



TARGET
GENDER
EQUALITY



Target Gender Equality – When She Leads

“Stop second guessing yourself, stop wondering what if you sink, ask yourself, what if you swim?
Take chances.”



Quick facts: Sharon Thuku – CEO - Ends International Company Limited – Kenya

We have 10 years to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. What are you doing to champion the Global Goals in your business?

Ends International Company Limited committed to develop the capacity of women in the building and construction industry by equipping them with the necessary technical skills to enhance their chances of competing in this male dominated industry. We have committed to annually train at least five women in the high-demand field of skilled painters, plumbers and joiners - trades that are generally perceived as a domain for men.

In this regard, we have already established an implementation framework and identified other industry players who we have approached for collaborative support to achieve our goals. To start with, we are already in talks with a leading paint manufacturer in Kenya who has agreed to provide formal short courses for the painters. Also, nine construction companies - five of them being women-led - have already signed up to absorb the women into their companies to ensure sustainability of the process.

Based on the current market rates, skilled labour earns \$15-\$20 daily, and therefore, once employed, the women will be able to meet the most basic needs of their immediate families by providing three meals a day. In addition, we shall organize and encourage them to start a joint saving and loan association which can assist them to start other small businesses to improve their income which will meet other family needs like shelter and education for their children and other extended family members.

What motivates you to keep fighting for the issues you care about?

I grew up in an environment where my parents treated all of us (girls and boys) the same way, and we were all given unconditional support and access to the same opportunities. Therefore, for a long time I did not know what gender bias was. When I started a business, while at university, as I interacted with various stakeholders in the construction industry, it dawned on me that being a woman in this male dominated industry was an issue.

In February 2018, my company participated in a competitive bid for the construction of various water works projects that was being sponsored and funded by an American Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and being supervised by a private implementing agency. In the course of executing the project, we faced what I assumed were normal industry challenges of delayed approval of funds by our bank and unexpected site conditions that lead to variations in quantities and the contract price.

Much to my disappointment, in addition to the normal problems, I experienced a serious problem of being belittled to the extent that at one time I was asked, in writing, to clarify my position in Ends International Company Limited, and if I was authorized to act on behalf of the company despite the fact that I am the one who had signed the contract in my capacity as a company director. All this was because they saw me as a young woman and not as a contractor. Occasionally, my payments for work done would be delayed unnecessarily to put pressure on me to part with something.



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Three months into the contract, I was so frustrated that I sought comfort and advice from my father who is also a contractor, and another friend and mentor, who incidentally happens to be the Chairman of the Joint Building Construction Council in Kenya. After they both saw the unprofessional manner in which the contract was being managed, we discussed and agreed that it was best for my father to complete the pending twenty percent, or so, of the contract works.

After completion and handover of the project to the end user, I decided to take up the matter with the NGO and I am grateful that they gave me an audience in February 2019. I shared my experience not because I wanted compensation for losses incurred due to delayed approvals for variations and payments, but to raise awareness on the need to have them put in place policies to support and protect other women who come after me, and who may not be lucky as I was to have a father and a friend to fall back to. After that experience, I could have easily given up and considered changing my line of business were it not for my strong support system.

The existing need to treat women professionally and not discriminate them on account of their gender or age is what motivates me to keep fighting for gender equality.

Can you share one obstacle that you had to overcome to achieve a successful career in business?

Access to **affordable** funding (working capital) was my greatest obstacle especially when starting out and security was needed as collateral. I was fortunate enough to have my father come on board as a director in the company to facilitate funding in the company, share his experience which provides insight during decision making as well as provide collateral to financial institutions when need arises.

As we continue to have conversations around gender equality, it is important that we also bring attention to cultural barriers that hinder women from achieving their potential.

Can you share one barrier to women's economic empowerment that you think is overlooked or not adequately prioritized? In your opinion, what needs to happen to accelerate the pace of change?

Women striving to balance between being a career woman and mother/wife.

In my opinion, we need to have more honest and raw conversations around sharing experiences with women who have made it despite the barriers faced, not just on how they succeeded but their pains, how they addressed discrimination faced in their fields (if any) and enlighten other women on how they overcame their adversities.

What is one piece of advice you would like to share with fellow women that are aiming to shatter the glass ceiling in the business world?

Most Women are naturally predestined to swim in shallow waters where it feels safe because growing up baby girls are seen as fragile, whereas baby boys are allowed to fall down and pick themselves up. This has made the boy child (men) grow up believing the fallacy that they are "stronger" and superior than women. Given an equal opportunity, what men can do, women can also do, and perhaps better! Try to find, and surround yourself, with a support system of men and women who can help you to bring out your best.

What is one piece of advice that you would like to share with male leaders?

You have a responsibility to mentor, coach and support women to enable them to realize their full potential in building their nations.