SOBA

SIERRA LEONE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUSINESS ACTION

SOBA Women's Economic Empowerment Insights:

Lion Mountains – Employing Women and Preventing Intimate Partner Violence as a Matter of Business

Adam Smith
International

Acknowledgements

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SOBA Background

Sierra Leone Opportunities for Business Action (SOBA) is a private sector development programme that uses a market systems approach to facilitate pro-poor economic growth in Sierra Leone. The programme collaborates with private sector businesses in three primary areas: (1) agriculture, (2) renewable energy, (3) professional services and entrepreneurship markets, to trial and to scale innovative and inclusive business practices that reduce poverty and improve economic opportunities for poor women and men.

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1. Background

SOBA's partnership with Lion Mountains

Within its support to Sierra Leone's agricultural sector, SOBA is working to strengthen the local rice market, bolstering rice production, processing and sales to outcompete imported rice that is not necessarily cheaper and can be poorer in quality.

Lion Mountains, a rice processor based in Bo, the country's second largest city, has set up a local resale network and marketing initiative with SOBA support. As part of this, Lion Mountains has built 20 branded kiosks to date (co-financed with SOBA) and has hired an exclusively female sales agent team to staff the kiosks. Lion Mountains plans to continue to grow its kiosk sales network.

The SOBA team and Lion Mountains became concerned that some kiosk saleswomen were experiencing problems with their husbands arising from their transition into formal employment shortly after the women first started their new jobs. These tensions put Lion Mountains' workforce at personal risk. In doing so, they also hindered salesforce performance. To rectify this, SOBA and Lion Mountains devised four recommended actions (for more details see Annex B):

1. Professional support to employees who are victims of domestic violence;
2. Prevent family tensions and problems by involving husbands in inductions and training for new and existing sales agents;
3. Bolster workforce safety and performance through regular team meetings between management and sales agents to discuss both sales strategies as well as to foster workplace support structures that might help to address concerns as a group rather than individually;
4. Facilitate workers to help each other through 'informal' regular meeting between female employees, without management.

Due to the upcoming close of the SOBA programme, Lion Mountains was provided with these recommendations and supported to kick start activities, with a focus on inductions and linking Lion Mountains with a local violence prevention NGO. Early monitoring was undertaken to make adjustments but also to support early learning for Lion Mountains as well as other companies that may be interested in replicating the approach on their own.

At the time of writing, Lion Mountains in collaboration with SOBA scheduled additional training for the sales agents, many of whom are illiterate, in basic bookkeeping and personal finances. Lion Mountains also planned to facilitate the saleswomen's access to widely available group-based savings initiatives (such as 'Osusu').

Case study purpose and methodology

This case study is part of SOBA's commitment to document key lessons learnt from its interventions as the programme comes to an end in August 2017. The case study is addressed to market systems and Women's Economic Empowerment practitioners and sets out to test three hypotheses:

1. Formalising women's roles through decent work brings immediate benefits to the women themselves and their families and has the potential to realise empowerment outcomes;
2. Companies have a commercial interest to invest in strategies to minimise the risk that their employees will become victims and perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV);
3. 3. Gender-responsive business practices are positively affecting the bottom line of commercial rice firms in Sierra Leone, such as Lion Mountains, and can thus act as examples for other players in the sector;

SOBA, with support from Lion Mountains, has undertaken small-scale operational research (see Annex A for a detailed methodology) with the objective to gather evidence to support or to reject the hypothesis outlined above. Data collection employed qualitative and quantitative methods andwas undertaken in two stages:

1. To inform SOBA support to Lion Mountains in designing tailor-made strategies to respond to the challenges posed by IPV with the objective to retain and to improve performance for female sales agents (March 2017); and,

2. To assess initiatives undertaken in order to understand which aspects of those support strategies lend themselves to scale-up (July 2017), to document them and to distribute them to other firms in Sierra Leone before the close of SOBA (August 2017) with the ultimate aim of fostering replication of those strategies that proved successful.

The remainder of the case study is structured as follows: Findings are summarised in the following sections and include insights from both stages of data collection. Take-aways present learning for private sector and WEE practitioners, both at a very practical level and at a conceptual level. The concluding section reflects on the three hypotheses.

2. Finding

Reaping the benefits of formal employment

Many women working at Lion Mountains were previously working as market women, selling fruit and vegetables with fluctuating income which usually dropped considerably during the rainy season. At Lion Mountains, after completing a three month probation period, they would earn a regular monthly income at minimum wage (SLL500,000, equivalent of USD65) and receive statutory benefits including transport allowance and medical insurance (SSL629,000, valued at US$82). In addition to receiving a regular and predictable income, women now work in sheltered kiosks with dorm areas and have regular working hours. Some women had been working as petty traders before, but for some it's the first time in their lives that they are undertaking paid employment outside their home.

The women's income is not only regular and predictable, but everyone agreed that it has also increased. This income is most often spent on food, children's school fees or the family's medical needs. "Nobody goes to bed hungry anymore," one woman says. Others proudly point out that they are now able to dress better and take care of their extended families rather than ask for financial support. Following the employment of the wife, one family now has an agreement to send money to the wife's family one month and the husband's family the next month. As a result, even extended family members now have indirect access to more regular income. Many women report they are able to save through group-based savings initiatives (mostly 'Osusu')—a first for many of the women.

This specific case is in line with international evidence which shows that women who earn and to some extent control their earnings invest a larger share of their income on children's health and education.[1] From a macro-economic perspective laying the ground-work for the future generation's well-being and productive potential matters; on a local level this could further Lion Mountains' reputation as business invested in the local community.

Employing women: conforming to existing gendered roles smart or business strategy? Perhaps both.

The reasons why Lion Mountains employs women in their kiosks and for certain positions in their factory are complex. Women were selected for certain positions within the company based on social norms around what is seen as appropriate and suitable work for women. In the factory, particular tasks such as rice winnowing and packaging are associated closely with women's work and are undertaken by female staff.

The decision to staff the new kiosks exclusively with women was similarly influenced by culturally determined ideas about sales being a female job:

[1]World Bank (2011). 2012 World Development Report. Gender Equality and Development. Washington. D.C.

"Women are more likely to attract business," said the husband of one of the women running a kiosk.

"In Sierra Leone people don't want to be served by a man and men don't want to serve (in shops)" said one of the male employers.

While gendered assumptions of what kind of work is appropriate for men and women can contribute to women taking on lower value roles in supply chains or contribute to a pay gap in this case it was an entry point for women with no education to access regular employment.

Furthermore, there is now recognition of the qualities that women bring to the tasks across Lion Mountains. For some the notion that employing women is an important ingredient for building a vibrant and reliable workforce is not new. Having worked in agriculture across Africa for over 40 years, Lion Mountains' Managing Director is convinced women workers are more reliable and trustworthy. For others in the organisation, the demonstration effect of seeing these women work has played an important role. For example, having seen the performance of female employees, the local Operations Manager now also recognises the commitment of female workers to their jobs and the contribution they make to the business.

Intra-household dynamics and the importance of 'respect'

Most women employed by Lion Mountains are the main income earners in their households. Husbands are either deceased or sick, as in the cases of most factory workers, or are unemployed or receive irregular income, as in many cases of the women staffing the kiosks. Individual experience varies considerably depending on the women's family status.

Given the study's focus on preventing harm, much of which occurs through IPV, the focus of this section is on women with living husbands and the power dynamics within their marriage rather than on influence of extended family members.

If married, the wife's income is commonly handed over to the husband with varying influence from the wife's side on how her income is being spent. Some women and husbands reported discussing and agreeing expenditure, while others have little say over household spending decisions (and would hand over a closed envelope). The latter is in line with existing country-wide data, according to which only 42 percent of women in Sierra Leone report that it's mainly them who decides how their cash earnings are used.[2]

How much women earn determines to what extent women's work is seen as a possible threat to the husband's role as provider and family head. Husbands of women not yet on permanent contracts considered the income very much as pocket money for the women (even if this money contributed to family welfare) and were not aware of the exact amounts. Some husbands indicated that problems are likely to arise if the wife's income would increase in the future. One key informant said that husbands would be *"ashamed"* if women earned more than them. The obvious solution for some husbands was to retract the agreement for their wives to work – which in their view would automatically translate into a termination of the women's employment.

Most women would not openly question the socially prescribed role of the husband as household head and main decision-maker – regardless of their de facto contribution to family expenditures. Furthermore, it is the women's responsibility to ensure that the reality of the household's economic situation does not publicly undermine the husband's position. In one case the wife's income was central to helping her husband to keep face and be recognised for his contribution[3]:

"Thanks to the help of my wife's income we could provide rice to my family for Christmas. I will always pray for her." (Husband of a kiosk rice seller).

Box 1: Defining respect in men's words

"You [husband] should have final say."

"She can't make decisions behind your back."

"She should only have arguments with the neighbours once this has been approved by the husband."

"It's disrespectful if you don't know when your husband is hungry."

On the other hand, tensions within the family were commonly explained by the woman's failure to accept the status quo which includes her own inferior status within the family hierarchy. Respect was a much discussed theme related to this. Box 1 provides some examples and definitions of the term given by men. For many, respect is less the admiration or regard for the rights of their wives but an expression of their subordination. A 'good wife' would respect her husband and failure to do so could justify consequences.

2 Sierra Leone. Demographic and Health Survey 2013.

3 The notion of being publicly recognised was also a finding on social norms research undertaken within the SOBA programme: Markel, E. et al (2016). Policy Brief: The Social Norms Factor. How gendered social norms influence how we empower women in market systems development.

Paid employment and violence against women and girls: risk and opportunity

While in a couple of cases tensions between the married couple were reported by the women or the company, it was one case that acted as powerful demonstration of the complex interplay between paid work and domestic violence (see Box 2 for some a brief summary of international evidence) while at the same time convincingly demonstrating that IPV is not simply a private matter.

A woman (let's call her Aminata) has been working at Lion Mountains for around nine months, first at the factory and later selling rice in one of the newly established kiosks. Although her husband was the one who looked for a job at the factory for his wife in the first place, he grew increasingly anxious about his wife's interaction with costumers (in particular men) when she started working at the kiosk. He tried to monitor his wife through checking the call list on her company mobile phone and paying her frequent visits at the kiosk. Aminata's husband asked her to quit the job but she refused, enjoying her new found economic emancipation. Finally, he demanded that the Lion Mountains' Operations Manager terminate his wife's employment. He also threatened to physically damage the kiosk where his wife works.

While physical violence by her much older husband has been a constant in Aminata's life for many years, it had become considerably worse as a reaction to her economic activity. Nevertheless, Aminata wants to continue working for Lion Mountains; according to her the financial independence means "I do not need to beg anyone for anything anymore." When talking about her work, Aminata for the first time during the interview lifts her head and smiles. Being Lion Mountains' top rice seller is clearly boosting her confidence.

Customary to dissolving a marriage in Sierra Leone, Aminata's husband returned her and the children to her father's house. Thanks to her own income she is not required to return to her husband (something she clearly does not want to do) as it provides her and her children with sufficient financial independence, despite others (including her husband's employer) trying to put pressure on her to "forgive" him and take him back. Interestingly, the power dynamics have subtly shifted through this process: while Aminata would have been unable to make the decision to leave her husband's house, it is now she who can decide to go back or not.

Box 2: Global evidence: A complex relationship between economic empowerment IPV

It is a common perception that women's economic empowerment reduces the risk of IPV. Women are able to leave violent relationships and increasing income can reduce the need to marry off female children at a very young age. On the other side, women's participation in economic opportunities threatens to change long-established power dynamics within families and can result in increased gender-based violence. Existing evidence therefore points to a more complex relationship between female employment status and violence which is highly dependent on context, including the family context for the woman or girl; social norms in her community that dictate whether and how women should work and her partner's economic situation.

Source: Taylor, G. et al (2015). Addressing VAWG through DFID's economic development and women's economic empowerment programmes. Part A & B.

Another serious case of IPV has seen a male Lion Mountains employee jailed recently. The employee has subsequently contacted Lion Mountains' Operations Manager to ask him to put up bail for him, something the company has refused to do.

This second case has shown that the business is not just affected by employees who are victims of violence but also employees who are themselves perpetrators of domestic violence. Staff absenteeism, reduced sales turn-over and general disruption associated with a domestic violence affect workers as well as management at Lion Mountains.

Conversations with male employees and husbands highlighted that these two cases, while cases of extreme violence, are unlikely to be isolated incidents. Gender-based violence is a common feature of relationship between couples—"a last word" to silence arguments as one male FGD participant put it—and tensions between husbands and wives are likely to increase as the rice sellers move to permanent contracts with higher incomes. Box 3 attempts to provide a brief overview over the norms governing gender-based violence in Bo.Box 3:

Norms governing domestic violence in Bo.

Conversations with men and women as part of this research have shown that many relationships are characterised by violence (DHS data from 2013 reports that 53.9% of women in Bo have experienced physical violence since age 15). Both men and women are ready to escalate arguments; slapping on both sides is a frequent sign of disagreements gone sour. However, violence against women frequently takes on another dimension as it is closely linked to women's subordinate status in the intra-family power hierarchy.

Men distinguish between violence that is justified (or deserved) and violence that is not. The latter is either excessive violence ("You should not beat your wife to a pulp." But "A slap or two will calm her down.") or without clear justification. Reasons that justify violence from the husband include a lack of respect, undermining the man's power (e.g. confronting the husband when he was caught cheating in public was seen as inappropriate and justified a violent reaction) or insulting the husband's family. Violence from the woman's side similarly needs to be answered with violence.

In many cases violence was a considered response and several respondents outlined a common scenario where the women had done something wrong and the husband would speak to her. If this did not bring the desired results, the husband would speak to the family or to the employer. If this again did not lead to a change in the wife's behaviour, violence was the logical next step. Not following this step-by-step escalation, for example by straight away resorting to violence, would decrease the chances of a successful marriage according to many men.

IPV and its costs to the business

Lion Mountains' management has found themselves playing an active role in resolving tensions throughout this conflict. Thanks to a trusted relationship between employees and the Operations Manager, the latter became aware of what is often seen as a private matter and has intervened by discussing with Aminata as well as her husband. Lion Mountains has also given her time off to "sort things out". At the same time, the husband has actively sought mediation from the Lion Mountains' Operations Manager by visiting the factory repeatedly and on one occasion approaching the Operations Manager at his house and physically threatening him. Most recently, the employer of Aminata's husband has also approached Lion Mountains' Operations Manager to request that he convinces Aminata to return to her husband.

According to the Operations Manager hardly a day goes by when he does not spend time mediating employees' so-called private matters.

A range of costs to Lion Mountains business are tied to incidents of IPV. These include monetary costs in terms of foregone sales (Aminata's kiosk was closed between three and four weeks over 2017 and no rice was sold during that time). Additionally, hard-to-measure non-monetary costs, such as psychological effects when dealing with colleagues' experiences of violence on a regular basis as well as distraction from the core job, also affect performance and sales.

Providing counselling support to employees in IPV cases, even if they have a direct effect on the business, is outside the remit of Lion Mountains. However, the reality of a small company like Lion Mountains is likely to see this counselling practice continue. As the Operations Manager pointed out:

"Gender issues have become part of my job description."

Division of labour and time management

Other tensions that are frequently reported in response to women's engagement in the labour market are those around care and housework. Social norms in Sierra Leone[4], as in many other contexts, firmly place care and household responsibilities with the woman—regardless of whether the woman or the man provides the majority of the household income. Women are acutely aware of this and will work hard to fit housework, shopping and care work around their working hours at Lion Mountains (helped by the kiosk's small dorms at the back which allows children to stay with their mother).

Women typically get up at five in the morning to do laundry and prepare food before they leave for work at Lion Mountains. After work, many go to the market and prepare a meal for the family.

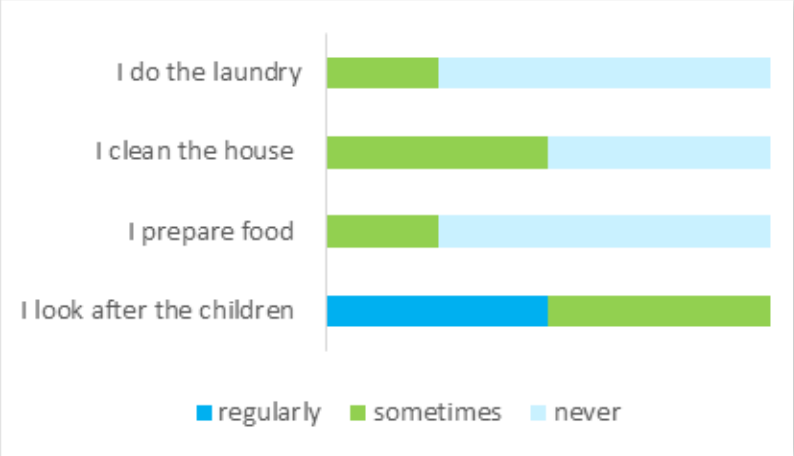
One kiosk seller reports that this means that the evening meal happens later than usual and sometimes children are already asleep by the time the food is ready. Some report they do laundry again in the evening.

It is widely reported that, children, relatives or so-called men-piken (poor children that come to live with families, often from rural areas, sometimes but not necessarily related to work for basic food and lodging) support the family with housework and childcare. Some husbands are looking after the children and reportedly started helping with some house chores, like cleaning or shopping. Social norms around unpaid care distinguish between tasks that are relatively accepted activities for men (looking after children) and others that are rarely performed by men (e.g. laundry). Quantitative data from the husbands attending the induction[5] (see Figure 1) support those findings from the qualitative data.

[4] Markel, E. et al (2016).

[5] Given the small sample and a likely selection bias (men married to women where both partners agreed for the man to attend the induction) this is not representative but more an indication of preference for one household chore over the other.

Figure 1 – Unpaid care activities undertaken by men (self-reported)



Moreover, breaking with those unwritten rules regarding the allocation of unpaid care responsibilities has consequences. Men are commonly reported to pay a higher price for the same goods at the market or are accused by friends "to love their wives too much" if they undertake certain household chores. Accordingly, even if there is a willingness at family level to reorganise some of the gendered division of labour, social norms present a clear barrier.

Engaging men

Data collection during stage 1 of this operational research showed that the intra-family tensions arise partly from husbands' misunderstanding of the nature of work, e.g. client interaction or working hours, and partly from shifting family roles and power relations (as outlined in the previous section on 'Intra-household dynamics'). In response, with SOBA's recommendation, Lion Mountains extended invitations to the rice sellers' induction to their husbands (with the women's consent) and half a dozen did participate. The induction provided an overview of the kiosk sellers' jobs, including the nature of customer interaction, working hours and an introduction to Lion Mountains and its business vision.

While participants appreciated an explanation of what the rice sellers' job entails, what really captured everyone's interest was the presentation by the NGO Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES) which was purposefully combined with the induction to address wider tensions reported around women's work. Providing a brief presentation on women's rights, women's work and gender-based violence participants asked a range of questions during the event and went on to discuss it with other employees or within their families.

The FGDs with male employees and husbands very clearly provided an additional forum for men to talk about issues that are rarely discussed, such as intra-family tensions, masculinity and violence. While undertaken with the primary aim of research (with a clear commitment to stay clear of any advice or counselling) the eagerness to share experiences and discuss with others was striking.

From communication to supporting collective voice

While women at the factory work alongside each other and know each other, women selling in the kiosks are at greater risk of being isolated. Lion Mountains has recognised this from an organisational point of view and, once they have passed their probation period, women receive a mobile phone which allows them to communicate with the factory and the Operations Manager to ensure they have stock and can raise problems. Telephone numbers of key staff are pre-programmed and calls within this network are free of charge.

While some of the rice sellers have reported that they contact other women if they run out of rice, none reported contact beyond logistical matters at the time of the initial situational analysis. Many do not know each other. It is still early days for many of the women employed and the potential isolation of the rice sellers has not been raised by women themselves. However, for the external observer it is clear that having contact with other sales agents could not only contribute to resolving logistical challenges or share successful sales tactics but could provide the opportunity to find a collective voice to raise concerns or suggest improvements to the business. At the same time, groups can be helpful support networks when women deal with tensions at home.

The staff induction has deliberately brought employees, including the rice sellers who rarely come to the factory, together. And there are reports that women started discussing family problems and many offered support to Aminata. Moreover, one further training event on bookkeeping, coupled with advice on personal finances and savings, is scheduled for August and before the SOBA programmes closes.

However, some kiosks are far away from Lion Mountains (one kiosk is about 45 minutes' drive from the factory) and regular meet-ups would involve both direct costs (mainly transport) and opportunity costs (forgone sales while the kiosks are closed) for Lion Mountains. Women confirm they do have contact with the rice sellers closest to their kiosk. However, it's too early to say if the relatively limited face-to-face contact the kiosk sellers had so far is enough to build phone rapport for anything other than logistical matters.

3. Takeaways: Tactics

The following table reviews the four tactics employed with Lion Mountains to address IPV experienced as a result of employment and within the workforce. This information has been shared with Lion Mountains and other, potential second movers. The table also includes a "potential for scale" rating of low, medium and high, by recommended action.

Recommended actions		Learning to date	Potential for scale
1. Professional support to employees who are victims of domestic violence	Offer employees (and husbands) services by vetted local organisations that provide professional counselling services and victim support.	Considerate interest from employees and partners during induction but too early to say if services are taken up. As the manager of a small business (that almost feel like a family business), the Operations Manager continues to be approached by staff for private matters. He will now receive basic counselling training to prepare him better for this part of his job. Difference between Family Support Unit (that has a legal objective) and other services needs to be clear. Fear of legal repercussion may otherwise override willingness to take up counselling service.	Medium—appropriate organizations need to exist locally and be vetted for the quality of their service
2. Prevent family tensions and problems	Involve husbands in inductions and training for new/existing sales agents. Involve Domestic Violence counselling organisations in the induction.	Positive feedback from female employees and husbands. However, both need to agree to attend, which leads to a self-selection with the more supportive partners attending and a possible exclusion of higher risk individuals. Practical considerations of advance warning and timing to fit with men's employment.	High

Recommended actions		Learning to date	Potential for scale
3. Organise sales agents – management communication	Regular meetings (monthly/bi-monthly) between management and sales agents to discuss sales tactics and priorities but also to address concerns as a group rather than individually (which is time-intensive)	No meeting beyond induction has taken place. Given distance of some kiosks this involved transport costs and opportunity costs when kiosks are closed. Explore an approach of clusters of kiosks which are geographically close.	Medium to high—depends on business model and associated costs to bring employees together
4. Facilitate workers to help each other	Add other sales agents' phone numbers to the pre-programmed numbers of the company phones Encourage an 'informal' regular meeting between female employees, without management. Suggest discussion topics, like advice on balancing family and working life.	Telephones have been pre-programmed with numbers but it is too early to tell if support goes beyond logistics of rice supply. No meeting beyond induction has taken place. Women naturally have contact with other women at kiosks close-by.	Medium—depends on location of work (isolation vs interaction)

4. Takeaways: For Practitioners

The following reflects on learning for market systems, WEE and private sector development practitioners with regards to the design and implementation of market systems and private sector development programmes.

Understanding social norms can provide entry points to employ women

To some extent the initial driver of employing women at Lion Mountains was strong occupational gender segregation with clear ideas about which jobs are suitable for women and which for men. One could argue that Lion Mountains simply conformed to existing cultural practices of employing women as sales agents. However, once the company employed women, the management team quickly saw them as reliable, committed and trustworthy workers that are contributing to a vibrant workforce and helping to strengthen the business.

Understanding social norms and using them as an entry point to build a business case for employing women emerged as an opportunity. In other words, social norms are not just a constraint to women's economic empowerment; they can equally act as enabler. Understanding how they affect specific interventions is crucial either way—as is an awareness that norms that are supporting women's economic engagement (the preference for female sales agents) could easily prevent them from growing within current economic structures (such as accessing management positions).

Market systems and private sector development programmes are well-positioned and may be obligated to affect social norms

This case study has shown that IPV in response to women accessing paid employment is a very real risk (and possibly more widespread than one might think). Market systems and private sector development programmes may not only have an opportunity, but an obligation, to address norms accordingly.

These programmes may also be well-positioned to affect change. They typically collaborate with a wide range of private and public partners and where objectives are framed towards systemic change. Though it's a long-term process, companies have the potential to affect social norms through employing female employees (and providing role models for communities) and engaging male employees and husbands on women's work, IPV and unpaid care. Reinforcing progressive practices through business associations or the media could have considerable influence on public opinion and norms widely.

Business arguments for gender-sensitive employment practices need contextual evidence

Much of the evidence of how diverse workforces contribute to a business' bottom line comes from Western Europe or North America (with the exception of a recent IFC publication[6]) or uses aggregated data (such as the much quoted notion that gender equality could add $12 trillion to global growth[7]). This evidence is of little relevance for businesses like Lion Mountains, where contextually relevant data speaks loudest. A stronger, local evidence base is more likely to garner support and action from second movers.

6 IFC (2017). Investing in Women: New Evidence for the Business Case.

7 Woetzel, L. et al (2015). How advancing women's equality can add $12 trillion to global growth. McKinsey Global Institute.

This case has, however, shown that women are well suited for sales positions in Sierra Leone. The demonstration effect of increased female employment as a smart business strategy at Lion Mountains can be a significant first step to foster female access to decent work in the context of Sierra Leone.The increased visibility of female workers within local communities combined with the spread of information about their qualities as workers among businesses (for example through existing business associations) could lead to increased female employment.

Violence is a business matter. Prevention strategies need to be integrated into existing company procedures

Violence at the workplace, such as harassment, is getting increasing international attention as investors start to look at the social impact of their work and consumers start to demand information on value chains. Many, however, perceive domestic violence removed once step further from the workplace (compared to e.g. (sexual) harassment at the workplace); it is rarely seen as core business matter. This case study is a powerful demonstration that IPV does not only come at enormous personal costs but has very direct economic implications for individual businesses. Opportunity costs associated with IPV limit revenue – these include decreased sales, increased staff turn-over (as in the second case of IPV involving the male employee as perpetrator), and large outlays of management time to support employees which distracts staff from their core responsibilities. The latter is considerable given it is a widely accepted practice at Lion Mountains to bring a range of private problems to the Operations Manager who is seen as an experienced mediator and person of trust.

While this study was able to provide some quantitative data on how IPV affected sales, quantifying the costs of domestic violence to the business including staff time was not possible with this ex-post design[8]. Qualitative data, however, alluded to the time commitment of management, as well as the non-monitory costs in terms of emotional effects by being threatened and needing to deal with serious cases of IPV on a regular basis.

Evidence from elsewhere shows that lost staff time, counselling, medical costs and recruitment can make up to 45 percent of a business' salary bill in high prevalence environments[9]. What this number does not include is the costs to business of the impacts on perpetrators of violence in terms of presentism and absenteeism. Given more than half of women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence committed by their husband or partner in Sierra Leone[10], the risk of domestic violence affecting businesses is far more common than most realise, reinforcing the notion that the (potential) costs to the private sector are real and prevention pays off.

However, any support needs to be integrated into core business processes (in particular for small businesses). Engaging a domestic violence counselling service to present at the staff induction has reduced cost for the business and created considerable interest from male and female staff, as well as their spouses.

[8] It was decided that recall data months after the event would not provide reliable quantitative data to calculate the costs in terms of management time.

[9] See case study undertaken by ODI in Papua New Guinea, summary here: https://www.odi.org/comment/10307-make-business-case-end-gender-based-violence

[10] Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2013. https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR297/FR297.pdf

Empowerment—quick results or a slow journey?

While many of the women have been in paid employment for a short period of time there are emerging insights into the potential to empower women with little or no education through decent work. Aspects of decent work[11] matter in real terms (the predictability of income) but also in how women doing those jobs are viewed by others (working regular hours in a kiosk) which in turn affects their self-esteem and confidence.

Women accessing and controlling the income they earn is a commonly discussed subject among academics and development practitioners concerned with women's economic empowerment. While earning regular income seems to have made a real and immediate difference to the women most are not necessarily able to control its use; in fact, some women reported handing it straight over to their husbands. Many conceptualisations would therefore not classify those women as empowered and make the case that empowerment is a slow journey, with possible throw-backs on the way.

The question is, if women themselves perceive the limited control of their income as much as a constraint as the theories around voice and agency would suggest? Conversations with women highlighted the importance of some of the immediate effects of their employment, such as financial security (not needing to ask for financial support from extended family members), respect (paid by others in the community) and dignity (being able to dress better). While Aminata clearly displayed a certain control over the decision to stay away from her husband, it is unclear if others see enough benefit in changing their interaction with their partners to justify some of the potential negative consequences. For development practitioners this means listening carefully to women's concerns and supporting them in achieving contextually appropriate forms of empowerment rather than to pre-define what empowerment should look like.

[11] According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), decent work "involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men."

5. Conclusions

This case study on Women's Economic Empowerment outcomes for female rice sellers in Bo tested three hypotheses:

1. Formalising women's roles through decent work brings immediate benefits to the women themselves and their families and has the potential to realise empowerment outcomes.

While it is still early days for many of Lion Mountains' female kiosk sellers, access to decent employment has brought immediate benefits to the women themselves and their families. In addition to monetary consideration of increased, regular and thus predictable income, many women also report how becoming an employee has positively affected their confidence and self-esteem. It is far less certain to what extent these effects have translated into increased decision-making power in relation with their husband in the short run. Those women who are reported to have a large extent of autonomy over the use of their salary are still on probation and husbands are largely viewing this as pocket money. There are significant risks of increasing household tensions once the women are moved on permanent contracts with greater pay and want to retain some say over the control of their income.

2. Companies have a commercial interest to invest in strategies to minimise the risk that their employees will become victims and perpetrators of IPV.

IPV has created substantial economic costs for Lion Mountains. While the ex-post design of the study did not allow for quantifying costs, employees as victims and perpetrators of violence have an everyday impact on management time and effort, foregone sales and staff turn-over. Rarely a week passes where the Operations Manager or the Logistics Manager (who delivers rice to the kiosks) do not deal with so-called private matters of their employees. In this sense it is not only economic costs but a psychological burden distracting management from core business tasks. Future studies should consider applying real-time diaries and timesheets by management to provide a more accurate estimate of staff time to build an even stronger business case for estimating the cost of IPV to private business.

3. Gender-responsive business practices are positively affecting the bottom line of commercial rice firms in Sierra Leone, such as Lion Mountains, and can thus act as examples for other players in the sector.

Lion Mountains is currently struggling to meet customer demand for its rice and sources supply from other areas of the country. Employing women as sales agents for its newly established kiosks was part of Lion Mountains' business strategy from the start and the company has never employed male sales agents. This means we cannot isolate the attribution of employing women for the company's business success. There is, however, little doubt that the women are the outward looking face of the Lion Mountains kiosks. "*They attract business*" as one man summarised it. Moreover, given women do most of the shopping in Bo, female sales staff will offer strong recommendations for attractive resale options as well as new strategies for reaching their peers as the kiosks are expanding the products.

In order to meet SOBA's ambition to scale best practices from lead firms to markets at large, the management of Lion Mountains will also be encouraged to present their business case for employing women and some learnings regarding the consequences of IPV using the Commercial Agricultural Producers & Processors Association (CAPPA), a local industry body, as the forum. The table within the Takeaways section summarizes immediate learning on the recommended actions. Ideally, the example of Lion Mountains will showcase best practice to others. With SOBA closing, support to facilitate replication for 'second movers' – who often require as much or more support than 'first movers' – may not be available elsewhere.

Annex A: Methodology and ethics

Research methods, tools and sampling

This operational research was undertaken through small-scale qualitative research that took place during one week in March 2017 (Stage 1):

- Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Lion Mountains staff and SOBA intervention teams;
- 1 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was undertaken with all 8 women working in rice processing in the factory;
- Individual interviews were undertaken with 4 out of the total 11 female rice sellers;
- 2 interviews with husbands were undertaken after seeking prior consent with selected rice sellers;
- Research team included male and female researchers, the SOBA Intervention Lead and an international. Women's Economic Empowerment Advisor; close support and supervision was provided by the SOBA project manager and SOBA Portfolio Lead;

Follow-up research was undertaken in June/July 2017 to undertake a light-touch assessment of the recommended actions (Stage 2):

- A short quantitative survey was undertaken with husbands who participated in the induction which was partly delivered before the induction and partly after the induction;
- Individual interviews with 10 female rice sellers;
- Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Lion Mountains staff and SOBA intervention teams;
- 2 FGDs were undertaken with husbands of rice sellers and male employees;

Analysis

- International theories, evidence on WEE, prior research undertaken under SOBA and knowledge of the intervention informed the FGD and KII guidelines;
- Preliminary 'in-field' analysis was undertaken during a daily debrief using the research questions;
- Final analysis was undertaken linking preliminary analysis back to research objectives and the hypotheses;

Ethics

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, specific attention was put in place to ensure a strict adherence to ethics in researching VAWG in line with international best practice[12]:

- Separate FGDs/KIIs were undertaken with male and female respondents, led by male and female Sierra Leonean researchers respectively;
- Training was delivered to research team on researching VAWG with a specific focus on ethics;
- Informed consent of FGD participants and key informants was obtained;
- Safe interviewing environment was ensured where conversations could not be overheard;
- Information on referral services was available if women wanted to access support services but this was not requested;
- Regular team de-briefs were undertaken where team members were given the chance to share concerns and discuss distress;

[12]WHO (2001). Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women; Jewkes, R. et al (2000). Ethical and Methodological Issues in Conducting Research on Gender-Based Violence in Southern Africa. In: Reproductive Health Matters 8 (15): 93-10.

Methodological Reflection

- While during Stage 1 more interviews with husbands/partners of the rice sellers would have enriched the information, this could in some cases pose considerate risk to the women and interviews were limited to two husbands who were purposefully selected where no tensions were reported and wives gave consent for those interviews to take place;
- During Stage 2 the FGD with husbands only included those husbands who were also at the induction. While this poses issues of selection bias, minimising risks to the female rice sellers was prioritized.
- In line with previous learning, interviews were neither recorded nor transcribed and the analysis was partly done 'in the field'. This encouraged reflection within the research team and sped up the final write-up while direct quotes were recorded (and translated) directly after the interviews.

Annex B: Recommended actions provided to Lion Mountains

Four simple actions to improve female workforce performance

1.

Professional support to employees who are victims of domestic violence

Recommendations
- Link employees (and husbands) to local organisations that provide professional counselling services and victim support (if employees wan this).

Actions
- Create a directory of family services in Bo.
- Post the directory in the office so that services can be reached when needed.

2.

Prevent family tensions and problems

Recommendations
- Involve husbands in inductions and training for new/existing sales agents.

Actions
- Create an on boarding process that includes training with husbands to explain the job and to answer questions.

3.

Organisational sales agents – management communication

Recommendations
- Regular, monthly meetings between management and sales agents to discuss sales strategy but also address concerns as a group, rather than individually (which is time-sensitive).

Actions
- Schedule sales agent management meetings.
- Periodically invite professional support services to explain their services.

4.

Facilitate workers to help each other

Recommendations
- Encourage 'informal' regular communication between employees, without management. Suggest discussion topics, like advice on balancing family and working life

Actions
- Add other sales agents' phone numbers to the pre-programmed numbers of the company phones
- Create space after management meetings for women to engage

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