



The Future of Women in the Cotton Sector is Very Bright

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Doris Phiri holds a degree in Economics and International Trade. She has a certificate in Monitoring and Evaluation from the University of Zambia. Ms Phiri is currently working for the Cotton Association of Zambia as a Monitoring and evaluation officer also doubling up with the Gender and Business Development activities where she works with various women empowerment programs with a focus on value addition in cotton. Ms. Phiri has been working in the cotton industry for close to three years now. She enjoys working with women and youths which gives her great joy and a feeling of satisfaction.

Tell us the story of your professional journey; the challenges that you faced as a woman and if you resolved them, how did you do it.

I am a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer working for the Cotton Association of Zambia. I am also in charge of the business development of the association where I focus on working with rural women in cotton to add value to their cotton through weaving and spinning. The major challenges that I have faced so far working with rural farmers is having to address elderly people and offer lessons to them. The main challenge to be honest was with me thinking that they won't respect me, because I was a woman, and in most cases younger than them. But the more I interacted with them the more I gained confidence and with time I was able to address them properly and without fear.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments .

Working with women in rural areas and helping them form groups of weaving and spinning that help increase their income brings me great joy. My biggest accomplishment in this sector so far has been linking these women groups to financial institutions that have helped in terms of financial inclusion where these women now own bank accounts. Some women even own businesses of mini-booths operations/mobile money and they are able to bring these services offered by the bank closer to the community members.

Do you have any role models, and how did they inspire you?

My role model, I can say, was my boss the late Mr Joseph Nkole who inspired me through his vast knowledge of the cotton industry. His vision for the industry gave us hope for a prosperous cotton sector in Zambia. It is my desire to get to know the industry as much as he did and be able to explore the various value chains and continue his vision in creation a successful textile industry in Zambia.

What advice would you give to other women who are beginning their careers in cotton?

I would like to advise all women joining the sector to come in with an open mind — one that is ready to explore the various value chains in cotton, as the cotton industry is a very vast industry, in which we as women have a special role to play to be successful and stand out.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, I am part of the management team and I also take the lead in organising women activities which gives me an upper hand in influencing what we can do better in terms of women in the sector.

How have you personally contributed to setting the gender imbalance right in your sector?

I advocate for equal participation of women in all activities and when organising trainings and workshops I make sure 50% or more of the invited guest are women.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women in cotton?

I would like to continue educating women on their rights. I will strive to increase their literacy levels in rural areas by connecting them to institutions that offer services of adult literacy. I believe the high illiteracy levels also contribute to the low participation of women in many activities as they feel as if they're inferior to men.

Five tips to support women at your workplace

1. Upgrade skills
2. Capacity-building in leadership and managerial skills
3. Appointing women to higher positions that are now occupied mostly by men
4. Creating support groups where most women can voice their feelings and concerns
5. Better wages and salaries

How did COVID-19 affect women at work and what can be done to effectively mitigate the impacts of the pandemic

I noticed that most women from my workplace worked better virtually. For example, when giving presentations, many proved to be more confident on virtual platforms and I believe this improved their confidence levels. More and more women explored different avenues and reached their potential. This basically meant that some women may have been feeling

intimidated at places of work and would rather act reserved and shy. Creating a more conducive environment can bring out the potential in women.

What does the future for women in your sector look like?

The future of women in textile and cotton is actually very bright, with many job opportunities and higher positions to be occupied by women. In Zambia specifically, the textile industry has potential but it would really need huge investments that will lead to the opening of textile mills. The future of women in cotton and textiles will also be linked with the growth of the textile industry.

What steps do you suggest remedying gender discrimination?

- Encourage and increase girl child education
- Build more schools
- Increase support programmes for women and
- Increase women empowerment programmes.
- How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers?

The industry needs to invest on skills development in value addition. The cotton value chain is long and has immense potential to create more jobs for women. In Zambia specifically, there is a need to revive the textile industry as it was in the past and grow it further.

What can an international organisation do to recognise and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

International organisations are working to reduce the gender gaps. They can strengthen their gender-sensitisation programmes, empower women in different skills, promote girl/child education and adult literacy especially targeted for women.



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