



## Women Economic Empowerment in Agricultural Trade and Commerce\*

On February 8, Grow Asia, the sustainability development arm of the ASEAN Secretariat and the World Economic Forum met with private sector representatives which included Morination and other multi stakeholders leading to the UN FAO's Asia Pacific Regional Conference. In the consultation, private sector's position and four priority calls to action emerged.

1. Scale up inclusive digitalization in agricultural value chains and support country-level capacity building for knowledge/research development to remove barriers and accelerate smallholder adoption of technology.
2. Amplify the business case for women's economic empowerment, to incentivize investment into gender mainstreaming actions, practices and policies
3. Design market-driven impact pathways that respond to in-country priorities and reach the last mile with scalable business solutions for climate change adaptation and resilience
4. Work with Governments and Businesses to design harmonized approaches for responsible investment in food, agriculture and forestry and develop blended finance models to de-risk and co-fund collaborative investment in smallholder agriculture and inclusive and sustainable food systems

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*\*Morination will be delivering this paper to participants of the Department of Agriculture and the Philippines Partnership for Sustainable Agriculture Women's Summit event on March 25. I was supposed to do this next week but in support of the PSM, I am doing this today.*

In the Business Call to Action for Women Empowerment, these key findings emerged:

### **Women's Economic Empowerment**

**The pandemic has amplified gender inequalities:** due to their predominance in low-income and front-line care roles, women have been disproportionately impacted in the sectors most affected by lockdowns. They bear unequal burden for care work, are disproportionately affected by the impact of climate change, and are unfairly discriminated against when it comes to new economic opportunities.

**Companies operating in agricultural value chains are increasingly committing to empower women in their own workplaces, among their suppliers, their distributors, and within the communities they serve.** They do so because of direct financial benefits, such as positive ROI/revenue generation. For example, companies shared that training female farmer group leaders has improved market penetration by targeting segments of the potential customer base that were otherwise untapped. Supporting gender equality can also lead to increased positive impacts on organizational culture and operations, improved talent attraction and retention, and increased efficiency and productivity. Finally, supporting gender equity can contribute to risk mitigation in the workplace due to better employee engagement, and lower turnover thanks to an improved and more inclusive work environment. In local communities, supporting gender equality can mitigate other risks, such as child labor.

**We need to amplify the business case for women's economic empowerment, to incentivize investment into gender mainstreaming actions, practices, and policies.** This can be done by consolidating and sharing research to demonstrate the benefits of gender mainstreaming in agricultural value chains and engaging partners in the process by asking for data and case study contributions. The consultations would also identify key opportunities relevant for program investment at regional and country levels, e.g. women's access to finance, women's access to technology, etc. An inventory of existing resources that can support private sector partners in developing relevant gender equality policies and strategies and implementing gender-aware programs in agricultural supply chains would also be useful.

These key findings and the experience in Morination's ecosystem present a compelling case for the Private Sector to create and scale an enabling environment for women's economic empowerment in the agricultural sector's areas of fair and sustainable trade and commerce.

**Morination is a social enterprise established in 2014.** Our core mission is to align our small shareholder farmers in the value chain. Included in our mandates is assistance to rural communities towards sustainability projects that will empower them towards self-sufficiency. In partnership with stakeholders in the industry, we are working towards market stabilization of the agroforestry and food security sectors on a long-term basis.

**Women as activators.** 90% of our small shareholder growers are led by women. This includes those in nurseries in Davao. We work with heirloom rice growers from Cotabato's conflict zones. We have moringa growers from Batangas. We engage with multi-crop farmers from Candelaria and Benguet. In this paper, I will highlight enterprises (1) who have supported Morination in UN's initiatives from the supply to the delivery of goods, (2) those who are involved in our Million moringa project, and (3) those who are now assisting us in COVID response initiatives. Our company does not discriminate anyone to work with us on our corporate goals but the enabling environment that we present and the alignment of our values make it possible for us to work well with women that 90% of our ecosystem are composed of women not just in agriculture but those involved in the trade movement of our commodities.

**Ecosystem-based approach.** Morination operates on the A to B model or the agriculture to buyers model, the hybrid of the B2B. This framework has the following elements to function: (1) women-led growers, (2) our company, and (3) our institutional buyers. For these to be effective, our ecosystem needs not only to be functioning but healthy. Like our farms, for it to have a bountiful harvest, this needs to be nurtured, as would the most basic unit of our society- the families. As would our communities. Our values need to be aligned and that the communication lines must be open at all times, especially during the critical phases in the value chain.

Women have opportunities in our ecosystem and play important roles in the agribusiness framework, not just from the labor-intensive, male-dominated farming and production side. We have women partners in our ecosystem in areas of leadership, finance, training, trade, logistics, field operations, audit, and quality control. We needed effective partners who understood our needs and requirements. We needed partners who can help us nurture our ecosystem so that we can be more effective in our deliverables. We see women as our partners and a vital component of our business process. Moreso, we rely on local impact enterprises because their innovation, local know-how, and presence are crucial in activating our value chain. Their expertise makes possible goods, interventions, and solutions that could not be generated by Morination alone.

**Women have a place in our business model and our company.** They easily sync into our business as our growers are forward-thinking and entrepreneurial. They find ways to meet our requirements and do not waste opportunities provided to them. They are lifelong learners while confident with their local knowledge and skills. They work on their farms and enterprises with the end of ensuring that funds will be enough to sustain their families, uplift their quality of life and ensure that these would be enough to reinvest in their farms, businesses and for the next planting cycles. The involvement of women in the economic system has been critical. As mothers they have taken in more leadership roles to craft a future that they want whilst encouraging more women's participation and empowerment in the sphere.

**Fair-trade promotes gender equality & empowerment; provides opportunities for self-determination.** As a company, we are not after transactional relationships of buy and sell but more of transformative partnerships. We are committed to ethical and fair-trade practices where the farmers dictate the prices of their harvests. Moreover, we work with them to grow their trade capabilities either by the direct purchase of their produce, consolidating their crops, and strengthening their organizations. We lend support to their farms by bringing in effective trade practices while respecting their local traditions and expertise. Together, we bring to fruition the requirements of our clients. This synergy works in bringing these back to the communities which makes this a circular economy, regenerates the ecosystem, and makes this framework function. It was the synchronicity of events and the alignment of our values that made us work together for our common goals. The entrepreneurial energy of our organizations moves us forward.

(1) Our first group of women growers is from Davao. 6 years ago, they supplied us for the UN half a million seedlings for the rehabilitation of Yolanda hit communities. From them, we learned how it is to be as mothers for their seedlings and farms as well. Morination is a witness to the love and care our growers have invested in their nurseries with the best possible conditions provided for their seedlings to grow and thrive. As the seedlings are transported and sent to their new homes, the growers bid their farewell. The seedlings carry with them their farmers' aspirations that these living things shall likewise bear fruits and bring good tidings as their mother plants have brought bountiful yields to their communities.

In the years that followed, our women growers assisted us in rebuilding communities through the UN including during the pandemic. Our growers assisted displaced Marawi growers and other communities nationwide with the UN through the supply and delivery of agri goods. Morination supplied and delivered heirloom rice seeds and rice grains to MILF communities and areas in Mindanao, from our Cotabato rice growers who themselves are in conflict zones.

(2) Behind the Million Moringa movement are our women Moringa growers of Batangas. Our women growers have been caring for their moringa trees for 3 generations of women now. These trees are another source of livelihood for them as they support their husbands who fish in Taal lake.

The moringa shares with it our most basic human tenets. Its humility comes to the fore that it grows in many of our backyards and grows silently until the need for it comes about. I speak of its resiliency reflecting our human proclivities as well to survive even in the most difficult conditions. It is resilient that it grows almost anywhere.

It is very resilient reflecting our human proclivities as well to survive even in the most difficult conditions. As a crop, moringa needs little care and grows very fast. It is also drought and calamity-resistant. Despite the El Nino and typhoons, we have been consistently harvesting moringa. When Taal Volcano decimated the agricultural sector surrounding it including the area of our moringa growers, the plants left standing and now thriving are our moringa trees. Two months after the eruption, we purchased 1 million Moringa seeds from our growers for planting.

(3) During the pandemic, when there was a disruption in the value chain, growers were throwing away truckloads of harvests. Our Marketing team through the use of data analytics, trade economics, and business development tools engineered a program to help vulnerable communities even if these growers are in conflict zones or have high incidences of COVID. From our annual marketing budget, we re-aligned this to our COVID fund so we can buy these crops from our women growers of Benguet and

Quezon together with other organizations. Vegetables from women-led associations are freely distributed to around 25,000 families in Metro Manila. These packs have been essential, especially for communities that are in lockdown and their residents cannot leave their houses. Women-led organizations made it possible for Agricultural machinery and 40,000 vegetable seed packs for the communities' livelihood programs in Mindanao for the UNFAO were likewise delivered. Even the delivery of these goods is led by our women partners.

**Moving forward.** We would want to make these model sustainable for our growers as we provide more initiatives with them in mind. Our company is preparing to scale and assist 300,000 more farmers by 2030 including women growers to get involved proactively in the ecosystem, increasing their access to markets by launching our digital source mapping and e-commerce platform, providing them with entrepreneurship training and mentoring to scale. We are involving multi-stakeholders to take on these challenges. Moving forward, we are confident that programs such as gender inclusion, fair trade, access to working capital and markets, digital platforms once scaled would not just help women and their communities, these are essential in meeting the SDGs by 2030. Morination continues to do so as we support PSM's and Grow Asia's initiatives. Moreso, since Morination is in a position to do so as Chair of the People Pillar's MSME Recovery in the Food systems, health systems, and Human Resource Development of the Philippine network of the UN Global Compact

**In closing,** the world's manufacturers are having production and supply chain issues due to the disruption caused by the COVID. Our projects with the United Nations are not impeded because partnerships with women growers are able to pivot our operations towards growth. These women in our ecosystem have been the essential cog in our business model and our ecosystem bringing impact to areas where they are needed in times when they are needed the most.