



**KENYATTA UNIVERSITY  
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT HUB**



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**WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING: A CASE OF LINE PLAST GROUP OF  
COMAPNIES, KENYA**

**By**

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**1.0 The Business**

The Line Plast Group of companies exemplifies a dynamic strategic alliance that harnesses the power of synergy to provide unparalleled one-stop services for Polyethylene (PE), Polypropylene (PP), and Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) solutions. As a cohesive unit, it excels in delivering heightened quality management, unrivalled cost efficiency, and significantly reduced delivery times. These pivotal advantages have solidified Line Plast Group's dominance in the fiercely competitive industry.

The Line Plast Group of Companies boasts a diverse portfolio encompassing various thriving businesses. Within the conglomerate, it houses a cutting-edge printing division, a packaging arm that produces innovative containers, and an integrated packaging solutions provider. Its cosmetics subsidiary takes pride in manufacturing top-tier haircare, body care, and cleaning products.

Additionally, the Line Plast Group of Companies is immensely proud of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) project *TakaTaka Ni Mali* Foundation (as depicted in the company photo below), a non-profit organization dedicated to organizing and promoting sustainability in the waste management ecosystem while supporting creation of green jobs and incomes within a Circular Economic model. Its waste management model has been successfully implemented in Kenya through Transformation and acceleration by United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Accelerator Lab. As a social enterprise, *Taka Taka Ni Mali* seeks to demonstrate to investors the potential for commercialization of sustainable waste management. The *Taka Taka Ni Mali* delivers a sustainable waste management ecosystem through digitalization, commercialization, and integration of different players across all waste streams.



*TakaTakaNiMali's office.*

At the heart of Mary Ngechu's endeavours lies a profound commitment to environmental stewardship and a broader purpose of mitigating climate change. Through *TakaTaka Ni Mali* and other sustainable initiatives, she diligently strives to reduce the negative impact on the environment while championing eco-friendly practices in the industry.

## **2.0 Business Ownership**

The business chaired by Paul Ngechu (Mary Ngechu's Husband), operates as a family-oriented enterprise with a strong emphasis on partnership and shareholding. To enhance efficiency and professionalism, they have established a clear distinction between ownership and management within the company.

Mary Ngechu, as the owner, understands that being the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) doesn't require her to handle day-to-day operations. Instead, the company employs qualified professionals in managerial roles, ensuring effective business operations while allowing Ms. Mary Ngechu to focus on strategic decision-making.

One notable aspect of this approach is the involvement of their 26-year-old firstborn son, who oversees the Information Technology (IT) department. This demonstrates a commitment to nurturing and empowering the next generation of the family, while also valuing expertise and skills, irrespective of family ties.

Furthermore, the company maintains a professional work environment that appreciates the contributions of all team members, regardless of their familial relationship. This inclusive

atmosphere fosters a strong team spirit and enables the company to benefit from both family involvement and effective management practices.

In addition to Mary and Paul, the Ngechu's are proud parents to two other children aged 23 and 12 years old. By instilling a clear division of roles and responsibilities, the company can harness the strengths of family involvement while capitalizing on the advantages of a well-managed and professional business environment. This balanced approach has played a significant role in driving the company's success and fostering its continuous growth.

**Education, Training and Awards:** Mary Ngechu is a trained telecommunication's Engineer with over 15 years of working experience in the telecommunication industry before joining the family business. She has also received several prestigious awards namely: United Nations (UN) Kenya Person of the year (runners up) in 2017, Ernst & Young East Africa Entrepreneur of the Year 2018 -Winning Woman (finalist), Zuri Awards 2019 - Woman in Manufacturing, and an award of Eminent Leadership in Inclusion and Diversity in 2019.



*Mary Ngechu (Business Owner)*

**Interest and Journey in the business:** Mary Ngechu and her husband both had corporate backgrounds, with her working for a Telcom Company and him as a broker in a printing press. However, they decided to venture into entrepreneurship by starting their own printing press. Their motivation was to cater to clients' needs directly, rather than sending them elsewhere. With their hard-earned savings, they purchased their first printing machine to kickstart their business. Mary took on the administrative responsibilities while her husband focused on client acquisition in the field.

Over time, the couple adopted a vertical integration business model, leading to the expansion of their printing press into a packaging industry, which began manufacturing containers. This shift allowed them to offer comprehensive packaging solutions, not just labels, to various industries

such as pharmaceutical, cosmetic, dairy, and agrochemicals. Their target market was the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that couldn't afford to buy these products in bulk from larger manufacturers.

By identifying this gap in the market and seizing the opportunity, Ms. Ngechu and her husband managed to grow their business exponentially over 18 years. Their success led to the establishment of four business subsidiaries under the Line Plast Group of Companies. Their ambitious goal is to achieve an annual turnover of US \$10 million, and they have been able to sustain their household incomes solely through their businesses.

In summary, Mary Ngechu and her husband's journey from being employees to successful entrepreneurs showcases their astute business acumen, dedication, and innovative thinking. By understanding the needs of their clients and adapting to changing market demands, they have managed to build a thriving business empire with a diverse range of services.

### **Employees**

The Line Plast Group of Companies, founded by Ms. Ngechu, began with just one employee. However, with the support of her husband, she successfully expanded the business, resulting in a workforce of 400 employees, including 30 individuals at the management level. Ms. Ngechu's commitment to gender-responsive policies has been instrumental in creating a diverse and inclusive work environment.

At present, 43 percent of the company's total employees are women, and this inclusive policy extends to the management level, where 40 percent of the positions are held by women. As a social entrepreneur, Ms. Ngechu is dedicated to providing opportunities for skills development and decent jobs for women within the Kenyan manufacturing industry.

Her leadership style exemplifies mentorship and training, leading to the formation of a strong and capable team. Ms. Ngechu's hands-on approach sets her as a role model for her employees. She actively encourages technical training through apprenticeship programs, fostering personal and professional growth among women in the company.

Ms. Ngechu's efforts have not gone unnoticed. She has received accolades such as the UN Kenya Person of the Year 2017 (runners up) and the Eminent Leadership in Inclusion and Diversity in 2019 – National Diversity & Inclusion Award, which clearly recognize her outstanding contributions in creating decent jobs and empowering women.

Overall, Ms. Ngechu's visionary leadership, dedication to gender equality, and commitment to skills development have not only driven the growth of her company but also served as an inspiration to others in the business community.

### **Initial capital**

Ms. Ngechu and her husband initially launched their printing business using their small savings. As their business expanded, they recognized the need for additional capital to support further growth. However, they faced challenges in securing loans due to the lack of sufficient collateral. To overcome this obstacle, they decided to take a house mortgage and utilized the house as collateral to obtain bank loans. This strategic move has been the foundation of their business approach over the years.

After successfully repaying the mortgage, they realized the importance of separating personal and business assets. To achieve this, they constructed separate structures that would enable banks to lend to the company directly, rather than relying on their personal assets as collateral. This move ensures greater sustainability for the business, paving the way for future generations to benefit from its growth and success.

Over time, Ms. Ngechu's business achievements and competent leadership as the CEO have earned her the bank's confidence. The bank recognizes her as a key figure in the company's success. However, Ms. Ngechu aims to foster a financial team capable of independently approaching the bank, negotiating loans, and securing them without her direct involvement. She believes this independence is a measure of true success for her company, setting it apart from many other SMEs that struggle to achieve the same level of financial autonomy.

In summary, Ms. Ngechu and her husband's strategic decision-making, their dedication to building a strong financial foundation for the business, and their vision of fostering independence in their finance team reflect the epitome of success for their printing business. They aspire to create a legacy that will stand the test of time and benefit generations to come.

**Social Networks/ Collective Action:** She believes that every woman needs an ecosystem around her in order to function at full capacity – learning from each other. Ms Ngechu keeps various level of networks that include business and corporate networks, and social networks. She engages differently across these levels depending on the group. Her goal is to relate to each group of people effectively and leave a good impact. For example, she would not behave like a businesswoman in a church prayer group, so as not to let her fellow women to shy away from her. She appreciates mixed-gender networks but she is more vocal when it comes to environment, women empowerment and SME development. She purposely would like to promote the role of women, that is gender inclusivity in the manufacturing sector.

**Access to Productive Resources:** They own land jointly although some properties are individually owned. Together, they make decisions regarding the use of land and other properties.

However, they support and respect each other's space and believe in the unique roles of men and women.

**Decision making/Agency:** Ms Ngechu and her husband are both signatories of all the business bank accounts they own, hence, any of them has access to their resources. However, the cultural set up is biased in such a way that there are distinct roles for men and women. For example, in buying land, it would be seen automatically as man's responsibility. Therefore, although they both have access to their finances, her husband is the one who makes the heavy financial decisions. This sometimes hinders her from taking the lead in investing in an idea that she sees as viable since she has to consult with her husband and make decision jointly. *“Financial freedom according to me is having access to money that I can make decisions about without consulting anyone and even if I make a bad decision, I just learn from it but I don't have to explain it to anyone.”* They make joint decisions regarding the use of their co-owned properties. However, when it comes to individual businesses, each makes their own decisions that are respected and supported by the other.

### **3.0 WIM Leadership**

Ms. Ngechu, the current Chairman of Women-In-Manufacturing (WIM), has exemplified exceptional leadership skills since taking on this role. Recognizing the importance of honing her abilities, she proactively pursued training and coaching, not only benefiting those under her guidance but also enhancing her own skills. As a result, her leadership has flourished, leading to significant growth in both the organization and her own businesses. This symbiotic relationship between leadership and business success has been a pivotal motivator for her continued dedication to WIM.

One of Ms. Ngechu's core beliefs is that serving in a leadership position provides the impetus for personal growth and continuous self-improvement. Her commitment to this purpose drives her to devote time and effort to WIM. For her, WIM is not just a responsibility; it is a vehicle that helps her achieve her ultimate goal of promoting gender inclusivity in the manufacturing sector.

Ms. Ngechu advocates for self-awareness assessments among women engaging in any endeavour. This introspection prevents individuals from falling into the trap of busyness without purpose. By knowing their motivations and aspirations, women can align their efforts with their true objectives and avoid wasting time on unproductive pursuits.

Failure is not viewed as a setback by Ms. Ngechu but rather as a valuable lesson that guides her towards the right course of action. This positive attitude towards failure has been instrumental in her growth as a leader and entrepreneur.

Support from her husband has played a significant role in Ms. Ngechu's success in WIM. Their collaborative approach recognizes that the strengths of one person may not necessarily be the strengths of the other. This mutual understanding fosters a harmonious and effective partnership.

Learning from her experiences in leadership, Ms. Ngechu has adopted a hands-off approach to managing people. Instead of micromanaging, she focuses on training, equipping, and delegating duties. This leadership style has not only empowered her team but has also translated to substantial growth in her businesses. Furthermore, Ms. Ngechu has become adept at managing her time efficiently and making informed decisions. These skills were honed through her involvement in the WIM program, which also exposed her to an extensive network of valuable connections.

**Women's role in the society:** Ms. Ngechu aptly stated, 'Women play a pivotal role in sustainable development and enhancing the quality of life within families.' A woman's responsibilities within the family are multifaceted: she serves as a wife, a leader, an administrator, an income manager, and above all, a mother. However, the landscape of women's roles has evolved significantly in recent times, leaving a profound impact on the society today.

In the past, women's contributions to society were restricted and controlled by men. Yet, in the present, women have emerged as influential figures, actively shaping their own destinies. They are assuming prominent roles as teachers, doctors, engineers, administrators, entrepreneurs, politicians, scholars, reformers, poets, writers, and even leading nations as heads of states."

#### 4.0 Lessons

1. Entrepreneurs must distinguish between ownership and management of a business, recognizing that effective business leadership involves both strategic vision and operational expertise.
2. A strong business model and well-defined strategy are essential cornerstones for business growth and long-term success, providing a solid foundation upon which businesses can flourish.
3. Employers should embrace transformative leadership by cultivating trust in the capabilities of their team members, empowering them to reach their full potential and fostering a collaborative and innovative work environment.
4. The unity of purpose between husband and wife is not only a critical factor in the success of a family business but also serves as a driving force behind its thriving growth and resilience.
5. For women entrepreneurs, social networks play a pivotal role in promoting holistic well-being, providing valuable support, mentorship, and access to resources that contribute to their professional and personal development.

6. Cultivating self-awareness and having a clear sense of purpose are fundamental in achieving goals, as they enable entrepreneurs to align their actions with their vision, overcome challenges, and make meaningful progress towards their aspirations.

### **5.0 Recommendations**

1. WIM should come up with a revolving fund due to the challenge of accessibility of funds by women manufacturers in the formal commercial banks.
2. Identify gaps and challenges that are faced by women entrepreneurs.
3. WIM should set up structures that will ensure a woman entrepreneur who has been given a loan is monitored to ensure the money is used for the intended purpose.