



MTN Nigeria

# An Outstanding Gender Leader: How MTN Nigeria Made the Right Call to Close Gender Gaps

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MTN Nigeria (MTN) is part of the MTN Group, a multinational telecommunications group, which operates in 19 countries in Africa and the Middle East. MTN Nigeria was established in 2001 and has grown to become the largest mobile network operator, serving 79 million people across Africa's most populous nation. MTN operates a variety of businesses, including voice, data, digital and mobile financial services (MoMo). MTN has the largest market share (37 percent) in the mobile segment.

Photo Credit: MTN Nigeria, 2024



Photo Credit: IFC, Gender Leader Awards, 2024

## Box 1:

### About IFC's Nigeria2Equal (N2E) program

Launched in 2021, N2E is a two-and-a-half-year program implemented by IFC in partnership with NGX Group, and the first multi-stakeholder country program that aims to reduce gender gaps in leadership, employment, and entrepreneurship in Nigeria's private sector. Specifically:

- A) N2E conducts **market and firm-specific research** to establish the business case for gender equality and guide best practices—topics range from gender balance in the workforce and in pay, to policies that foster equality in the workplace such as balancing childcare responsibilities and building a respectful workplace.
- B) N2E provides a **peer learning platform** for participating companies to share knowledge on effective gender-smart measures that promote women's participation in employment and entrepreneurship.
- C) N2E gives **firm-level advisory support** to help companies assess their needs, build capacity to develop and implement their gender action plans, and obtain globally recognized certification.

Participating firms make **commitments**: at least two at operational level, covering leadership, employment and entrepreneurship, and at least one at advocacy level, to build community efforts towards gender equality. These commitments require time-bound actions and measurable outcomes and must be in line with a company's existing business strategy.

## OVERVIEW

As the largest mobile network operator in Nigeria, [MTN Nigeria](#) (MTN) has been a trailblazing company. MTN accelerated its gender equality initiatives under a partnership with IFC. In 2023, the company leapfrogged from a previous ranking of number thirteen to become the top-performing company amongst the thirty most capitalized companies on the Nigerian Stock Exchange when it comes to providing equal opportunities for women in the workplace, based on a rigorous third-party assessment by Equileap and independent verification by PwC<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, in August 2023, MTN became the first wireless telecommunications services company in the African continent to obtain the Equity, Diversity, and Gender Equality (EDGE) Certification at the “EDGE Move” level—the second of three EDGE Certification levels<sup>2</sup>, and thus a testament to its bold progress. MTN also made a historical record of becoming the second organization in Sub-Saharan Africa to achieve this level of certification.

The road leading to this high point goes back to 2021 when MTN joined IFC's Nigeria2Equal (N2E) program, which supported companies in becoming more gender-balanced across their business operations (see Box 1). Under N2E, MTN committed to working on specific focus areas under the three broad workstreams of the N2E program a) leadership and employment, b) entrepreneurship, and c) advocacy for gender equality and empowerment. IFC played a catalytic role, helping MTN make data-driven, informed decisions; providing exposure to global best practices in gender-smart policies; and helping the firm aspire for global certification and recognition.

Building on its earlier work as an inclusive company that emphasizes gender diversity from the top and invests in gender-focused interventions, MTN accelerated its efforts over the two-and-a-half-year period of the N2E program. In line with its commitment under N2E, MTN deployed actions that promote women's participation in leadership, employment, and entrepreneurship. The firm recruited and promoted more women, conducted diagnostics that revealed blind spots on mentoring, supplier practices, and anti-bullying & harassment, and closed these gaps in its policies and practices towards the equal treatment of men and women.

This case study will elaborate on how the firm achieved success and ended up raising the bar for all firms.

## MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Nigeria is one of the largest economies in Africa, with a burgeoning population. It is poised to become the world's sixth most populous nation by 2030<sup>3</sup>, with 228 million people as of 2023<sup>4</sup>, but only 11 percent of employed women are wage and salaried workers (2023)<sup>5</sup>. Many women are underemployed or work below their potential<sup>6</sup>. The share of women in vulnerable employment is much higher than that of men--78.9 percent as against 54.3 percent for men (2023)<sup>7</sup>.

In 2023, Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) was nearly \$364 billion<sup>8</sup>. However, closing the gender gap in key sectors of Nigeria's economy could yield a gain of as much as \$22.9 billion<sup>9</sup>—which makes a compelling economic and business case for women's inclusion.

## GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE TELECOMS SECTOR

Africa's telecoms landscape is generally marked by low levels of female representation across the chain—whether as leaders, employees, suppliers, or distributors. This gap is especially deep in senior management roles. While 35 percent of employees at the entry and staff levels are women in Africa's telecommunications sector, less than one in 10 senior leaders is a woman<sup>10</sup>. Hurdles standing in the way of women's entry, retention, and advancement in the sector range from limited access to jobs and promotions, to low education and skill levels (particularly in STEM fields), to caregiving responsibilities and bias at the workplace.

Nigeria is no different. Women's workplace composition in telecoms has historically trailed that of men, especially in management and technical fields. On average, they earn 1.3 times less than their male colleagues. They are also less likely to get promoted.

These gaps tend to work against companies since a wide body of evidence shows that organizations with a more diverse set of leadership tend to be more profitable and innovative than less diverse ones. They are also more likely to outperform their peers in long-term value creation measures, better environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance and ethical business practices, enhanced workplace policies, risk management, and employee retention<sup>11</sup>.

## LEADING CHANGE

MTN holds the largest mobile market share in Nigeria at 37 percent<sup>12</sup>, provides jobs, and its sector is a significant contributor to real GDP<sup>13</sup>, these factors position it well to lead the charge in narrowing gender gaps in Nigeria's telecommunications sector.

## IFC's SUPPORT

Under the Nigeria2Equal program, IFC provided support to private sector companies across three components:

- i. **Research & Best Practice Case Studies:** Establishing the business case and the role of the private sector in advancing gender equality in Nigeria.
- ii. **Peer Learning Platform:** Providing webinars and events where publicly listed companies and IFC clients can interact, work together, network, share best practices, and engage with local and global experts.
- iii. **Firm-Level Advisory:** Helping companies identify gender gaps in their businesses and implement specific gender-smart measures to reduce these gaps in the workforce and across the firm's operations. Based on clients' needs and capacity, the focus could be on corporate leadership, employment, supply chain capacity support, and/or community engagement.

MTN participated in the N2E program with specific commitments across three workstreams (Figure 1) and drew on IFC's support during its implementation.

**Figure 1.0** MTN's commitments under the Nigeria2Equal Program

### Workstream 1: Leadership and Employment

- Strengthen women's pipeline across levels by deploying female-focused campaigns and targeted talent programs.
- Undertake an assessment to measure the impact of MTN's mentorship program for women.
- Undertake EDGE diagnostics and certification.

### Workstream 2: Entrepreneurship

- Undertake an assessment to understand the gender makeup of its supplier database.
- Set targets to increase the participation of women and implement actions to support women as entrepreneurs.

### Workstream 3: Advocacy

- Participate in or host initiatives/events to promote gender equality as a proactive business strategy, especially at the executive management level.
- Sign up to the United Nations Women Empowerment Principles.
- Report gender focused initiatives in the annual company report.

## WORKSTREAM 1: PROMOTING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYMENT

In line with its commitments, the company implemented several actions to hire, promote and retain female staff, and undertake the EDGE assessment and certification.

**Dedicated leadership:** As part of the Africa-wide MTN Group, MTN Nigeria has had high standards for diversity and inclusion. The company's efforts in Nigeria have been spearheaded by a highly active and visible CEO, Karl Toriola. After joining N2E, MTN assigned dedicated resources and an executive with decision-making power, specifically focused on the gender program.

**Rapid recruitment and promotion of women:** MTN has achieved a 50:50 gender ratio among its executive-level managers—a significant improvement in the 24 months since it joined the N2E program—with an exponential rise in new female hires and overall promotions. MTN took intentional steps to achieve this, including targeted and deliberate succession planning, framing job advertisements to appeal to women, reaching out to women through the firm's Y'ello network, and sometimes re-advertising jobs to ensure enough qualified women applied. It sensitized hiring managers to eliminate unconscious gender bias. It also mapped gender imbalances across departments and systematically hired and promoted qualified, competent women into them. MTN also strived to better match skillsets to roles, encouraging female employees with tech skills to apply for technical roles as, and when advertised. Women receive ongoing training to nurture their talents and prepare them for senior positions. Training focused on confidence building and interviewing skills has seen significant uptake by female employees. MTN also held an internal career fair amongst its employees to create awareness of its women's recruitment drive.

Low education and skill levels in STEM<sup>a</sup> fields is a major barrier to women's entry into the telecommunications sector and limits their availability for high-paying technical roles<sup>14</sup>. To build the feeder into its talent base and the broader telecoms sector, since 2021 MTN started to organize 'Women in Tech' sessions that are open to the public and aimed at demystifying technology and strengthening the female talent pipeline in STEM.

### The exponential rise of women at MTN

- 2x** increase in recruitment of female talent
- 7x** increase in number of new female recruits
- 4x** growth in number women promoted overall
- 13.3** percent rise in number of senior female managers

### Workplace flexibility to help attract and retain female staff:

Underpinned by the belief that workplace flexibility benefits both the employer and employees, the top leadership actively promotes the utilization of their flexible and remote work policy by both men and women. During their participation in N2E, the firm deployed line manager effectiveness sessions to strengthen the implementation of its flexi-work options. The policy offers a hybrid work model of three days onsite and two days off-site, and an option of 'anytime anywhere' work flexibility for eligible staff.

To eliminate discretionary practices, the sessions ensured managers have clear guidelines for managing teams that utilize flexible working arrangements. This has yielded impressive results. Nearly three-quarters of both men and women frequently use the available options. This has been especially beneficial for women staff who typically bear most or all the family caregiving responsibilities.

MTN offers a generous parental leave provision for both parents. Working mothers can take up to a 30-week (7.5 months) fully paid maternity leave—which exceeds Nigeria's minimum statutory maternity leave requirement of 12 weeks (6 weeks pre-delivery, and 6 weeks post-delivery) at 50 percent of normal pay, and ILO's minimum standard of 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, at a rate of pay that is at least at two-thirds of the employee's regular salary. Working fathers are provided a two-week paternity leave.

During their participation in N2E, MTN revised its policies on parental leave. Working mothers can now combine their annual leave in the same year that they take maternity leave and have the option to take an additional month without pay. Additionally, through new birth notifications from the companies' health insurance providers, the line managers and HR partners can now systematically encourage men to use their two-week paternity leave. As a result, and despite cultural norms and expectations, the uptake of paternity leave by working fathers at MTN is quite high at 70 percent.

MTN has also taken steps to mitigate the occurrence of the 'motherhood penalty'<sup>15</sup>—the loss in lifetime earnings experienced by women raising children—characterized by underemployment and slower career progression after returning to work. The organization has put in place systematic measures that ensure taking maternity or paternity leave does not negatively impact an employee's career development opportunities (pay, promotions, training, mentoring, etc.). Appraisals and job promotion ratings are not biased by absence during maternity and employees can freely participate in career interventions such as job rotations and shadowing. Given the increasing importance of mental health and well-being, MTN employees now have access to tailored sessions with psychologists.

**Helping women break the glass ceiling:** Equal access to opportunities is critical to ensuring career progress for both men and women. As part of the N2E program, in 2022 MTN assessed the impact of its formal mentoring program

a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

on female mentee beneficiaries. It found that the program has been a valuable intervention and has helped women to expand their internal network, gain personal mastery, become more effective, and access guidance/tools that have helped them achieve their career goals and development. Through the assessment, MTN received valuable feedback, identified opportunities to scale its efforts to support more women and men in the program, and devised an action plan. It now regularly conducts surveys of its mentoring program and disseminates the results within the organization, to demonstrate its effectiveness and encourage participation. Additionally, MTN has reinforced its training and upskilling opportunities for female staff via strategic leadership conferences and executive leadership development programs at Ivy League schools.

**Freedom from Violence, Abuse, and Sexual Harassment:** IFC and global research have shown that respectful workplaces free of violence, bullying, and harassment, are not only good for employees but also good for business. Companies in Nigeria lose an estimated 5.68 billion Naira (\$7.57 million)<sup>b</sup> per year to the effects of violence and harassment. To mitigate such negative consequences and protect employees, during the two-and-a-half-year Nigeria2Equal program, MTN strengthened its anti-sexual harassment and anti-bullying policies, expressing zero tolerance for all forms of bullying and violence in the workplace, including verbal, physical, and sexual harassment. They deployed communications campaigns and conducted several company-wide engagements, like training, town hall sessions, and regional roadshows across its teams in Nigeria. Up to 78 percent of employees have now attended at least one of these sessions and 93 percent of MTN employees agree that information on the procedure to report a concern regarding sexual harassment and discrimination is easily accessible to them. To review progress, MTN participated in an IFC study that assessed company responses to bullying and harassment. The findings helped them to benchmark against other private sector companies in Nigeria and identify opportunities for improvement.



“The EDGE MOVE certification establishes us as trailblazers, making MTN Nigeria the pioneering telecom company in Africa and the second in Sub-Saharan Africa to attain this.”

**Esther Akinnukawe**  
CHRO MTN Nigeria

Photo Credit: MTN Nigeria, 2024

<sup>b</sup> Conversation rate at the time of the GBVH study: NGN750 to \$1.

## ECONOMIC DIVIDENDS FOR GENDER EQUALITY (EDGE): GETTING EDGE CERTIFIED

With IFC’s support, MTN undertook the rigorous EDGE assessment and independently verified certification conducted by a third-party auditor. EDGE is the leading global assessment methodology and certification standard for measuring workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). EDGE measures a company’s female to male balance across its workforce and leadership levels, assesses the fairness of its pay scale, identifies whether its policies and practices ensure equitable career opportunities for women and men, through an inclusive culture, benchmarks it against its peers globally, and makes recommendations for a data-driven action plan to close identified gaps (see Box 2). The diagnostic found that the effectiveness of MTN’s policies and practices considerably exceeded the EDGE minimum standard of 65 percent across five areas (see Figure 2)<sup>16</sup>.

**Figure 2:** Scores for MTN’s policies and practices, as benchmarked against EDGE standards.



Note: The dotted line at 65 percent indicates the minimum percentage needed to meet the EDGE Standard.

MTN’s performance was particularly remarkable in the areas of organizational culture, equal pay for equivalent work, and flexible working.

a) **Organizational culture:** EDGE found that gender equality at MTN is a strategic goal that is advocated from the top, championed by senior leaders, and proactively supported and tracked across the firm. It is reflected in MTN's corporate scorecard which aims for full gender balance by 2030. Its DE&I requirements cascade down to the respective functions across the organization. All members of the senior leadership are visibly and systematically committed to achieving gender equality and it is reflected and tracked as part of managers' Key Performance Indicators.

b) **Equal pay for equivalent work:** MTN's policy explicitly supports equal pay for equivalent work regardless of gender. It conducts annual gender pay-gap assessments that analyze the aggregate mean pay gap by gender and job categories. To keep the leadership accountable, it openly communicates its proactive management of gender pay equity at all levels of responsibility. This ensures awareness across relevant stakeholder groups. As a result, both men and women at the firm mostly believe that they are being paid fairly for the work that they do compared to others in similar roles.

c) **Flexible workplace policies and working arrangements:** The EDGE assessment revealed that most MTN employees (70 percent) agree that their job affords them the desired work-life balance and more than 80 percent believe that for both men and women, a career at MTN is compatible with family. EDGE also found that the firm actively promotes parental leave for both parents with a high maternity retention rate (85 percent) that exceeds EDGE's 80 percent standard for an excellent retention rate. MTN's review of its flexible workplace policies and practices has strengthened employee perception, morale, and productivity—and MTN is reaping the dividends.

In August 2023, MTN became the first wireless telecommunications services company in the African continent to obtain the EDGE Certification at the "EDGE Move" level—the second of three EDGE Certification levels, and thus a testament to its bold progress. MTN also became the second organization in Sub-Saharan Africa to achieve this level of certification.



Photo Credit:  
MTN Nigeria, 2024

"A diverse, inclusive, and equitable workforce is critical to the success and sustainability of our business. We are committed to promoting gender inclusiveness, equality, and empowerment internally as well as across our ecosystem to ensure that interventions are holistic and position women to thrive effortlessly. If we must narrow the gender gap and address the disproportionate representation of women in the private sector, I believe that business leaders and CEOs must disproportionately allocate resources to support women across all levels."

**Karl Toriola, CEO MTN Nigeria**

## WORKSTREAM 2: PROMOTING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN MTN'S CORPORATE VALUE CHAIN

As part of its second commitment under the IFC N2E program, MTN assessed the gender diversity of the entrepreneurs in its corporate value chain, as suppliers and distributors or agents. They sex-disaggregated their core supplier base to understand the composition of women-led businesses in their supply chain. This helped them to develop a baseline and set targets. It also revealed the need for more intentional gender-inclusive sourcing practices across strategic business departments, for which MTN devised an effective action plan to support female entrepreneurs as suppliers and distributors.

Furthermore, they launched a program to target female SMEs with tailored MTN offerings and solutions alongside business capacity building for their business skills. MTN also went on to broaden its support for women SMEs. In 2022, MTN through its corporate social responsibility foundation launched the 'MTN Y'ellopreneur Initiative', a program that aims to reduce women's unemployment and provide capacity building and access to finance to female entrepreneurs thereby expanding its pipeline of women entrepreneurs. The program has since supported over 4,700 women with entrepreneurship training, access to internet connectivity for their businesses, access to finance, and to help the entrepreneurs develop a credit footprint, the top 50 female entrepreneurs were shortlisted to receive equipment loans worth \$75,000. While MTN aims to scale impact, early results of these interventions revealed an improved engagement level, reduced churn, improved loyalty, and brand affinity.

## WORKSTREAM 3: ADVOCATING FOR GENDER EQUALITY

MTN spearheads gender advocacy, transparency, and accountability efforts in line with its commitment under the N2E program (see Figure 1, Workstream 3).

In June 2022 with IFC's support, MTN became a signatory to the United Nations Women Empowerment Principles (UN WEPs)<sup>17</sup> voluntary code. By joining the WEPs community, MTN CEO Karl Toriola signaled his commitment to women's advancement at the highest levels of the company. MTN also began to participate in the UN Women 'HeForShe' campaign—an invitation for men to stand as allies in solidarity with women in advocating for gender equality.

As a measure of transparency and in fulfilling its N2E commitment, MTN now reports its gender-focused initiatives and gender performance targets in its corporate annual reports, highlighting the milestones it has achieved in advancing women's opportunities and closing gaps affecting them, as well as its future targets.

**Recognition:** As part of the N2E program, IFC partnered with NGX Group to assess the workplace gender equality

performance of the 30 most capitalized companies listed on the stock exchange. This assessment was carried out by Equileap, which used its Gender Equality Scorecard™ to conduct a gap analysis of the companies' gender performance<sup>18</sup>. Equileap draws on publicly available company-issued documents and sources for its assessment. It emphasizes transparency and accountability by a company, placing a high value on a company openly publishing its policies and holding itself accountable by reporting on its progress periodically.

**IN 24 MONTHS:** MTN displaced 12 publicly listed companies to emerge as the top-performing company in Gender Equality.

*Based on Equileap Scorecard\**

In 2021, based on Equileap's assessment, MTN's gender equality performance was ranked at 13 out of the 30 most capitalized companies listed on the Nigerian Exchange<sup>19</sup>. Over the next 24 months, with strong leadership under its CEO, Karl Toriola, and a close partnership with IFC, MTN would race to close workplace gender gaps, with the telco's efforts paying off. In May 2023, MTN was ranked the top-performing company, by Equileap, amongst Nigeria's publicly listed companies. Additionally, MTN's gender equality score was 11 points more than the top company score in 2021. In this phenomenal achievement, MTN significantly raised the bar for all companies in Nigeria, earning the Outstanding Gender Leader award for its excellence in Gender Equality Performance, at the IFC-NGX Gender Leader Awards – verified by PwC.

## LESSONS LEARNED

In embracing a diverse team, MTN stands to reap multiple dividends in the form of improved decision-making, enhanced creativity and innovation, and a better understanding of customer needs, enabling tailored products and services with market traction. Critical success factors have included:

*Leadership commitment and buy-in:* MTN's CEO, Karl Toriola, has set a strong tone at the top. He is committed to gender equality. He publicly advocates for women's economic empowerment as a proactive business strategy, and this is coded into the company's corporate strategy and structure. MTN has an executive sponsor for the gender agenda at the leadership level and a gender champion that coordinates gender equality actions across functions.

*Independent assessments:* Undertaking an independent diagnostic such as the EDGE certification, and being assessed by Equileap, has strengthened MTN's gender equality efforts by helping it develop a data-driven gender action plan and elevating its brand and visibility.

*Sex-disaggregated data:* Sex-disaggregated data has been critical to helping the firm track its efforts in talent management, employee training, gender-inclusive sourcing, etc., and implementing robust policies.

## CONCLUSION

By participating in the Nigeria2Equal program, undertaking the rigorous EDGE certification, and making rapid changes to achieve gender parity, MTN Nigeria has raised the bar for Nigeria's private sector. It is now better equipped to scale its gender-smart actions and make necessary adjustments based on feedback, outcomes, and evolving organizational needs. EDGE requires companies to continue monitoring their policies and practices: MTN has committed to continue deepening its efforts towards reducing gender gaps across all levels by implementing the action plan developed under EDGE and communicating these efforts to employees. Going forward, the telco has set its sights on achieving a 50:50 gender balance across its workforce by 2030.

## ENDNOTES

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