will continue to support its clients through a range of corporate-level initiatives.¹



Farmland and mountains in quiet balance near Wolseley in South Africa's Western Cape province. Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

¹ See IFC's [Roadmap 2030 on Gender and Economic Inclusion](#) and [World Bank Group's Gender Strategy 2024-2030](#).

1. From Apparel *in Asia to Agribusiness in Africa*

GEAR'S ORIGINS IN THE APPAREL SECTOR

The Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) Program was developed to create opportunities for women to progress in their careers in contexts where they are underrepresented in supervisory and management roles. GEAR started in the apparel sector as a joint initiative between IFC and the International Labor Organization (ILO) under the [IFC-ILO Better Work Program](#).

The first GEAR Program was delivered in 2016 in Bangladesh, where it helped women factory workers become supervisors. This first experience made the case for GEAR's effectiveness and impact: the number of women supervisors in participating factories increased from 5 percent before the program to 12 percent after its completion, and the production lines where these newly trained supervisors worked saw an average efficiency increase of 5 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ

FIGURE 1. WHAT IS GEAR?

GEAR IS A COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING PROGRAM THAT HAS TWO GOALS:



HOW DOES GEAR ACHIEVE ITS GOALS?



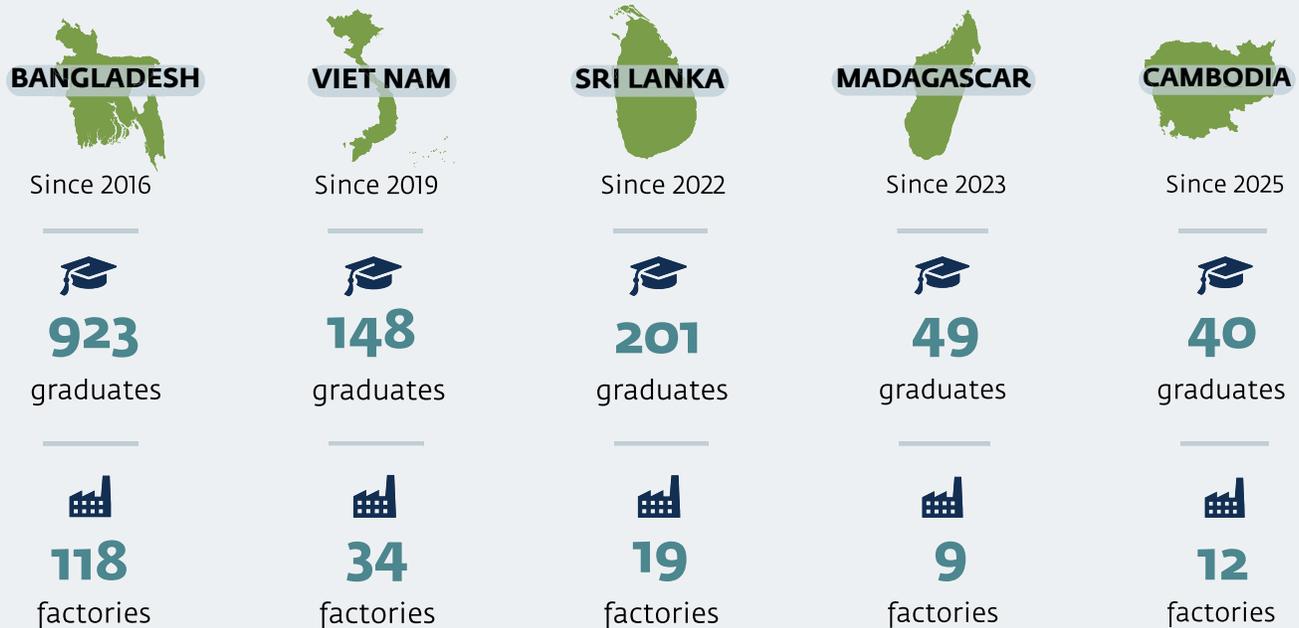
Since then, GEAR has expanded to other countries in Asia and Africa under the Better Work Program to reach hundreds of women apparel workers. It has consistently had a positive impact on their career progression (65 to 70 percent promotion rate on average across programs), factories' productivity (a 4 to 8 percent increase), and on working conditions more broadly (see Figures 2 and 3).

GEAR is a training program that invites women to embark on a journey to develop the leadership and technical skills essential for professional advancement.

These skills facilitate their progression into supervisory and management roles while improving their ability to lead teams and manage processes. In parallel, GEAR develops management's capacity to identify, support, promote and retain talented women, fostering an environment that benefits everyone in the workplace. GEAR contributes to productivity improvements through better-trained supervisors, enhanced communication, and improved teamwork.

FIGURE 2. GEAR FOOTPRINT TO DATE IN THE APPAREL SECTOR

To date, under the IFC-ILO partnership on Better Work, GEAR has been implemented in over 190 apparel factories, reaching over 1,300 women, and continues to expand.



Notes:

- (i) In Bangladesh, the GEAR program is delivered in partnership with global apparel brands, including Ralph Lauren, VF Corp., Levi's, H&M, M&S, and more recently Target USA and Puma.
- (ii) In Bangladesh, Viet Nam, and Sri Lanka, the initial phases of the GEAR programs were led and delivered by IFC under the joint ILO-IFC Better Work program. In Madagascar and Cambodia, Better Work delivered the GEAR programs from their inception. Subsequently, Better Work has led the continuation and scale-up of GEAR in the apparel sector across all these countries. In addition, Better Work delivers a Women Leadership Development Program in Ethiopia in collaboration with the ILO's Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE) Program. Inspired by GEAR, the program provides training in soft and technical skills, on-the-job coaching, and mentoring to women workers in apparel factories. It achieved a similar impact to the GEAR programs in other countries: of the 234 women workers and supervisors who participated in the training program, around 70 percent have since been promoted to more senior and better-paid roles.

FIGURE 3. GEAR'S IMPACT TO DATE IN THE APPAREL SECTOR



BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

For companies

- Increase in the share of women in supervisory and managerial roles
- Improvements in productivity and product quality
- Larger internal talent pool
- Enhanced corporate reputation as an employer of choice

For employees

- Personal and professional development
- Acquisition of transferable skills
- Increased influence and decision-making power
- More respectful workplace environments
- Contribution to better working conditions for other workers

Notes:

(i) This information is limited to the results of the GEAR programs implemented by IFC in Bangladesh (79 factories), Viet Nam (10 factories), and Sri Lanka (10 factories).

(ii) The efficiency figures are intended to provide an indicative overview of the productivity changes recorded across the GEAR programs implemented by IFC in the apparel industry. Production line efficiency is influenced by numerous factors, such as the type of product being manufactured at a given time. Efficiency rates in Viet Nam and Sri Lanka, which were measured by participating factories and collected by IFC for monitoring purposes, do not account for these variables that may influence efficiency beyond the effects of the training program. Efficiency rates for the GEAR program in Bangladesh were evaluated through two independent impact assessments that controlled for the effect of these other variables. The first independent study, assessing the 2016–2017 pilot phase, found that production lines managed by GEAR-trained supervisors experienced an average efficiency increase of 5 percent. The second study, evaluating the 2018–2022 phase, found that production lines overseen by GEAR-trained supervisors were up to 4.3 percentage point (the equivalent of 7.5 percent increase) more efficient compared to those managed by comparison supervisors. For further details, see IFC, 2018, "[Cutting Through the Cloth Ceiling](#)", and IFC and ILO, 2025, "[Creating Better Jobs for Women and Boosting Productivity in Bangladesh's Garment Factories](#)".

(iii) The information on salary is derived from the GEAR programs in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka only. It reflects the salary increases obtained by GEAR participants who were promoted to higher-level roles following the completion of their training.



Women workers participate in a GEAR training session at an apparel factory in Sri Lanka in 2023. Photo: Capture Eye.

INTRODUCING GEAR TO AGRIBUSINESS

The agribusiness sector is an important source of livelihood in Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 66 percent of women's employment is in agrifood systems, compared with 60 percent of men's.^{iv} Across the continent, formal jobs in the agricultural sector increasingly represent a source of income for women, especially among the younger generations and those with small or no landholdings.^v In particular, the growth of high-value, export-oriented agriculture – such as horticulture – has contributed to a rise in women's employment in production and processing activities within large companies.^{vi}

Women remain underrepresented in management positions in agribusiness companies in Africa, which undermines the potential of the sector to provide a pathway for women's economic empowerment.²

For this reason, IFC explored the applicability of GEAR in Africa's agribusiness sector. In 2022–2023, with support from the World Bank's Jobs Umbrella Multi-Donor Trust Fund³, IFC adapted and piloted GEAR and gathered some insights with two goals in mind:

1. Inform the expansion of GEAR in the agribusiness industry as well as similar initiatives aimed at bolstering women's leadership in agribusiness enterprises.

2. Strengthen the business case for approaches that advance women's careers, gender diversity, and operational performance in the agribusiness sector.

The pilot initiative consisted of customizing and implementing the GEAR Program with one IFC agribusiness client, United Exports, in South Africa. In addition, further information has been collected through desktop research and interviews with

selected industry stakeholders to contextualize the findings from the pilot and inform more broadly how employers in Africa's agribusiness sector can promote gender diversity and productive employment through corporate interventions.

This program and report focus on formal wage employment within export-oriented agricultural production and processing activities, specifically in large, commercial farms and agribusiness companies, as distinct from smallholder farming and subsistence agriculture.⁴



Produce grows in neat rows at a United Exports' farm. Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

² See Section 5 for data on women's representation in leadership roles in wage employment in agribusiness in Africa.

³ The GEAR pilot in agribusiness, along with the production and publication of this report, have been made possible through financial support from the World Bank's Jobs "World Bank's Jobs Umbrella Multi-Donor Trust Fund." The fund is supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development; the Austrian Ministry of Finance; the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance; the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; and the German Agency for International Cooperation.

⁴ The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations makes a distinction between employment and work in agrifood systems. Employment is defined as activities performed for pay or profit, such as wage and salaried workers in family or commercial agrifood enterprises. Employment can also include activities such as self-employment and contributing family workers on farms and agrifood enterprises. The definition of employment excludes subsistence agriculture, which is considered work. Wage employment still represents a small share of women's employment in agrifood systems in Africa (less than 10 percent in agriculture and less than 20 percent in off-farm activities), compared to self-employment or contributing family workers. FAO, 2023, "The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems".

2. Adapting *and* Delivering GEAR *in* Agribusiness

A FRUITFUL PARTNERSHIP WITH UNITED EXPORTS

IFC partnered with [United Exports](#) and the [Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre](#) to adapt and deliver a tailored version of the GEAR program to 34 women employees working across six farms that United Exports operates, including one plant nursery facility, in South Africa's Western Cape Province.

United Exports is a leading producer and exporter of fruit (primarily blueberries) that handles all steps of the production process, from breeding and planting to packaging and delivery. Women make up nearly 60 percent of its workforce, yet the majority are in entry-level or temporary positions. This is a common situation across South Africa's agriculture sector, where 93 percent of women are employed as general workers, 4 percent as supervisors, and only 3 percent as senior representatives and managers, according to a 2020 study.^{vii}

United Exports is actively working to address this imbalance through different corporate initiatives aimed at promoting women to supervisory and management roles. More broadly speaking, the company provides training, education and various capacity development programs to its workforce, including through its [OZblu Academy](#), thereby supporting over 6,000 employees and their families. Helen Clarke, Human Resources Director at United Exports, says: "People are our greatest asset, so developing their capacity and commitment to deliver on the broader business objectives is paramount."

Through its collaboration with IFC, United Exports complemented its existing capacity building programs and enhanced its approach to promoting women's career development.

The 34 women who took part in the training hold different roles at United Exports, from team leaders and supervisors in production and packing, to quality controllers, compliance officers, HR professionals, and plant health experts.

They contribute to the full blueberry production cycle, from planting to handling irrigation, caring for plant health, pruning, harvesting, and packing. The women come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. For the most part, English, the official business language, is their second or third language.

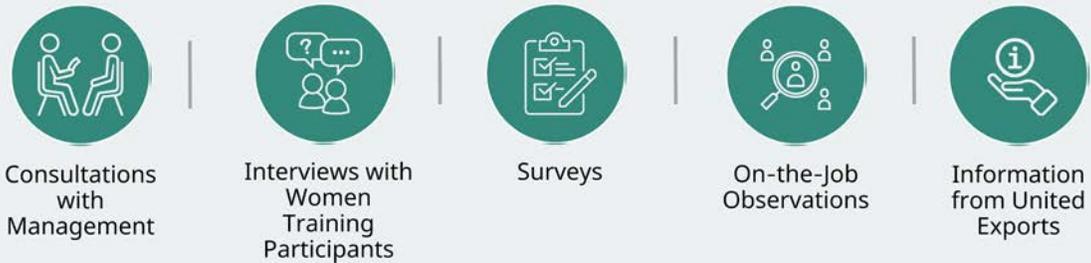
As the fruit's production peaks during the harvest season, many employees step into higher-level roles with increased responsibilities during this critical period. Team leaders and supervisors oversee the operations of large and diverse teams of seasonal workers, ensuring that production goals are achieved, and quality and compliance requirements are met.

During the 2023 harvest season, 10 women junior managers at United Exports onboarded and trained more than 4,000 seasonal workers across several farms. "Seasonal workers harvest all our fruit, and the responsibility on these managers, to ensure the workforce is both productive and quality focused, is enormous," Clarke said. "So, investing in our women managers is a no-brainer."

In addition to the 34 women participants, key mid-level and senior managers from United Exports also took part in the program through dedicated sessions. These included the participants' direct line managers, such as those overseeing production, and farm managers from the six participating farms.

DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM

FIGURE 4. TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT



IFC and the Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre began this engagement by conducting an in-depth training needs assessment to understand women’s roles and responsibilities, their career growth opportunities, the challenges they face, and their priorities and aspirations. The assessment also examined the priorities, challenges, and expectations of their managers.

A customized program was designed with the goal of developing the leadership capacity of women at supervisory and junior management levels, equipping them to excel in their current roles and take on greater responsibilities. In addition, the program aimed to

strengthen managerial capacity to support and empower training participants to apply leadership skills.

The program was designed to align with United Exports’ goals and existing programs on people development and women’s empowerment.

The program invited the 34 training participants to embark on a “learning journey” structured around five modules that build on each other to create an integrated experience.

FIGURE 5. OVERVIEW OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM



Life Skills Training

This module focused on the self, relationships, and individual leadership, guiding participants to explore their values and purpose. It helped them become more aware of their thoughts and beliefs, know themselves better as individuals, leaders, and communicators, and importantly, recognize their self-worth.



To me, it was a self-discovery journey, and I learned a lot about myself and how to be a better leader in my workplace as well as at home.

ANONYMOUS TRAINING
PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Collaborative Team Workshops

Participants and their managers came together on each farm to exchange what had been learned and discuss opportunities and challenges in applying these insights to work more productively as a team. They articulated the next steps for their work on the farm and committed to supporting one another to meet their business goals.



This training is going to help our team to plan better and it's going to take a lot of weight from [the shoulders of] production managers.

ANONYMOUS FARM
MANAGER FEEDBACK

Management Principles Training

This module gave participants an overview of the business context in which they operate, exposed them to key management functions in a company, and applied concepts to their working environment and their roles. It covered topics like planning and budgeting and integrated them with skills like conflict resolution, managing emotions, and problem solving.



The knowledge I have gained changed my perspective of my management style.

ANONYMOUS TRAINING
PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Individual Coaching Sessions

Each participant attended four monthly in-person coaching sessions throughout the program. These were designed to help them pull together the various training threads and develop their self-image and self-confidence as leaders. The sessions focused on setting actions to work towards the participants' goals and dreams, both professionally and personally, and finding ways to better handle challenges. In addition, final coaching sessions were organized about six months after the completion of the program to debrief after the harvest season.



A coach helps you see and know yourself. They build confidence in you.

ANONYMOUS TRAINING
PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Workshop for Mid-Level and Senior Management

This workshop was tailored to senior farm and production managers – who oversee and supervise the work of women training participants – to raise their awareness about women's perspectives on the enablers and barriers in their careers. It also invited managers to explore how gender affects perceptions, experiences, and behaviours, how the program would benefit their farm-level goals, and the importance of their role throughout the program.

Addressing Gender-Specific Challenges

Overall, the program addressed barriers that hinder women's ability to thrive in their careers. Through its various modules, the program examined societal norms, unconscious biases, perceptions, and beliefs that shape confidence and behavior – key factors influencing women's career progression.

³ As identified through the training needs assessment.

PROGRAM RESULTS

The training program has been transformational for many participants, who reported personal growth, enhanced communication and management skills, along with greater productivity.

Lucy Blackburn, United Exports' Learning and Development Manager, said the project had "unearthed the depth and wealth of women's talent and wisdom at United Exports by engaging with people at a deep and meaningful level. It showed our managers and employees that we value women's empowerment and are determined to spend time, energy, and money on it".

Personal Growth, Improved Leadership and Management Skills

At the completion of the four-month program, 90 percent of women participants reported experiencing more self-confidence and an enhanced ability to manage people, 84 percent reported making better use of opportunities offered to them and living their lives more truthfully, and 87 percent demonstrated improvement in their knowledge about key leadership and management concepts.⁶

Feedback collected six-to-eight months after the completion of the program showed that training participants could effectively apply their knowledge and skills during the harvest season. The vast majority reported improved leadership and management capabilities compared to the previous year's harvest season (see Figure 6).⁷

FIGURE 6: GROWTH IN LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CAPABILITIES

Competencies	Share of training participants reporting improvement compared to the previous harvest season
Taking responsibility for one's work	96%
Being self-confident	96%
Solving problems	100%
Communicating effectively & constructively	96%
Managing emotions	100%
Handling conflict	100%
Motivating teams	92%
Planning and organizing	100%

Participants and their managers highlighted the following growth areas as the main benefits from the program:

Self-Awareness and Self-Confidence

Women training participants expressed a deeper understanding of their values and beliefs, as well as a greater ability to understand and manage their emotions. Recognizing their own worth and value provided the trainees with a foundation to embrace growth, develop new leadership abilities, and embed these in their decisions and behaviors at work, and in their personal lives.



If you want to rise above your circumstances, you first need to start taking the lead of yourself, practicing self-control, and learning to live according to your values. It's very important to know and live your own values – it's the only way others can see who and what you are.



LOUISE LOUW
SCOUT
UNITED EXPORTS



It evoked strengths we didn't know we had.



AWONGIWE MANTAMBO
PRODUCTION OFFICER
UNITED EXPORTS



Note:

Training participants' titles reflect the positions they held at the time of project completion with United Exports (March 2024).

⁶ Results are derived from participants' self-evaluation forms, as well as from baseline (pre-training) and final (post-training) evaluation questionnaires.

⁷ Derived from the 28 participants surveyed, for whom such comparisons were possible.

Personal Initiative, Responsibility, and Ownership

With increased confidence in their abilities and knowing that they are entrusted and supported by the company and their managers, many participants expressed having a greater sense of ownership in their roles at work and in shaping their own lives.



Leadership isn't a right – it's a responsibility.

THEMBEKA MABANGULA
COLD ROOM ADMINISTRATOR
UNITED EXPORTS

We can do more and are capable of moving mountains, but we have to believe in ourselves and take the first step in whatever it is that we want to accomplish.

GERALDINE WILLEMSE
TEAM LEADER
UNITED EXPORTS



This renewed sense of responsibility, which drove the initiative to overcome structural challenges, was also observed by the senior managers who oversee the operations in which women training participants are involved.

Johan Goosen, Nursery Manager at United Exports, explained the training participants “realized that they have a big role to play, that they have value to bring to the company, and they are now more positive about the future and growth opportunities”.

Werner Coetzer, Estate Manager for Waveren Berries, one of United Exports’ farms, stated that the women who participated in the program became more confident and prouder of their roles in the company. “They have a better understanding of their jobs and their responsibilities, take ownership, and are more involved,” he explained.

Effective and Constructive Communications

Improved communication – including an enhanced ability to give instructions, keep the information flowing, raise issues, provide feedback, and acknowledge colleagues – increased mutual understanding, team collaboration, and everybody’s ability to execute their tasks properly.

When people know that you can be a listener, understanding increases at the workplace. Creating space for workers to express their concerns, including those affecting their personal lives, helps to address many issues at the workplace.

NOSINDISO PEPU
JUNIOR PRODUCTION
MANAGER
UNITED EXPORTS



Coetzer added that the improved communication skills meant the training participants were “much more focused on making sure that all the people they manage are on the same page. They now have the confidence to share their views and propositions on how to proceed.”

Independent Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution

Lastly, with greater confidence in their judgment and enhanced communications, the training participants said they felt better equipped to address problems and solve conflicts.



“
My first take-away from the training is about resolving conflict. There is always conflict when you're leading, and it was something I would run away from before.
 ”

KWAKHONA MPOTULO
 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT
 UNITED EXPORTS



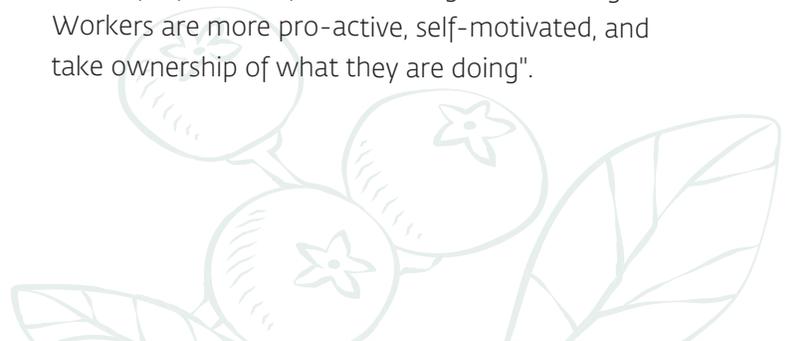
“
I learned to react better when there is conflict. I used to walk away when I observed a conflict situation, but I have now learned it's better to try and solve it, and do so in a civil manner.
 ”

ROSEDINE MANUEL
 GENERAL WORKER
 UNITED EXPORTS

As women team leaders and supervisors displayed greater autonomy to address issues, this helped to relieve upper-level managers of issues they previously had to deal with. In turn, managers were able to shift to a more supportive and oversight-focused role, nurturing a virtuous circle of growth.

“With regards to solving problems and handling conflict, in the past, they tended to step back,” recalled Coetzer, “but now I can observe substantial improvements in their ability to handle issues”.

Production Manager Musa Mfengu commented that “the program has been helpful not only for the employees, but for the management at large. Workers are more pro-active, self-motivated, and take ownership of what they are doing”.



Janine Jansen, Rosedine Manuel, and Thembeke Mabangula – who all took part in the IFC training program – monitor plant growth at a United Exports farm. Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

Productivity Improvements

Improvements at operational levels were already noticeable at the completion of the program in June 2023. By then, managers from five farms reported observing changes, such as improved planning and goal setting, better prioritization and flexibility to meet goals, and higher-quality outcomes.

Then, comparing the 2023 harvest season (which started three months after the end of the program) with the 2022 harvest season (pre-training), 96 percent of training participants observed improvements in their own productivity or in the productivity of the team they supervised. They also reported improved harvest quality.

On their end, managers observed productivity improvements in the operations performed or managed by 93 percent of the training participants. Coetzer, who oversees a large farm where six GEAR participants work, noted that the small changes, lessons learned, and growth experienced by the participants had “led to huge improvements on the farms and also at a personal level.”

The key behavioural changes cited by managers were participants’ enhanced ability to motivate team members, better planning and organizational skills, and improved problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.



There was a big change between this harvest season and the previous one. During the latest harvest, some team leaders managed up to 80 people, and they were much more comfortable relating messages and managing these teams. This year's harvest more than doubled in quantity and four women team leaders led most of it. When there were problems, they solved most issues rather than coming to me.



PIETER PRINS
SENIOR PRODUCTION MANAGER
UNITED EXPORTS

FIGURE 7. KEY RESULTS FROM THE TRAINING PROGRAM

PRODUCTIVITY IMPROVEMENTS¹



93%

PARTICIPANTS IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY IN OPERATIONS, AS OBSERVED BY THEIR MANAGERS



96%

PARTICIPANTS OBSERVED PRODUCTIVITY GAINS IN OPERATIONS, INCLUDING HIGHER QUALITY OUTCOMES

CAREER DEVELOPMENT



67%

PARTICIPANTS ASSUMED GREATER RESPONSIBILITIES OR TOOK ON NEW ROLES DURING HARVEST

(WITHIN 3 MONTHS OF PROGRAM COMPLETION)



12%

PARTICIPANTS WERE PROMOTED TO HIGHER-LEVEL ROLES

(WITHIN 6-8 MONTHS OF PROGRAM COMPLETION)

1. Productivity improvements – both in training participants’ own operations and in those of the teams they supervise – are based on behavioral changes and outcomes observed and reported by the participants themselves, as well as their line managers. However, these improvements have not been validated by IFC using farm-level data on harvest yield and quality. These figures are intended to offer an indicative overview of the training’s results.

Career Development and Promotions

During the harvest season, 67 percent of the participants assumed greater responsibilities or took on new roles.⁸ Once harvesting was completed, some of them kept their roles and responsibilities, while others received career development opportunities. Notably, four participants were promoted to higher-level roles.

Changes Beyond the Workplace

Qualitative feedback from participants pointed towards changes they made in their own lives, at home, within their families, and in their communities. For instance, some of the women are planning – or starting – to further their education and acquire new academic credentials, while others have found greater freedom, including financial independence.

To discover participants' journeys, refer to IFC's Impact Story [Breaking the Grass Ceiling](#), watch the short videos of Awongiwe Mantambo ([here](#)) and of Rosedine Manuel ([here](#)), and their longer interviews in [this video](#).



Managers' Experiences

Through their engagement in the program, managers said they have gained an understanding of the challenges faced by women in their roles and their career advancement. They also indicated they felt better equipped to nurture participants' self-confidence and enable them to be more effective in their roles.⁹



Management's mindset and approach to communication also has changed. We're now more present to share information with and support the team leaders. Through the program, we got to learn from, and more about, the training participants, which wouldn't happen on a normal day-to-day basis.



WERNER COETZER
ESTATE MANAGER
UNITED EXPORTS



The training participants from United Exports – ranging from team leaders in production and packing to quality controllers, HR professionals, and plant health experts – celebrate their graduation. Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

⁸ Of the 33 women who completed the training, 22 were given increased responsibilities during the harvest season, which in most cases were associated with a salary increase.

⁹ Derived from surveys with the management of the six farms involved in the training program.

3. Insights *and* Lessons Learned

This section highlights insights from the GEAR pilot with United Exports, integrates lessons learned from previous GEAR experiences in the apparel sector, and provides context by incorporating information collected through desktop research and interviews with selected stakeholders, including employers, training providers, and experts.¹⁰

These insights and lessons aim at informing how employers in the agricultural sector – particularly those engaged in large-scale production and processing activities that employ significant numbers of workers – can promote gender diversity and productive employment through a range of corporate interventions focused on their workforce.

BUILD CRITICAL SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

From self-awareness and self-management to social awareness and relationship skills, socio-emotional skills are crucial for success in supervisory and management roles. These skills encompass abilities such as “being able to navigate inter-personal and social situations effectively, as well as leadership, teamwork, self-control, and grit”^{viii} and to “set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions”^{ix}.

The World Bank refers to socio-emotional skills as one of the four key sets of abilities needed to succeed in the 21st-century labor market.^x In Sub-Saharan Africa, research found that these skills are associated with higher income, for both women and men.^{xi}

The agricultural industry is no exception: adaptability, teamwork, assertiveness, problem solving, communication skills, creative thinking, and responsibility are particularly relevant across agribusiness activities.^{xii}

Programs that develop such skills are valuable for professionals at all levels, demonstrating benefits for less experienced employees, first-time supervisors, and those transitioning into supervisory roles without prior adequate training – as experienced with GEAR. In contexts where women are underrepresented at management levels, having leadership programs dedicated for women is particularly relevant.



Photo: Marisa Estivill via Shutterstock.

¹⁰ The desktop literature review and interviews focused on wage employment in the agricultural sector in Africa, with a focus on high-value, export-oriented agricultural production and processing activities, as distinct from smallholder farming. Four themes were explored: (a) women's representation in supervisory and management roles, including barriers and enablers to women's career development; (b) good practices related to the onboarding, supervision, engagement, and retention of seasonal workforces; (c) soft skills relevant to supervisory and management roles; and (d) relevance and use of Kaizen and Lean management methods. The lists of sources and stakeholders consulted can be found in the Appendix.

RECOGNIZE THE DEMANDING ROLES OF SUPERVISORS IN HIGH SEASON

Many participants in the GEAR pilot with United Exports oversee seasonal workers during the harvest season. Leading these operations and people during the company's peak seasons put additional demands on its supervisors. It is not uncommon for a single supervisor to manage 50-100 workers during the harvest, while ensuring that yield and quality objectives are met.

Seasonal workers are generally less familiar with company policies and practices than permanent employees. They have less formal training and limited time to get accustomed to the job. At United Exports, they represent diverse cultures, nationalities, languages, age, experience, and education. The GEAR training specifically focused on nurturing the leadership skills (outlined in Section 2) that supervisors need to thrive during peak seasons.

Kwakhona Mpotulo, Production Assistant with United Exports, oversees about 200 seasonal workers during the harvest. Reflecting on the training, she said one of the key learnings relates to "situational leadership". "I learned you can't lead an experienced person the same as you would an inexperienced person," she explained, before adding: "The most important thing about leadership is to understand the people you are leading. If there is no understanding, people will not follow you".

The desktop research review supported the idea that cross-cultural competence, effective problem solving, clear and consistent communication, and strong teamwork skills are critical for supervisors managing seasonal workforces. Additionally, it underscored the importance of adapting leadership styles and team-building models to these unique contexts. Key leadership attributes – such as fairness and accessibility – are essential, along with the ability to understand individual differences, foster team cohesion, and unite teams around a shared goal.¹¹



Kwakhona Mpotulo monitors plant health and growth with her colleagues.
Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

¹¹ A small body of literature on seasonal leadership focuses on seasonal workforce supervisors' qualities and skills, and how leadership and team building models should be adapted to suit these unique dynamics. Though this literature seems to predominantly focus on the hospital industry (e.g., Arasli et al., 2020), some papers are dedicated to the agriculture sector (e.g., McDonald et al., 2024, Rothstein, 2022).

LEADERSHIP STARTS WITH ONE'S SELF

A key insight from this pilot is that “leadership starts with the self”. Self-confidence, a sense of self-worth, self-awareness, and an alignment with one’s own values provide the basis to grow and be an effective leader.

“
I realized that I must be a leader for myself before leading others.”

LOUISE LOUW
SCOUT
UNITED EXPORTS

GEAR develops leaders from the “inside out”. It equips participants with mindsets and abilities that are transferable to any role and applicable beyond the workplace, and from where key competencies – such as personal initiative, responsibility, effective communication, and conflict management – can flourish.

Importantly, such an approach encourages individuals to find and trust their own abilities and position themselves as leaders of their own lives.

“
With a training program like this, there's a responsibility for participants to get involved, to grow. People's mindsets and readiness to grow is as important as the technical skills.”

STEPHAN BADENHORST
MANAGER OF PROJECTS AND
PRODUCTION STANDARDS
UNITED EXPORTS

“What matters most with such training is that participants realize that they hold their own pen and write their own book”, noted Stephan Badenhorst, Manager of Projects and Production Standards at United Exports, adding: “But this asks them to go outside of what they know, and to stand up for themselves”.

TAILOR THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

A customized learning experience is essential to achieving the objectives of a program like GEAR within a specific cultural context, industry, and company.

It begins with a comprehensive assessment to identify training needs, barriers to women’s career advancement, and ensure alignment with the company’s people development and business goals. Engaging all stakeholders from the outset – from future training participants to company management – through a participatory assessment strengthens the program’s relevance and fosters early commitment.

Using proven training courses that have demonstrated impact and replicability is valuable, but adaptations are essential. The program’s structure, content and delivery model should be customized to individuals and their operational environments to ensure applicability and effectiveness.



Photo: Oticki via Shutterstock.

“The training content must not take a one-size-fits-all approach,” said Carmen Roberts, CEO of the Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre. “Tailoring it to the specific needs of the company, supervisors, and workers is crucial. Practical training sessions work best in these contexts. It’s also critical to acknowledge each individual and adapt the teaching style accordingly, ensuring equal attention to every participant, as their circumstances vary,” she added.

Achieving this requires trainers and coaches with expertise in various topics, extensive experience working with farm workers and local companies, and the ability to effectively engage with a diverse group of beneficiaries.

WORK WITH MANAGERS TO CREATE A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN'S CAREER PROGRESSION

Expecting employees to grow and thrive solely by working on themselves is unrealistic. GEAR actively involves managers to bridge gaps in understanding among all levels of management and the participating women. Managers benefit from a better understanding of their staff needs and challenges, especially for women, and how to enable them to perform effectively.

Programs like GEAR involve senior and mid-level management to help them create an environment that supports women's ability to thrive in their roles and advance in their careers. This includes:

- Raising managers' awareness about the challenges faced by women employees and how this affects them in the workplace.
- Helping them recognize unconscious gender biases, understand how these biases may negatively impact women employees' development and promotion, and take steps to address them.
- Highlighting the importance of their role in nurturing the growth of women participants through regular and open communication and feedback, providing the necessary support and resources for their success as leaders, and serving as role models who provide equal opportunities to all staff.

It is important to involve all relevant senior and mid-level managers – particularly those supervising or overseeing the work of women training participants – regardless of their gender.

The significance of these shared responsibilities has been stressed by the other stakeholders interviewed as part of this pilot initiative, with the goal of bringing further context to the pilot's findings. They emphasized that everyone involved in hiring, supervising, working with, and promoting women has a role to play. In particular, senior management must set the tone from the top.

For instance, according to Maria Verschoof, Co-Founder of Mama Cashew in Tanzania, it is also important to empower men to support their women colleagues, and for the former to be ready "to listen when women are given an opportunity to lead". Furthermore, Stephanie Barrientos, Emeritus Professor at the University of Manchester, believes it is essential "to have senior management that promotes gender equality, embraces role modelling and mentorship".

SUPPORT THE INTEGRATION AND PRACTICE OF SKILLS THROUGH COACHING

In addition to training courses and workshops, coaching plays a crucial role in supporting participants to apply what they learned in practical situations.

In the case of GEAR, individual coaching sessions helped participants internalize their own approaches to applying their leadership skills at work and beyond. Coaching offers a safe space for participants to receive feedback and support, enabling them to progress towards their goals.



***A coach helps you to see and know yourself.
They build confidence in you.***



THEMBEKA MABANGULA
COLD ROOM ADMINISTRATOR
UNITED EXPORTS

Desktop research and interviews confirmed the important role that coaching plays to advance women's career advancement.

For example, Anzette Coetzee, Human Resource Manager at Bergendal Boerdery in South Africa, told IFC how coaching plays a significant role in their business culture. "We identify women employees with leadership potential and invest in developing their careers. Coaching is one way through which we help women leaders to grow, and it helps us bring more women into management roles," she said.

INTEGRATE TOOLS AND PRACTICES FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

GEAR equips women for leadership roles while also fostering broader employee empowerment and enhancing operational performance.

Lean Management and Kaizen methods engage all employees – workers, supervisors, and managers – to continuously improve operations. These methods were central to GEAR programs in the apparel sector, where they strengthened participants' ability to manage processes, proactively identify and solve workplace challenges, and encouraged them to make decisions that improve workflows and raise the value of their work.

Lean Management and Kaizen methods were not integral to this first experience in agribusiness where the focus was first and foremost on piloting leadership development modules in a distinct operating context.¹² Looking ahead, incorporating both approaches in GEAR programs in agribusiness would be beneficial, especially when productivity improvement is a key objective for participating companies.

Lean and Kaizen methodologies are used in some agro-industries, particularly by larger commercial farms and in eastern Africa's horticulture sector. While their impact on the continent's agricultural sector is not widely documented, anecdotal and qualitative evidence suggests they are effective.

Stakeholder interviews revealed that some vegetable, flower, and nut producers apply these methods to increase workers' involvement in process improvement. For instance, Mary Muhara, Director of the Village Nut Company, a macadamia nut processing business in rural Kenya, told IFC that Kaizen had become part of the mindset of their company, and that they had taken on board the principle of "small changes lead to big changes".

"We started by establishing 'team talks' through which employees were asked to share what they would change at their workstation. Some of these practices have now become embedded in the company's culture.

Applying Kaizen principles is an integral element of departmental objectives and central to team meetings. All solutions come from employees, which is much better than hiring an external consultant," she explained, adding: "The solutions employees propose are simpler, more effective and directly applicable, and less expensive. Training all employees to adopt a Kaizen mindset, which advocates 'being a leader at your workstation', proved very impactful at Village Nuts."

DRIVE PROFESSIONAL GROWTH COMPANY-WIDE

Creating opportunities for all employees to progress in their careers requires a deliberate, company-wide approach that addresses the specific barriers women face.



Photo: Fokke Baarssen via Shutterstock.

While GEAR is a valuable intervention for advancing career growth and job opportunities for women, it will best reach its goals when integrated as part of a broader approach that provides equal opportunities for all employees. This includes a good working environment where all workers – regardless of their level, gender or other attributes – feel recognized and appreciated and have the opportunity to perform and progress.

¹² The goal of this first pilot in agribusiness was to develop the leadership capacity of participants, without deliberately seeking measurable productivity improvements.

Desktop research, interviews with experts, and the pilot project highlighted various examples of good practices, which include:

- Undertaking a comprehensive gender assessment of the workforce, which provides quantitative and qualitative data to identify and inform the design of interventions.
- Conducting awareness-raising training on gender and diversity for all employees, including managers, to help ensure that everyone behaves according to a company's inclusive values.
- Adopting HR policies and practices that promote inclusivity and address the different aspects of diversity and their intersections.
- Ensuring quality and affordable childcare arrangements (or stipends) for all employees with caregiving responsibilities, so they can participate fully in the workforce.
- Engaging in effective worker-management communication to proactively address potential issues and prevent conflicts.
- Practicing mentorship to help women thrive and facilitate their growth within the company.
- Celebrating and showcasing women role models and their stories in leadership roles, demonstrating to others that career progression is possible.
- Holding in-house and external training programs to upskill employees and support their career advancement.

United Exports has various initiatives that support the development of its employees, which together actively contribute to advancing women's careers. For example, its graduate placement and internship programs recruit, promote and retain numerous talented young people, including a significant proportion of women in supervisory

and junior management roles. The company provides bursaries to selected employees for higher education, with 83 percent awarded to women employees over the past year. Additionally, United Exports offers programs to build functional and technical skills, with women comprising 79 percent of participants in adult literacy (English and mathematics) and 52 percent in the learnership program – both supporting women's career growth.



Photo: Photoography via Shutterstock.

The importance of implementing a range of interventions has been outlined by many of the stakeholders interviewed by IFC, including through initiatives involving the broader community.

To illustrate, Muhara maintained that by “gaining a deeper understanding of women – who they are, their life stages, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter – and by considering staff's families, communities, and cultural norms around gender roles, we can take a holistic approach to support women's career progression.”^{xiii}

Beyond corporate interventions, broader societal efforts are also needed to transform mindsets, norms, and perceptions that shape women's decisions and behaviors. Bertille Marcos Guèdègbé, the Founder and CEO of Les Fruits Tillou in Benin, was interviewed as part of the research. She said that people's mindsets need to shift “in all areas so that every individual aspires to do great things, believe in their ability to do so, and can do so.” She insisted that “education plays a crucial role in this transformation, but it must be implemented across all sectors and domains”.

^{xiii} The goal of this first pilot in agribusiness was to develop the leadership capacity of participants, without deliberately seeking measurable productivity improvements.

4. The Journey Continues *at United Exports*

At United Exports, the customized GEAR Program complemented the company's existing training initiatives to advance the professional development of women employees.

Following its collaboration with IFC, United Exports has continued to support the professional advancement of the women who participated in GEAR. Many of them are now enrolled in a two-year Diploma in Plant Production to advance their technical knowledge.¹³ In addition, in 2025 two GEAR graduates were promoted to higher-level roles, including one who became a production manager at one of United Exports' farms, making her the first woman to hold this position.¹⁴

United Exports has also expanded soft and leadership skills training to more employees across its different production sites. For instance, all participants from United Exports' graduate placement and internship programs, both men and women, are now annually enrolled in the Life Skills training program, facilitated by the same training provider, the Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre. Team leaders from several farms also attend dedicated training courses.

Furthermore, United Exports has introduced annual "People Management for Productivity and Well-being" training for all managers, supervisors, and team leaders across its production sites.

The collaboration with IFC, which was fully aligned with United Exports' dedication to nurturing talent and promoting opportunities for all employees, contributed to enriching the company's programs and initiatives.

The GEAR Program highlighted the importance of life skills and socio-emotional skills, essential for personal growth and forming the foundation for confident and effective team leadership.



Janine Jansen, Rosedine Manuel, and Thembeke Mabangula – who all took part in the IFC training program – care for the plants through the production cycle. Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

¹³ This diploma is a national qualification in South Africa (Level 5 in the National Qualifications Framework).

¹⁴ These two promotions, which occurred more than 18 months after the completion of the training program, are in addition to the four promotions reported as part of the program results outlined in Section 2.

5. Broader Applicability of GEAR in Agribusiness

Adapting GEAR from Asia's apparel industry to Africa's agribusiness sector has demonstrated the program's broad relevance and benefits in a completely new context. This pilot highlighted the importance of a comprehensive leadership development program that builds employees' personal and professional capacities so they can grow and thrive in more senior supervisory and managerial roles.

It also showcased the critical value of initiatives like GEAR for supervisors in demanding positions, such as overseeing seasonal workforces. Under such conditions, self-confidence, effective communication, cross-cultural competence, conflict resolution skills, and strong team-building abilities are essential for managerial success.

EXPANDING CAREER GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN AGRIBUSINESS EMPLOYMENT ACROSS AFRICA

GEAR is a vehicle that enhances and complements companies' programs that focus on supporting career growth for women and achieving a more gender-balanced supervisory and managerial structure.

Programs like GEAR could benefit more employees and enterprises in agribusiness, particularly in large-scale commercial agriculture, a significant source of formal employment where women remain underrepresented in leadership roles – limiting the sector's ability to serve as a pathway for women's economic empowerment.

Publicly available data on women's representation in formal agribusiness employment is limited. However, the desktop research conducted as part of this pilot

gathered information that points to three untapped opportunities for women's career development and economic empowerment: in addition to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles, they also tend to be overrepresented in temporary and seasonal positions, and earn less than their male counterparts (see Figure 8).¹⁵ Furthermore, when seasonality is involved, these three issues tend to reinforce each other. For instance, the prevalence of seasonal roles limits career advancement prospects as they provide fewer opportunities to upgrade skills, create more precarious and insecure employment conditions, and contribute to financial precarity due to the intermittent nature of work.

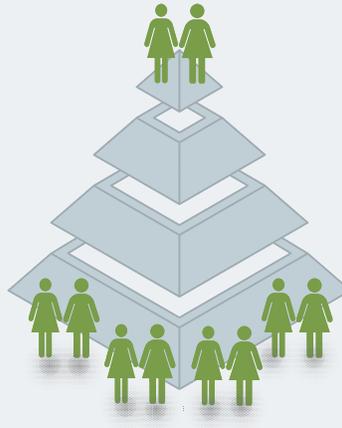
These observations call for a greater focus on employment, especially in commercial agriculture, to promote gender equality and economic inclusion in agriculture.



Photo: Marisa Estivill via Shutterstock.

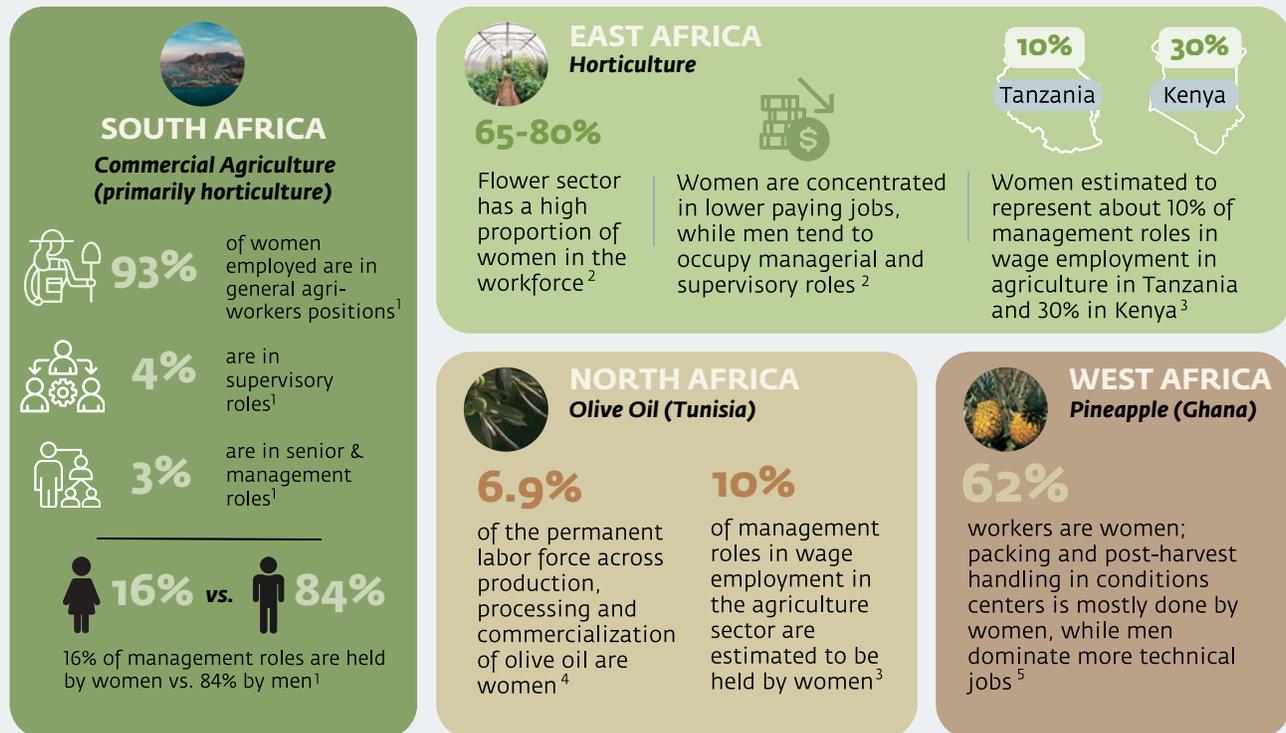
¹⁵ The data points presented in Figure 8 were compiled to provide an indicative overview of women's representation in formal agribusiness employment in selected African countries, based on the limited publicly available information in regard to it.

FIGURE 8. THREE UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN AGRIBUSINESS EMPLOYMENT IN SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES



#1 WOMEN ARE UNDER-REPRESENTED IN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING ROLES

And over-represented at the bottom of the pyramid.



1. Gys M. Loubser, 2020, [Women in Agriculture](#)

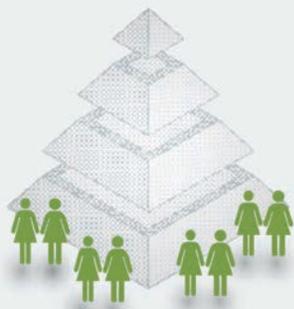
2. Fairtrade Foundation, 2018, [Women's Employment and Economic Empowerment on Fairtrade Flower Farms in East Africa](#); Miet Maertens & Anna Fabry, 2019, [Creating More and Better Jobs in Global Value Chains](#)

3. Estimates derived from the stakeholder interviews.

4. Michael Weber, Jade Salhab, Keratilwe Tsatsimpe, & Sonia Sanchez-Quintela, 2019, [Olive Oil in the North-West of Tunisia: Findings from a Value Chain and Jobs Survey](#)

5. Miet Maertens & Anna Fabry, 2019, [Creating More and Better Jobs in Global Value Chains](#)

Note: Publicly available data on women's representation in agribusiness wage employment, both in Africa and globally, remains limited. Figure 8 compiles data points from different sources gathered during the desktop literature review and stakeholder interviews, which focused on high-value, export-oriented agricultural production and processing. Figure 8 presents data from selected agricultural products and regions where wage employment in production and processing is common, and for which such data was available. The data points provided in Figure 8 are meant to provide an indicative overview of key issues relating to women's representation in agricultural wage employment in Africa.



#2 WOMEN ARE OVER-REPRESENTED IN TEMPORARY AND SEASONAL POSITIONS

Often characterized by inadequate contracts, limited job security, and increased vulnerability to precarious conditions, including exposure to sexual harassment.



#3 A DIFFERENCE IN PAY: WOMEN EARN LESS

Both because they are under-represented in management roles and because they are paid less than men despite being on the same role/level.



SOUTH AFRICA Commercial Agriculture (primarily horticulture)

across all levels, fewer women than men are paid above minimum wage and industry benchmarks¹



SOUTH AFRICA Commercial Agriculture (primarily horticulture)



34%
FULL-TIME
employees are
women¹



52%
PART-TIME
seasonal
employees are
women¹



NORTH AFRICA Olive Oil (Tunisia)



women make up the majority of the seasonal workers hired for harvesting²



WEST AFRICA Horticulture (Senegal)



women have less access to permanent and written contracts³



NORTH AFRICA Olive Oil (Tunisia)



TND
~12-15



TND
~20-25

women are paid less per day than men for performing similar work²



TND
~400-450
temporary worker



TND
>1000
full-time worker

average monthly wage for a seasonal agricultural worker is less than half of a full-time general worker²

*Tunisian Dinar (TND)



Agriculture (Morocco)

25%

women earn on average 25% less than men, even in tasks that require skilled labour⁵



WEST AFRICA Horticulture (Senegal)



women are more often employed in piecework and casual jobs, with shorter employment periods and slightly higher daily working hours⁴

<24%

women's wages are on average 24% lower than those of men (297 versus 392 CFA/h), mainly due to contractual differences³



<18% GLOBALLY Across 10 Countries

women were paid 18.4% less than men in agriculture wage employment, earning 82 cents for every dollar earned by men⁶

1. Gys M. Loubser, 2020, [Women in Agriculture](#)

2. Michael Weber, Jade Salhab, Keratilwe Tsatsimpe, & Sonia Sanchez-Quintela, 2019, [Olive Oil in the North-West of Tunisia: Findings from a Value Chain and Jobs Survey](#)

3. Anna Fabry, Goedele Van den Broeck & Miet Maertens, 2022, [Decent work in global food value chains: Evidence from Senegal](#)

4. Miet Maertens & Anna Fabry, 2019, [Creating More and Better Jobs in Global Value Chains](#)

5. Dr. Abdelghani Nabloussi, 2016, [Periodical Information from the Regional Center for Agronomic Research in Meknes](#). Other sources cite a wage difference between men and women in agricultural work ranging from 16 percent^{5a} to 50 percent^{5b}.

6. FAO, 2023, [The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems](#). Notes: (i) 10 lower-middle-income countries across Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa; (ii) In agriculture, women wage workers earn significantly less per hour than men in six of the sampled countries: Cambodia, Egypt, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Rwanda and Tunisia.

IFC is committed to promoting women’s leadership and employment in agribusiness and will continue to scale a range of initiatives to support this goal. The [World Bank Group’s Gender Strategy 2024-2030: Accelerate Gender Equality to End Poverty on a Livable Planet](#) emphasizes the need to tailor programs to the specific dynamics of agriculture and agri-food systems to enhance women’s employment, productivity, product diversification, and livelihoods.

For example, the ILO-IFC partnership on Better Work, which focuses on promoting decent work and competitiveness in apparel supply chains, is expanding its impact and tailoring its approaches to the agribusiness industry. The Better Work Program in Ethiopia piloted its first Women’s Leadership Development Program in the horticulture industry in 2023, inspired by GEAR’s success in the apparel sector.¹⁶

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT AND JOB QUALITY FOR ALL EMPLOYEES

As companies increasingly look at reskilling and upskilling their workforces – central to the World Bank Group’s strategic objective of catalyzing job growth – GEAR provides an innovative solution to develop essential and transferable socio-emotional, leadership, management and job-related skills, while improving workplace productivity and enhancing job quality.

GEAR can be adapted to develop the leadership and management skills of all employees, regardless of their gender or level. The program is particularly relevant and meaningful for less experienced employees, first-time supervisors, and those transitioning into demanding supervisory roles.

GEAR can be adapted according to the needs and priorities of companies and their employees across different sectors.

INDUSTRIES & ACTIVITIES	BENEFICIARIES	INDUSTRY CHALLENGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labor-intensive activities in production, manufacturing and processing industries that involve a relatively large share of women employees. • GEAR can be adapted to services industries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees with potential to access supervisory and management roles for which upskilling is needed. • Employees who would benefit from upskilling to excel in their roles or further advance in leadership positions. • Company management, including training participants’ line managers and mid-to senior-level managers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little to no gender diversity or underrepresentation of women in supervisory and management roles. • Low or limited productivity. • Low employee engagement. • Challenges around attracting and retaining talent – high turnover.

¹⁶ The Women Leadership Development Program was delivered by Better Work in Ethiopia in the horticulture industry in collaboration with the Ethiopian Horticulture Producer Exporters Association (EHPEA). It included training modules to develop participants’ technical and soft skills, confidence, and eligibility for promotion to the next higher position. The training was accompanied by a three-month on-the-job coaching and mentoring initiative conducted by their immediate supervisors and line leaders. In total, 29 workers and EHPEA trainers participated in the program in 2023.

ADOPTING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Deeply rooted barriers limit women's advancement in the workplace. These include societal and cultural norms that influence women's choices, opportunities, and mobility; household and caregiving responsibilities; limited access to relevant education, adequate training and professional development; and insufficient awareness and lack of incentives for companies. Broad efforts undertaken by various actors are needed to address structural barriers – both within companies and across society.

Education, socialization and norms about gender roles significantly shape women's behaviors in the workplace. A key observation from implementing GEAR across industries and regions is that women often hold themselves back due to self-doubt, influenced by societal expectations and perceptions about how they should behave and the roles they should occupy.

This underscores the need for broader societal efforts to shift mindsets, norms, and perceptions.

Companies can contribute their part through deliberate measures to address the obstacles that women face in the workplace. These include conducting comprehensive gender assessments that provide a baseline for data-driven interventions, strengthening policies and practices to recruit, retain, and promote more women, implementing targeted programs like GEAR, and delivering gender-awareness programs for all staff.

IFC is committed to advancing gender equality across sectors and will continue to support its clients through a range of corporate-level initiatives.¹⁷ [IFC's Roadmap 2030 on Gender and Economic Inclusion](#) focuses on three pillars, one of which is promoting women's access to more superior jobs and leadership roles, so they have better and more frequent opportunities to earn a livelihood. This is integral to the World Bank Group's goals to generate and support quality jobs.



Flowers blooming at one of United Exports' farms in South Africa's Western Cape Province. Photo: Heinrich Knoetze.

¹⁷ IFC supports its clients across the manufacturing, agribusiness, health, and education sectors to promote inclusive employment and leadership. Such initiatives include corporate gender assessments (including EDGE Gender certifications) that review policies and procedures, coaching HR teams on unconscious bias, helping companies to design and implement gender interventions (such as childcare and family-friendly practices, creating safe and respectful workplaces, and encouraging flexible schedules), enhancing companies' training programs to specifically support women's career development (GEAR), and providing peer-learning platforms.

Appendix

I. Stakeholder Interviews

Stephanie Barrientos, Emeritus Professor, The Global Development Institute, School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester

Saber Ben Mbarek, Consultant, IFC, Tunisia

Anzette Coetzee, Human Resource Manager, Bergendal Boerdery, South Africa

Bertille Marcos Guèdègbé, Founder and CEO, Les Fruits Tillou, Benin

Joshua Kahura, Group Compliance Manager, Shalimar Fresh Limited, Kenya

Alice Michira, Co-Founder and CEO, Mwangaza Africa Consultants, Kenya

Mary Muia, Co-Founder and Director, NOPE, Kenya

Mary Muhara, Director, Village Nuts, Kenya

Lydia Mbevi, Consultant, IFC, Kenya

Carmen Roberts, CEO, Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre (KBOS), South Africa

Maria Verschoof, Co-Founder, Mama Cashew, Tanzania

Joy Van Biljon, Co-Founder, Koue Bokkeveld Training Centre (KBOS), South Africa

Stakeholders' titles reflect positions held at the time of the interviews in late 2023.

Appendix

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Contact Information

For more information please contact:

Diane Davoine, GEAR Program Lead, IFC: ddavoine@ifc.org
Sabine Hertveldt, Senior Operations Officer, IFC: shertveldt@ifc.org