

Costly mistakes in women-led businesses

SMES

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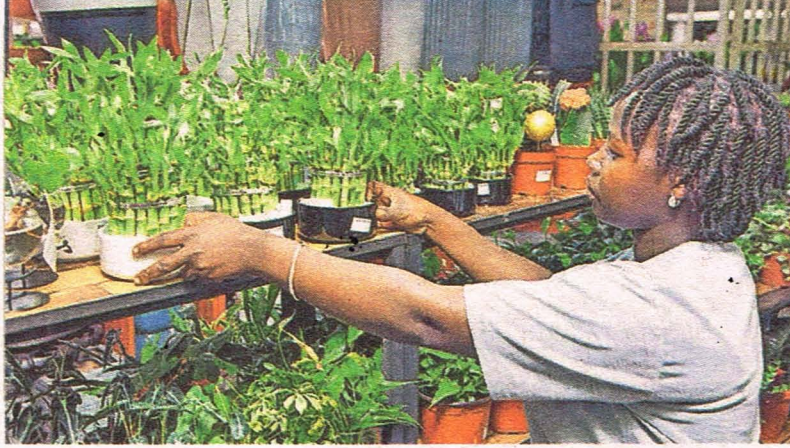
As we commemorate Women's Month, I would like to celebrate the remarkable spirit of the Ugandan woman, so often reflected in her entrepreneurial drive. Beyond traditional roles, she remains a vital pillar of our economy, building businesses that are not only growing but also evolving in dynamic and inspiring ways.

According to the Trade Ministry, women own up to 40 percent of all registered businesses in the country. Some estimates indicate that in the informal sector, women's ownership in micro-enterprises is even higher at 70 percent.

Uganda Bureau of Statistics estimates that women own three out of 10 businesses, which are predominantly micro-enterprises. These women-led Micro, Small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are concentrated in three sectors: wholesale and retail trade (nearly 35 percent), accommodation and food service (about 23 percent), and agriculture, forestry, and fishing (12 percent).

From this year's national Women's Day theme: Scaling up investment to accelerate access to justice for all women and girls in Uganda, women-owned enterprises can thrive with a deliberate approach.

However, women-led MSMEs still lag in product certification, which disad-



Ms Rosemary Mwima, an attendant arranges flowers. Many entrepreneurs lack information about product certification. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

vantages them in the marketplace.

According to the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) records, only about 20 percent of products from women-led enterprises are certified.

There are 12 critical mistakes these enterprises should avoid to strengthen their position in a competitive market.

The first mistake is non-compliance with the relevant product standard requirements. To meet the requirements of Compulsory Uganda Standards, women MSMEs should procure copies of the relevant product standards from UNBS or from the UNBS webstore.

In case of any failures to comprehend the requirements, women MSMEs should consult the UNBS MSME divi-

sion for guidance before applying for product certification.

Inadequate documentation

The second mistake is inadequate documentation. This can be handled by maintaining proper records of production processes. These should include: raw material inspection records, production monitoring record and final product assessment record.

For food processors, other records may include; personal hygiene monitoring records, cleaning schedules records, pest management record, and waste management records.

Mistake three is poor product labelling. Proper labelling is mandatory for

product certification. Before designing their labels, women MSMEs should acquire copies of the relevant product labelling standards from UNBS or from the UNBS webstore for guidance.

Mistake four is poor hygiene during production, which results in product contamination, resulting in products failing laboratory tests. Check with UNBS for proper guidelines to follow for particular standards.

Mistake five is lack of internal product testing capacity. Always conduct regular product testing using UNBS or UNBS-recognised laboratories.

Mistake six is inconsistent quality control. Many women MSMEs fail to establish and maintain quality control mechanisms, leading to inconsistencies in product quality.

To achieve this, document production processes and procedures, understanding the controls involved, and ensuring that they always follow their processes to the dot.

Mistake seven involves non-registration with the relevant authorities. Many women owned MSMEs operate informally and are not registered with relevant authorities, which is a prerequisite for certification. The solution is to register the business formally and comply with regulatory requirements before applying for product certification.

Mistake eight is viewing certification and compliance as a burden and delay or avoid the process entirely. This is because certification and testing fees are

not catered for as part of the production costs for majority of the MSMEs businesses in Uganda. Women MSMEs have a window. They can seek financial support provided via UNBS partnerships and collaboration to facilitate their product certification processes.

Mistake nine is about delays in addressing feedback. When UNBS raises non-compliances during the review of applications or product certification audits, some women-owned MSMEs are slow or fail to address the issues raised adequately, yet the Certification Information Management System has specific set of timelines for different processes. This results in several women MSMEs' applications getting disabled before concluding the product certification process. In case women MSMEs don't understand the feedback by the technical officers, they should consult the UNBS for guidance. This guidance can be accessed in the regional offices in Jinja, Gulu, Mbale, Gulu and Mbarara.

Mistake ten is failure to request for renewal of product certification permits on time. UNBS sends reminders to certified companies to apply for renewal of their permits three months in advance prior to the expiry of the running permit.

Mistake eleven is the persistent use of third parties by women entrepreneurs to manage their application process at UNBS. Just avoid this. It is costly. Always consult UNBS for guidance on issues related to the application for UNBS product certification.

The writer is the head of public relations and spokesperson at UNBS.