

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BLC BANK:
QUEST FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT CASE STUDY

by
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A project
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Business Administration
to the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business
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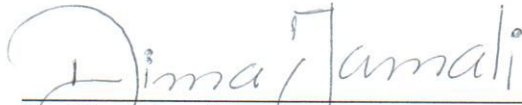
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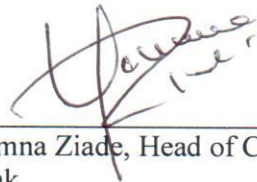
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I would like to thank Dr. Dima Jamali, my mentor and my source of inspiration, for her infinite support and motivation

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Finally, my Zanzoun- I couldn't have done it without you!

AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Farah Mahmoud Matar for Master of Business Administration
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Title: BLC Bank: Quest for Women Empowerment Case Study.

This case study about BLC Bank's quest for women empowerment seeks to elucidate a financial institution's endeavor for adopting corporate social responsibility (CSR) and incorporating it within the bank's core values and principles. BLC Bank is a leading Lebanese bank with over 40 branches spread across Lebanon and vigorously involved in financing the productive sectors in the economy. BLC bank exemplifies its strategic corporate social responsibility achievement through its various initiatives, specifically through a unique and comprehensive initiative targeted towards women: the We Initiative. The We Initiative is the first initiative of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region dedicated to the economic empowerment of women in Lebanon. Through in-depth interviews conducted with BLC Bank's management and CSR committee, this case study aims at generating a well-rounded understanding about the core shared value conceptions and their application in a financial institution.

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To My Love
LinHodZanBadou

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On her eight-hour flight from Washington D.C. to London on October 23th 2010, Tania Mousallem, Assistant General Manager and Head of Strategic Development at BLC Bank, a prominent Bank in Lebanon, was deep in thought as she gazed through the window adjacent to her, relishing the sunrise and consciously glaring at the infinite skyline. She was absorbed by the view of the emerging sun across the dark skies, as she was recalling the last few days that had passed.

Tania was on her way back to Lebanon from Washington D.C. where she had just attended the Annual Summit of the Global Banking Alliance for Women (GBA), a leading organization of financial institutions that drive the creation of women's wealth worldwide. It was at that point that the idea she was pondering about materialized concretely in her mind: BLC Bank should steer its efforts to upsurge the focus of banking on women. In fact, she was now convinced, more than ever, that incubating the setting for women banking at BLC Bank will definitely allow the Bank to differentiate itself in its industry and ultimately rise to be a reference bank in the Lebanese financial services industry.

Without hesitation, she picked up her tablet and composed an email to Maurice Sehnaoui, Chairman of the Board and General Manager of BLC Bank; and Raoul Nehme, General Manager of BLC Bank:

Dear Mr. Sehnaoui and Mr. Nehme,

Since 2008, BLC Bank has been striving to differentiate itself from others in the industry by shifting its focus from retail banking to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and corporate banking, which I believe has been a cornerstone to our swift expansion and growth.

The last few days that our team has spent at the GBA conference in Washington DC were very enlightening and inspiring. In fact, after careful consideration, I believe that BLC should focus its efforts on an additional area under the realm of SMEs: women!

Women represent an enormous untapped market for us in the Lebanese economy and a significantly underserved segment as well. I believe that BLC Bank should spearhead the focus on women in banking and should incorporate this goal of reaching out to women in its long-term business strategy. At this point, I am convinced that this will not only propel great opportunities for success for the Bank, but will also benefit the Lebanese economy and community as a whole and would exemplify BLC's responsibility towards its society. BLC Bank should be the leader in fostering women economic empowerment and development in the MENA region!

Looking forward to your responses,

Tania pressed on the "send" button, put her tablet away, and closed her eyes with a tranquil and heartening smile on her face, knowing that her email will reach Mr. Sehnaoui and Mr. Nehme's inboxes upon her arrival to Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport. Deep at heart, she knew that this is going to be the inception of a great endeavor that will open up doors to a new era of women development in Lebanon and the region.

CHAPTER II

BLC BANK- AN OVERVIEW ON ITS HISTORY

BLC bank is a leading Lebanese bank with over 40 branches spread across Lebanon, vigorously involved in financing the productive sectors in the economy, and directly contributing to growth and sustainable development in Lebanon. BLC bank offers a range of products and services including commercial banking, corporate and small and medium enterprise (SME) banking, private banking, investment banking, asset management, retail banking, brokerage, and insurance.

BLC Bank aspires to become a universal bank and a bank of reference in Lebanon. Furthermore, the Bank aims to reinforce its responsible role in the multifaceted development of the economies and communities that it serves. The bank endeavors to build and maintain long-term relationships, reinforced by robust trust, credibility, and integrity, with its clients. Being one of the oldest banks in Lebanon, BLC bank has witnessed a meticulously planned growth over the years, especially since 2008 when Mr. Maurice Sehnaoui, after becoming one of the main shareholders of the bank, was appointed Chairman of the Board and General Manager of the Bank. In 2009, BLC Bank acquired Lati Bank in Lebanon and launched a Private Banking division that provides a wide range of custom-made financial solutions to serve its high valued client base. In 2010, BLC Bank successfully acquired 9.9 percent shares of USB Bank PLC CYPRUS and later acquired 95.61 percent in 2011. USB Bank, with a network of 19 branches throughout Cyprus, is one of the largest banks in Cyprus and one of the four banks listed on the Cyprus Stock Exchange.

Between 2008 and 2012, BLC Bank's assets have increased by 158 percent,

total equity by 138 percent, customers' deposits by 148 percent, loans and advances by 545 percent, and net profits by 44 percent. BLC bank has furthermore qualified to become an Alpha Group Bank in Lebanon, which refers to an elite group of banks with customer deposits above US\$ 2 billion (Daily Star, November 2011).

As of January 2014, BLC bank employs 760 employees including its subsidiary BLC finance and operates a network of forty branches in Lebanon. BLC Bank's subsidiaries are USB Bank PLC-Cyprus, BLC Finance SAL, BLC Services SAL, and BLC Invest SAL. The Bank has recently opened a representative office in Abu Dhabi and performs deals with several correspondent banks located internationally to cater to its clients' international needs in trade finance, international and cross-border transactions.

CHAPTER III

A NOVEL STRATEGIC EMPHASIS ON SMES AND WOMEN IN BANKING IN LEBANON

A. Lebanon- A Contextual Background on Social and Economic Challenges and Opportunities

Lebanon is a relatively small country (10,452 sq km) and has a population of approximately 4.01 million (UN 2005). There exists numerous agonizing social and economic challenges in Lebanon that revolve around unemployment, emigration of Lebanese talents, escalating government debt, poverty and gender inequality, among others.

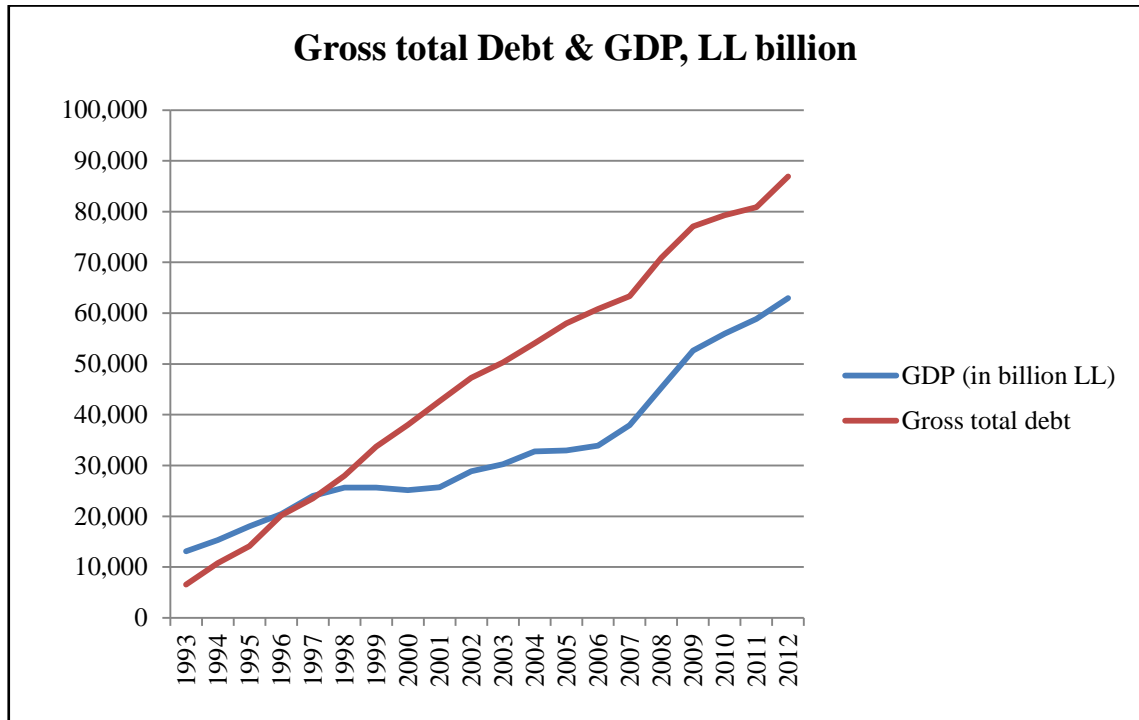
The working population in Lebanon- aged 20 to 59- represents 52.3 percent of the total population (MOF 2013b), yet the unemployment rate is 11 percent with 35 percent unemployment among the youth (El Khoury 2013). In fact, Lebanon will need to create 23,000 jobs per year, six times more than its current state, to absorb the new entrants into the labor market (Robalino and Sayed 2012). Furthermore, Lebanon is witnessing a high rate of vibrant and skilled youth talent emigration; according to the Global Competitiveness Index, Lebanon occupies the 120th position out of 144 countries in the world with respect to brain drain losses (El Khoury 2013). The latter is particularly noticeable given that Lebanon has a relatively high literacy rate of 90 percent during the years 2005 to 2011 for ages 15 and older (MOF 2013b d).

Looking into the economic ambience, we notice that Lebanon is characterized by having a free market economy depicted by its strong laissez-faire commercial convention. The economy is primarily service oriented with core growth sectors encompassing the service, banking, and tourism sectors. During the post-civil war

period (1990 onwards), Lebanon focused on reconstructing its physical and financial infrastructure by borrowing immensely- mainly from domestic banks - which ultimately drowned the government in an enormous pool of debt (Index Mundi 2013). Lebanon's debt has been on the rise since the 1990s (Figure 1). This notion continued to expand until 2006, when the debt reached a maximum of 179 percent of GDP and has been decreasing since then to reach 138 percent of GDP in 2012 (MOF 2013a) (Figure 1). Lebanon's debt to GDP ratio is considered to be one of the highest in the world and is a major and persistent problem. Accordingly, certain economists advise that production is a key solution to reduce the public debt, stimulate the economy, and prevent financial turmoil in Lebanon. These economists stress that Lebanon needs to exploit its vast areas of real competitive advantage, which include: human resources, fertile soil, and water. Lebanon is characterized by having a "reservoir of human capital": highly qualified professionals graduating from its local universities. The latter can help Lebanon delve into high-value added services and industry sectors. Some of the areas for development include focusing on industries such as: agribusiness, medicine, pharmaceutical products, data processing, subcontracting for international software companies, upscale textile industries, bio-organic food and others (Corm 1998).

With respect to SMEs, even though the Lebanese government lacks a formal SME policy, a support program for SMEs has been in place since 2004. Furthermore, several associations exist to promote SME development, including an SME Support Unit in the Ministry of Economy and Trade, Kafalat (a limited credit guarantee society), the Bader Young Entrepreneurs Program, the Berytech Fund, and INJAZ-Lebanon (MOF 2013b).

Gross Total Debt & GDP



Gross Total Debt/ DGP (%)

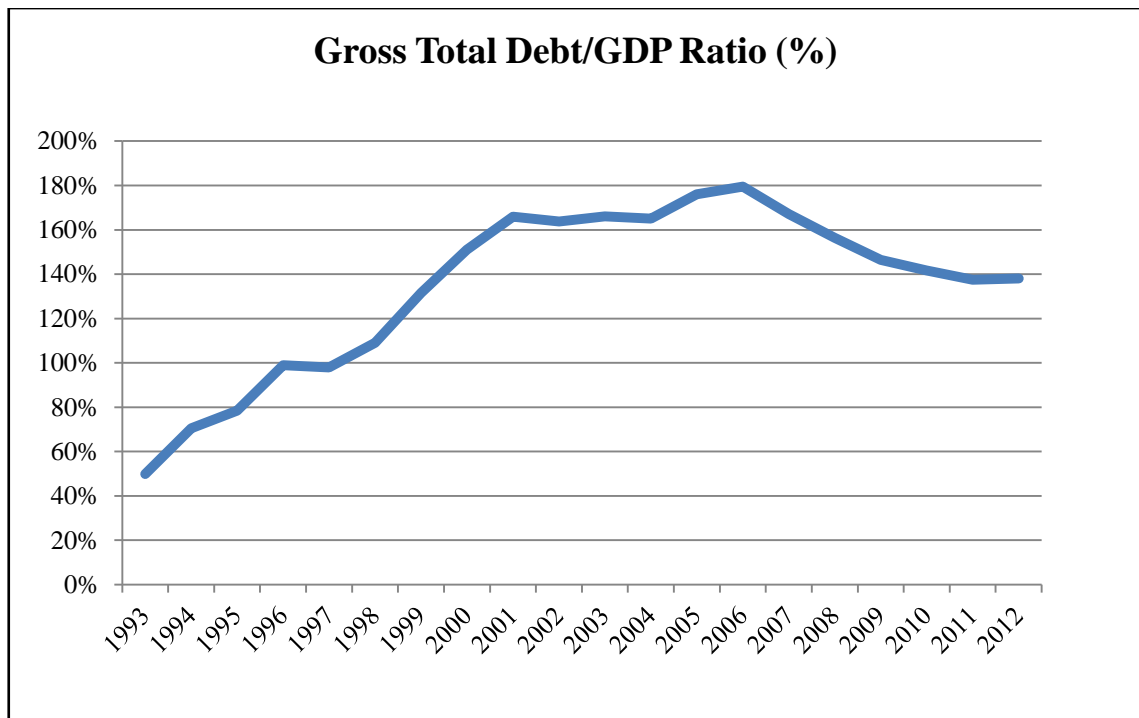


Fig. 1. Economic Indicators in Lebanon

Source: Compiled by authors from Lebanese Ministry of Finance Debt and Debt Markets Reports; available from <http://www.finance.gov.lb/en-US/finance/PublicDebt/Pages/DebtReports.aspx>; Internet; accessed 10 March, 2014.

One of the major difficulties faced by SMEs in Lebanon is the limited access to finance; only 16 percent of total loans granted in 2010 were issued to SMEs (El Khoury 2013). Furthermore, women entrepreneurs are particularly affected: out of the 51 percent of female business owners that requested loans in 2011, only 17 percent were granted (IFC 2011); in addition, only 3 percent of bank loans go to female entrepreneurs (IFC 2013). Other challenges encompass the need for high levels of collateral, limited awareness of the various support initiatives, scarce training and advisory services, limited mentorships initiatives and imperfect impact evaluation that is necessary to assess program efficiency (El Khoury 2013).

In what pertains to gender, there exists noticeable discrimination against women in Lebanon and the MENA region as a whole. In Lebanon, women represent a significant component of the general population (51 percent) (HKTDC 2011) as well as the educated population; 56 percent of university graduates are women. Furthermore, women account for 25 percent of the workforce, and women owned SMEs account for 20 percent of total SMEs (Maloy 2012). Yet, the early-stage entrepreneurial activity (TEA) rate for women (10.2 percent) is about half the rate for men (20.2 percent) (Stevenson *et al.* 2010). The female share of entrepreneurial activity is about 36 percent (Stevenson *et al.* 2010). Unfortunately, women's economic needs have generally not been appreciated or catered for in the Lebanese context and remain severely underserved (Maloy 2012).

B. BLC Bank's Growing Interest in SMEs and Women

BLC's interest in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) came along with the bank's new vision in 2008. Prior to that, the Bank's orientation had been slanted towards retail banking. BLC Bank looked into the economic trends of the developed

world and noticed the critical role that SMEs are playing in many countries' economies; in fact, SMEs are considered as a pillar to economic expansion and a key to job creation.

Worldwide, SMEs are estimated to represent more than 95 percent of enterprises, employing about 68 percent of developed countries' working population, and contributing to 53 percent to their country's GDP on average (El Khoury 2013). Looking into Hungary, for example, SMEs account for 71 percent of total employment and contribute to 50 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Similarly for the United States and United Kingdom where SMEs contribute to more than 50 percent of GDP. Comparing those figures to the Middle East, SMEs represent a very low contribution to their countries' GDPs, for example, in Saudi Arabia, SMEs represent only 25 percent of the GDP and contribute to 25 percent of employment (www.strategy-business.com). In Lebanon, SMEs contribute to 51 percent of the total workforce (El Khoury 2013).

Following Mousallem's visit to the GBA Summit, BLC Bank carefully considered the various dimensions of opting for Mousallem's suggestion. In fact, one of the very promising statistics that the research team came across was that an economy could achieve up to 27 percent increase in GDP per capita if it eliminates gender gaps in its labor market (Elborgh-Woytek *et al.* 2013). Furthermore women-owned enterprises have a tendency to hire more women and offer better social benefits to employees than men- owned enterprises (IFC 2013). Consequently, since 2011 BLC Bank pledged to champion the economic development of women in Lebanon and to capitalize on potential women bankers.

Moussallem explained "You see many parents telling their daughters get married, and then we'll see if you can go into business or not... then we see husbands asking their wives to stop working after they've

had a child... there is a cultural bias against women and women need to prove themselves before they can be trusted” (Stempf 2012).

BLC Bank sought the advisory services of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group and the largest global development institution focused solely on the private sector in developing countries (IFC 2014). The IFC’s team worked hand in hand with BLC Bank to design financial services and banking products aimed at small and medium size businesses, and to reach out to those owned by women. The latter entailed an extensive market research phase to understand the needs of women-owned businesses, a testing phase for new product concepts, and finally a launching of full-fledged banking services targeted to women.

“Discrimination against women is evident in our Middle Eastern culture... in fact, one of the chief questions that any bank representative would primarily ask a woman upon her request for a loan is details about her husband’s or father’s financial status and whether this person will be able to serve as her guarantor... We wanted to change this mentality” explained Nehme (Stempf 2012).

CHAPTR IV

THE “WE INITIATIVE”

A. The Conception of the Initiative: What is the We Initiative?

Launched in March 20th 2012, the “We Initiative” stands for Women Empowerment Initiative, a unique and comprehensive program dedicated to the economic empowerment of women in Lebanon and the first initiative of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region (Figure 2). Through this program, BLC Bank seeks to support the advancement and inclusion of women in the economy, thereby opting to be the preferred Bank and the employer of choice for women, and attracting the employee of choice in the MENA region. The We Initiative targets all women: the professional females and female entrepreneurs, the female employees at BLC Bank, the mothers, and the widows. BLC Bank seeks to find solutions for these women’s challenges and aims to unleash their potentials by providing state-of-the-art products and services and a unique platform for them to connect, network and evolve. The Bank seeks to cultivate long-term relationships between the Bank and these women, and among the women.

Tania Moussallem was the initial driving force behind the We Initiative. After her return from Washington she was cognizant that a women development and empowerment venture would equally represent crucial and vital opportunities for the Bank as a whole and the communities in which it operates. The proposed new strategic direction was equally appealing to both Sehnaoui and Nehme who were both supportive and believers in the Bank’s new strategic business orientation focusing on banking for women and were certain of BLC Bank’s abilities in cultivating such an exertion.

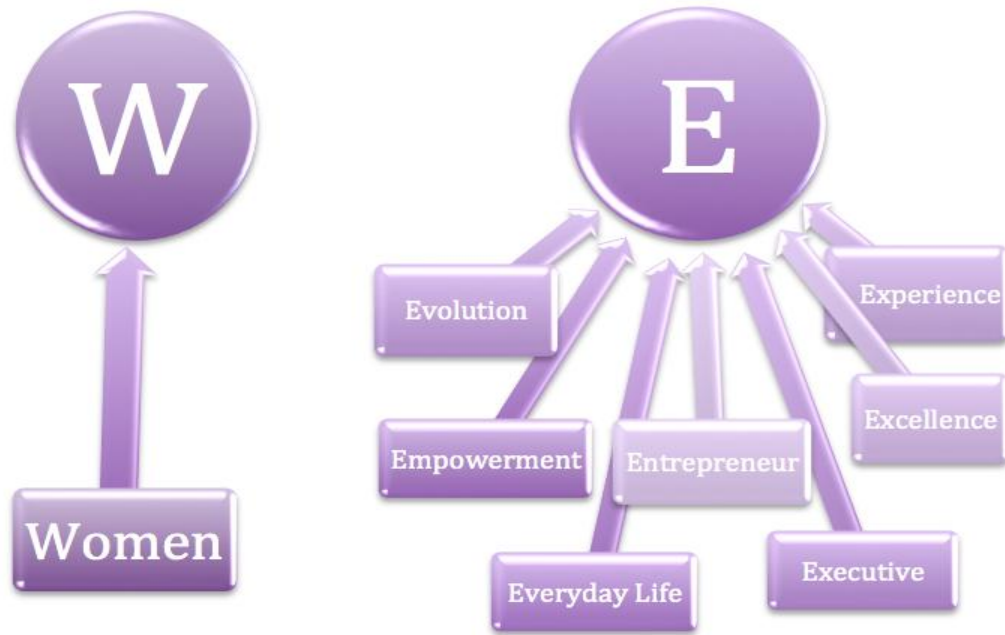


Fig. 2. The We Initiative

Source: Compiled by Authors from BLC Bank Website; available from <http://www.blcbank.com>; Internet; accessed 21 March, 2014.

B. We- An Outcome of Extensive Research and Development

In pursuit of understanding women’s needs, BLC Bank conducted widespread market research before launching the We Initiative. These efforts included focus groups conducted in various regions in Lebanon, in addition to qualitative and quantitative assessments of women behavior. Accordingly, the bank was able to monitor trends and reach important conclusions that enabled it to cautiously mold its program to best-fit women’s needs and wants. Some of these conclusions touch upon the risk profile, role in decision-making, and loyalty status of women in Lebanon. The Bank was able to infer that women are considered to be more risk averse than men and therefore pose less credit risk for the Bank. Furthermore, women are key decision makers in the household and express more loyalty traits than men. All these deductions further inspired the Bank during the development stages of the Initiative.

Internally, BLC Bank conducted a series of radical trainings for its employees

to ensure equal opportunities, inclusion, and non-discrimination. It was essential for the Bank’s employees to be aware of and to eliminate any conscious and unconscious biases towards women, which may hinder the objectives of the We Initiative of promoting women’s growth and gender equality. Three major waves of trainings were conducted to fully train the Bank’s employees about the We Initiative and its products. The trainings tapped into various issues including strategies for selling to women, gender intelligence, SME and women market. Furthermore, the Bank continuously ensures that new employees obtain the adequate training needed to fit into the bank’s We Initiative ideology (See Table 1).

Table 1. We Initiative Internal Training

Wave 1- “Excelling in Selling to Women Clients”	
Trainer	Professor from Babson College
Employee Rank	All
Number of Recipients	75 employees
Total Hours	56 hours
Wave 2-“SME & Women Market ”	
Modules	The Corporate image; Strategies for selling to women, Sales Techniques; The Risk; Objectives & KPIs
Trainer	9 BLC Trainers
Employee Rank	All
Number of Recipients	395 employees
Total Hours	123 hours
Wave 3- "Gender Intelligence"	
Trainer	IFC Consultant / Gender Specialist
Employee Rank	Middle Management
Number of Recipients	65 employees
On- Spot Training- We Initiative	
Trainer	We Brand Manager
Employee Rank	We Ambassador/ Champion and We Initiative frontliners
Induction Sessions- We Initiative	
Trainer	We Brand Manager
Employee Rank	New Employees

Source: Compiled by Authors

C. Setting the Foundations

1. Gender Equality- A Core Value

Upon delving into the We Initiative, BLC Bank was keen on updating its mission and core values to encompass responsibility and gender equality. BLC Bank was ardent to update its core values that touched upon the Bank's commitment, integrity, and result orientation by adding two additional values: the bank's commitment to gender equality and adherence to social responsibility. Furthermore, the bank integrated its key stakeholders in its revised mission statement (Figure 3).

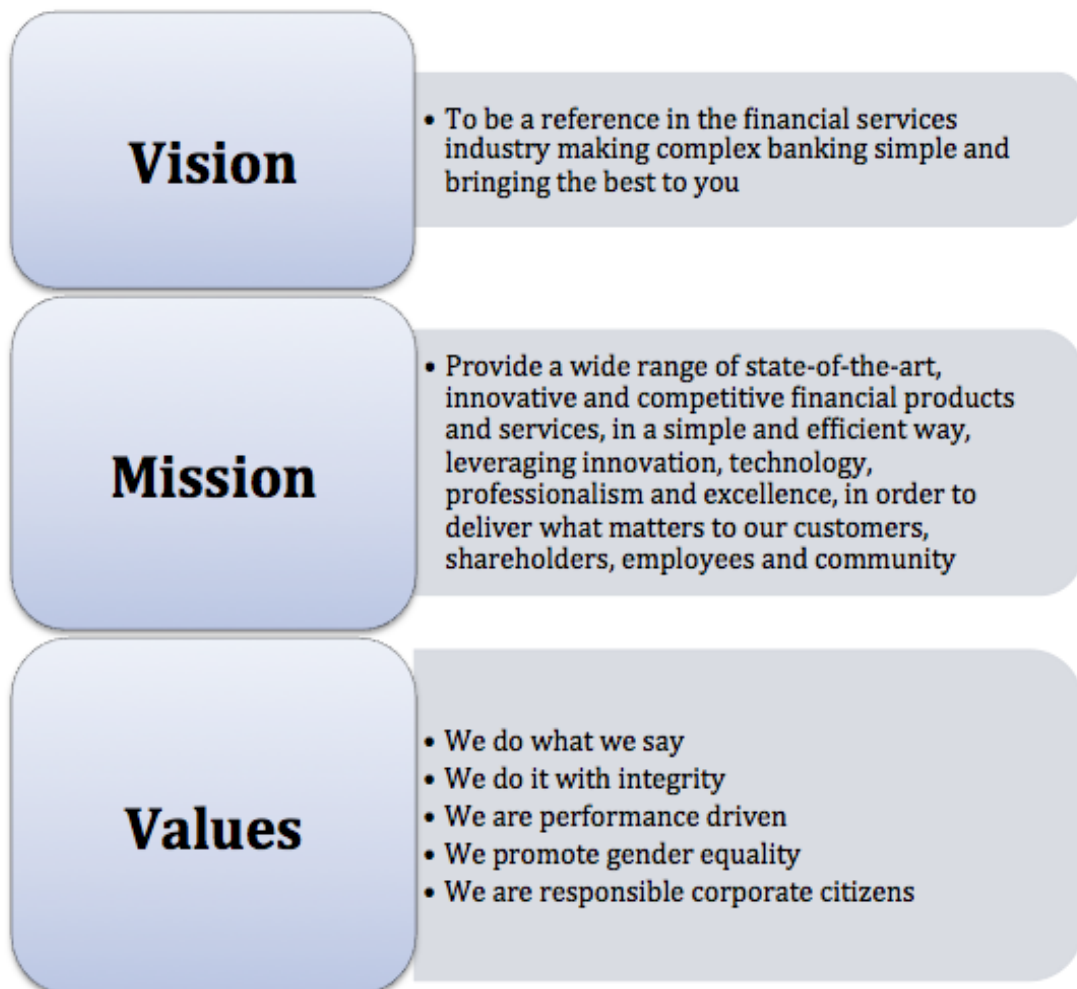


Fig. 3. BLC Bank Vision, Mission, and Core Values

Source: BLC Bank Website; available from <http://www.blcbank.com>; Internet; accessed 21 March, 2014.

2. Women Empowerment Principles and Global Banking Alliance for Women

In line with its internal strategy of becoming an employer of choice for women, and external strategy of empowering business women and becoming their bank of reference, BLC Bank was the first Bank in the MENA region to commit to the UN Women/UN Global Compact Women's Empowerment Principles –a set of seven principles for businesses, offering guidance on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community (see Figure 4). The principles cover fair working environment, gender equality, and competency based evaluation processes.

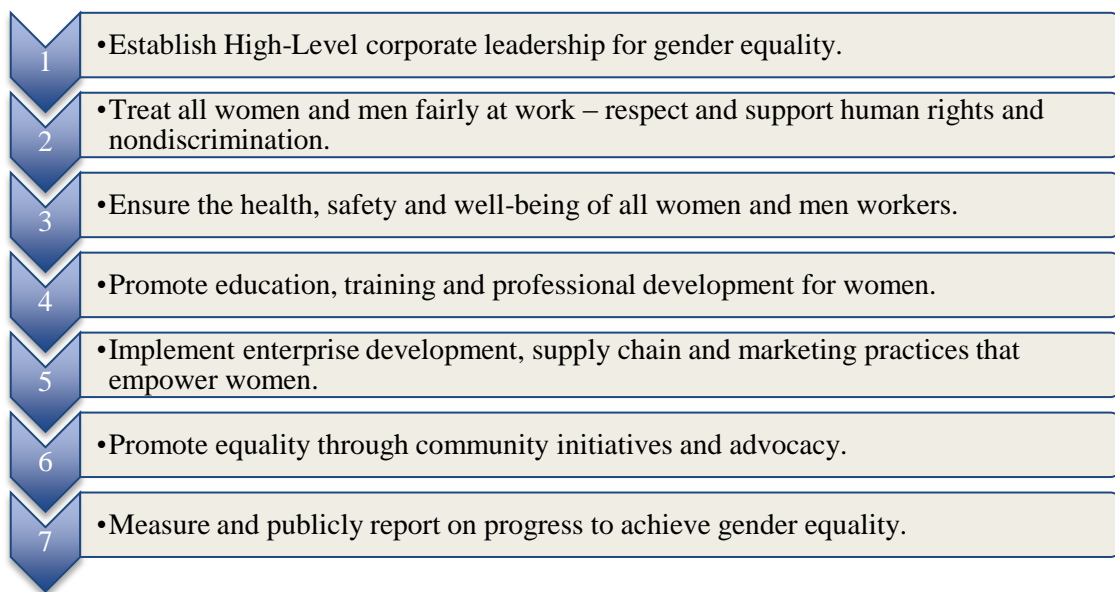


Fig. 4. UN Women/ UN Global Compact Women's Empowerment Principles

Source: UN Global Compact Website; available from

http://www.unglobalcompact.org/issues/human_rights/equality_means_business.html; Internet; accessed 20 March 2014.

Furthermore, BLC Bank was the only bank in the MENA Region to join the Global Banking Alliance for Women (GBA). The GBA is a leading international network of financial institutions and organizations, found in more than 135 countries

and interested in building women's wealth worldwide and particularly involved with women entrepreneurs running small and medium enterprises. This vibrant network allowed the bank to have practical access to best practices from around the world (www.gbaforwomen.org).

Mr. Sehnaoui affirmed in the launching conference of the We initiative on March 20, 2012:

“This initiative launched by BLC Bank qualifies it to become the financial and banking reference for women in the Middle East after being the first bank in the region to join the Global Banking Alliance (GBA) and to sign the Women Empowerment Principles and preparing the adequate tools for the inclusion and advancement of women in the business world, based on the strong belief in their vital role in developing the economy”.

D. A Creative Full Fledged Initiative

In light of the extensive market research that was conducted, the We Initiative emerged as a holistic value proposition comprised of a mix of financial and non-financial products and services aimed at encouraging women to develop their businesses, enhance their careers, and achieve their personal and financial goals.

From a financial perspective BLC Bank was able to alleviate chief challenges or constraints that were portrayed as severe impediments to women who are opting to start a business in Lebanon. BLC bank successfully removed the collateral requirement, a major obstacle and source of anxiety to women, thereby creating the collateral-free loan and catering to women's needs. BLC Bank was also a pioneer in establishing the Mother Fiduciary Account, which gives mothers the power to independently open and operate accounts for her minor children without having to refer to the legal guardian. Prior to that, a Lebanese mother was not allowed to open a bank account for her child without the consent of the child's legal guardian, the father. The Initiative furthermore

provides its customers with an array of business solutions and services that would facilitate their day-to-day operations, such as: omitted fees and bank commissions, free domiciliation of bills, reduced price on checkbooks, same value date for a variety of transactions, reduced commissions on deposits, including others (See Table 2).

Table 2. We Initiative- Financial Services

<p>Collateral Free- Loan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Established Business for at least 2 years - Flexible financing conditions to help you achieve your plans without the hassle of securing a collateral - Ability to borrow to finance equipment, raw material, inventory, farming supplies and working capital - Long-term repayment period up to 5 years. <p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loan amount: max USD 20,000 - Loan period: up to 5 years with equal monthly payment - Grace period: up to 45 days - File fees: NONE - Required guarantees/collaterals: NONE - Bank commission: NONE - Down Payment: 20% from the project value. Bank's Terms and Conditions apply. <p>Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Competitive fees and commissions - Grace period in line with your business needs - Flexible financing methods and long term repayment period to better manage cash flow - Assistance from our banking advisers to aid in choose the program that best fits needs. - Ability to monitor and manage accounts anytime around the world through the BLC Cloud, a complete virtual and secure self-service banking solution that aids in managing accounts in no time, anytime around the world through Full Mobile and Internet Banking - Ease of depositing cash and checks at 40 locations all over Lebanon 24/7 through our Smart ATMs
<p>Mother Fiduciary Account</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convenience of opening the account with as low as USD 300 - Competitive interest rate - No file fees and no bank commission
<p>SME Packaged Account</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free unlimited domiciliation of bills - Reduced price on checkbooks - Same value date for a variety of transactions - No commission on deposits up to USD 3,000 - Free debit, credit and internet cards - Free access to BLC Cloud: BLC Bank's complete virtual and secure self-service banking solutions that allows you to manage the accounts in no time, anytime around the world through BLC Bank full Mobile and Internet Banking. The entrepreneur can also deposit cash and checks at 40 locations all over Lebanon 24/7 through our Smart ATMs - Low fees on LBP and USD check deposits

Source: BLC Bank Website; available from <http://www.blcbank.com>; Internet; accessed 21 March, 2014.

From a non-financial perspective, the We initiative provides women with trainings and educational workshops- either free of charge or at discounted rates, networking opportunities, and advisory services that further allow women to enhance their professional and personal lives. Non- financial services include: We initiative platform, Brilliant Lebanese Awards, and trainings and roadshows (See Table 3).

Table 3. We Initiative- Non- Financial Services

We Initiative Platform www.we-initiative.com
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing experiences in forum discussions - Articles: business and finance, career and networking, family and home, life and leisure, health and wellness - Expert and mentor advise - Career center - Banking advise
SME Toolkit
<p>A program by the IFC that provides business tools including financial tools, legal documents, economic bulletins, guides and manuals, studies and reports, tailor made trainings to SMEs, after they have become registered members (http://lebanon.smetoolkit.org/lebanon/en/)</p> <p>Provides for free:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Business intelligence on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accounting and finance: such as preparing & analyzing financial statements & taxes Business planning: creating and implementing a business plan Human resources (HR): managing Human Resources & maintaining talent Marketing: devising marketing strategies Sales, operations, and information technology (IT) to name a few - Advisory services through experts in different fields, be it legal, financial, mediation or others - Mentorship - Video tutorials - Case Studies - Online interactive tools, quizzes - Forms, templates and calculators
Roadshows
<p>Informative Roadshows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presenting full range of business solutions available to entrepreneurs - Answering queries - Guiding towards best practices implementation - Providing financial advice

“Table 3 - Continued”

<p>Roadshows Cont’d</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spreading awareness about sustainability issues - Showcasing success stories <p>Technical Roadshows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture or specialized agricultural institutions. - Offers presentations by field specialists - Offers advise and tips by field specialists - Topics include but not restricted to: caring trees, dealing with bee hives, preparing, marketing and promoting conserved products (“mouneh”). - Choice of the topic and region is subject to studies conducted by the concerned ministry, agronomist, agricultural engineer or specialized institution, recommendation of the municipality and the BLC Bank branch in the region.
<p>External Trainings and Workshops</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open to BLC clients and non-clients - The Mini–MBA Program by Exceed - Seven advanced business workshops. - BLC Bank clients can benefit from this program for as low as 102\$ / month. - Special Offer: BLC Bank clients will also receive a full learner’s kit, 2 Assessments Exercises, and 4 Coaching Sessions for FREE! <p>The Business Foundation Program by Exceed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Four business-learning workshops. - BLC Bank clients can benefit from this program for as low as 87\$ / month. - Special Offer: BLC Bank clients will receive a full learner’s kit, 2 Assessments Exercises, and 5 Mentorship Sessions for FREE! <p>Courses Offered by Management Mix</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing a competition strategy - Finance for non-Financials - Improving your selling skills - Establishing your Marketing Mix Strategy - Excellence in Customer Service, Caring for Customers - Communicating Effectively - Developing a business plan for a new venture
<p>Brilliant Lebanese Awards</p>
<p>THE WOMAN ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR award will be given to an exceptional woman entrepreneur who has demonstrated excellence and success in such areas as innovation, financial performance, and personal commitment to her business and community.</p> <p>THE BUSINESS OF THE YEAR award will be given to an exceptional business who has demonstrated excellence and success in such areas as innovation, financial performance, sustainability, and social responsibility.</p> <p>Winners of the BLC Bank Awards will receive each a prize of 30,000 USD.</p>

“Table 3 - *Continued*”

Brilliant Lebanese Awards Cont'd
<p>Criteria for enrollment: All Lebanese small and medium companies and businesswomen who own more than 51% of the shares of their company with an annual turnover less than \$5 million, had the opportunity to compete in this award.</p> <p>The main criteria considered in selecting the winner are Creativity, Financials, Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility under the supervision of a and independent professional and highly credible jury panel- constituting of only one BLC representative</p>
Networking Events
<p>Purpose: to create an opportunity for businesswomen, academics, journalists, bloggers... to meet in a round table to discuss a topic of interest, share thoughts, experience and ideas, interact and build network over a Business Breakfast/brunch</p> <p>Alumni Central and We Initiative Breakfast:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- WE Initiative by BLC Bank and Alumni Central organized an engaging and intimate discussion to gain insights on how leading Lebanese women have:- Professionally – Climbed the ladder of success- Personally – Served as a role models

Source: Compiled by Authors and BLC Bank Website; available from <http://www.blcbank.com>; Internet; accessed 21 March, 2014.

1. We Initiative Platform¹

BLC Bank launched an innovative and interactive platform that allows women to network with one another by connecting, sharing experiences and ideas, and contributing articles. Women members who are not necessarily bank clients can benefit from the various resources offered within the platform including: articles related to money and finance, success stories, BLC Bank’s business tools, the SME toolkit, certified trainings and workshops (at discounted prices for BLC Bank clients), consultations with the Bank’s experts and mentors, networking opportunities with other prominent business women, job openings being shared, and business advertisement

¹ We-initiative Website; available from <http://we-initiative.com/>; Internet; accessed 11 March 2014.

opportunities. The SME Toolkit, an innovation by IFC and powered by IBM, is a website that provides crucial and free information and tools dedicated to provide SMEs with non-financial services including computer based training, online interactive tools, relevant information and services that enables them to enhance their financial and development opportunities, and implement sustainable business management practices (See Table 3).

2. Brilliant Lebanese Awards

BLC Bank launched the Brilliant Lebanese Awards, the first Lebanese banking awards designated to identify successful entrepreneurs who have achieved excellence and success and demonstrated personal commitment to the business and the community. The Awards are composed of two categories Woman Entrepreneur of the Year and Business of the Year whose winners will win a cash prize of USD 30,000 each (See Table 3).

3. Roadshows

The Bank organizes roadshows aimed at creating awareness about BLC Bank's business solutions, developing rural areas, as well as creating a vibrant network of clients. The bank conducts these roadshows either independently or in collaboration with second parties; namely municipalities, NGOs, chambers of commerce, syndicates and cooperatives (COOPs). Roadshows fall under two main categories: the informative, which spread awareness about BLC Bank's business solutions and spread financial education; and the technical, which are developmental in nature and mainly targeted to remote and rural regions in Lebanon (See Table 3).

E. An Emphasis on Partnerships

“At the end of the day, you cannot do everything on your own. It’s all about finding the right partner that shares your values, a partner with whom you will be able to have an impact and have maximum reach...” explained Karyl Akilian, Head of Women in Business Section at BLC Bank.

Opting to reach maximum business and social value with its We Initiative, BLC Bank embarked on various partnering arrangements with a selected number of organizations. In terms of providing business solutions for SMEs, BLC partnered with Management Mix, a certified IFC Business Edge provider that delivers a wide range of management and development courses that aid SME leaders and managers in developing their core competencies. BLC also partnered with Exeed, a talent development consultancy that delivers educational and developmental programs solely customized to help entrepreneurs and SME owners and managers grow their business. The Mini MBA and the Business Foundation Program are two examples of the programs that are offered to SMEs by BLC Bank and Exeed (See Table 3 and Figure 5). Additionally, BLC Bank actively partakes in the programs and initiatives offered by the Blessing Foundation and the New Arab Women Forum (NAWF) that also promote women socio-economic development (See Figure 5).

F. Women at BLC Bank

Internally, BLC Bank has set its own targets of achieving an equal number of females and males in managerial levels by 2020. Female employees currently represent 43 percent of upper management, 38 percent of middle management and 53 percent of remaining employees. Accordingly, the HR team is collaborating with the heads of each unit and department, to identify the potential future female managers in order to mold unique career paths for each one in terms of training, mentoring, and monitoring.

<p>Exeed</p> <p>Exeed is a talent development consultancy whose purpose is to have individuals and organizations realize their underlying potential via assessments and the delivery of customized, relevant, practical and up-to-date business knowledge. The collaboration between Exeed Executive Business Institute and BLC Bank resulted in the creation of the “SME Academy”, a set of business education and talent development programs, customized specifically to help entrepreneurs and SME owners manage, sustain and grow their businesses.</p>	<p>Management Mix</p> <p>A certified IFC Business Edge training provider, to deliver a comprehensive range of courses in Management and Development to help men and women develop their core competencies and achieve their full potential.</p> <p>The topics include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a competition strategy • Improving your selling skills • Finance for Non-financials – Using and analyzing financial statements • Establishing your Marketing Mix strategy • Excellence in Customer Service, Caring for Customers • Communicating Effectively • Developing a business plan • Working out your pricing strategy • Working with budgets 	<p>The Blessing Foundation</p> <p>Founded on the core values of leadership, collaboration, integrity and diversity, the Blessing Foundation aims to provide women with a platform to interact and share ideas in order to build a dynamic business environment that mentors and develops future women leaders.</p> <p>The Blessing Foundation connects the wise and experienced with the motivated and growing, creates a platform for mentor-mentee discovery and dialogue, leverages learning from global initiatives and fosters an environment of entrepreneurship and sound business judgement.</p>
<p>Fair Trade</p> <p>Fair Trade is an NGO, officially representing the World Fair Trade Organization in Lebanon since 2006. Fair Trade works with around 12 COOPs each specializing in a different product (Olive Oil and Wine both certified by WFTO as well as jams, vinegar, salt, dried fruits, seeds). 11 of these COOPs are female-only, whereas only 1, which handles the production of the wine, is mixed. BLC Bank established a partnership with them allowing to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider their produce for end of year gifts 2. Jointly create a documentary on the COOPs and the women workers 3. Create field trips in the regions where they are present. 4. Carry out roadshows, including technical ones, for the COOPs as well as their suppliers 	<p>NAWF</p> <p>Forum for announcing WOW winners, an award launched by NAWF in 2012 to applaud and recognize the success of exceptional Arab female figures in various fields: 1. Civic Service; 2. Business; 3. Entrepreneurship; 4. Media; 5. Artistic expressions and 6. Science, Research and Technology.</p> <p>WOW award does not only aim to highlight and recognize the strong capabilities of the modern Arab woman, it also strives and hopes to inspire women everywhere to make use of their full potential, while having the strong resolve to override hindrances and obstacles, just as every WOW woman has had to do.</p>	<p>USAID</p> <p>BLC Bank and the Lebanon Industry Value Chain Development (LIVCD) cooperated in implementing activities to strengthen competitiveness of selected value chains in Lebanon through the LIVCD Project, financed by the United States Government through the U.S Agency for International Development (USAID), that works to end extreme global poverty and enable resilient, democratic societies to realize their potential. LIVCD beneficiaries include farmers, agro-processors, input suppliers, transporter, exporters, small businessmen, service providers, retailers, and other entities involved in rural wealth creation.</p>
	<p>Cherie Blair Foundation</p> <p>Cherie Blair Foundation supports women entrepreneurs in developing and emerging economies to develop their confidence, capability and capital. BLC Bank and Cherie Blair Foundation partnered to provide an opportunity to address the access to capital needs of women entrepreneurs in the project with Tomorrow's Youth Organization and Al Majmoua. 245 women will be supported to grow sustainable and profitable businesses.</p>	<p>Yaduna</p> <p>A women heart health care center with a mission to improve women's cardiovascular health and reduce burden of disease through awareness, prevention, primary treatment and advocacy</p>

Fig. 5. BLC Bank We Initiative Partners

Source: UN Global Compact Website; available from http://www.unglobalcompact.org/issues/human_rights/equality_means_business.html; Internet; accessed 20 March 2014.

BLC Bank is furthermore ensuring equal opportunities between female and male employees with respect to its human resources practices including recruitment, training and development, performance evaluations, and promotions. In fact, over the last year, the bank has incurred 40 percent higher training cost on women than men employees. Furthermore, the Bank has noticed that 56 percent of the total applications to the bank belong to female applicants. BLC Bank is also keen on motivating its female employees to return back to work after they have given birth and therefore introduced the “After Maternity Leave Special Schedule”, a short working schedule and full time pay for a period of two months following the maternity leave offered under the Lebanese Labor law (BLC Bank 2013).

BLC Bank furthermore partnered with Yaduna, a women heart health care center with a mission to improve women’s cardiovascular health and reduce burden of disease through awareness, prevention, primary treatment and advocacy. Through this partnership, all female employees at the bank, as well as the employees’ female relatives (mother and wife) can obtain free screening for Coronary Heart Diseases (CHD), such as Laboratory tests and Non- Invasive Cardiology Screening.

All these efforts allow BLC Bank to reach its goal of being an employer of choice for women. To add, BLC Bank realized that despite its very low employee turnover rate, the turnover rate of females is much lower than that of males.

G. Men- Not Excluded from the Picture

BLC bank is not trying to discriminate against men through the We Initiative. However, given the male-orientation of banking operations in Lebanon, BLC Bank felt that it needed to put more effort into incorporating the needs and requirements that women bankers might face. In fact, men can also benefit from the products and services

offered by the We Initiative, such as the collateral free loan among others. Akilian described:

“We made it clear to everyone that we are not trying to alienate men, but instead, we are trying to include women in the picture ... BLC Bank wants to be a bank for all genders; but for that to happen we need to include women in the banking cosmos. Hence, there are changes that need take place; changes that are driven by the We Initiative.”

Furthermore, BLC Bank offers its male employees a three day paternity leave, a period greater than the one day paternity leave offered under the Lebanese labor law.

H. Ensuring the We Ideology across the Bank Network

Understanding that the We Initiatives should be integrated with operational responsibilities such as regulatory compliance, business transactions, and labor practices; BLC Bank assigned a representative for the We Initiative in each of its branches across Lebanon. This representative is a standing employee at a BLC branch who is appointed as a “We Champion” or a “We Ambassador” depending on the seniority of position. BLC Bank’s top management believed that these representatives play a crucial role in ensuring that the We business model is inclusive and that its practices are in compliance with the guidelines and strategies to which the Bank is committed.

In terms of lines of operations, these champions and ambassadors report to a We Initiative agent located at the Bank’s Business Support unit. This agent is responsible for managing the We Initiative program at the level of the Bank’s branches. Furthermore, the We Initiative Brand Managers and leaders are in direct contact with the We Initiative agent as well as the We champions and ambassadors for continuous feedback on the We Initiative (See Figure 6).

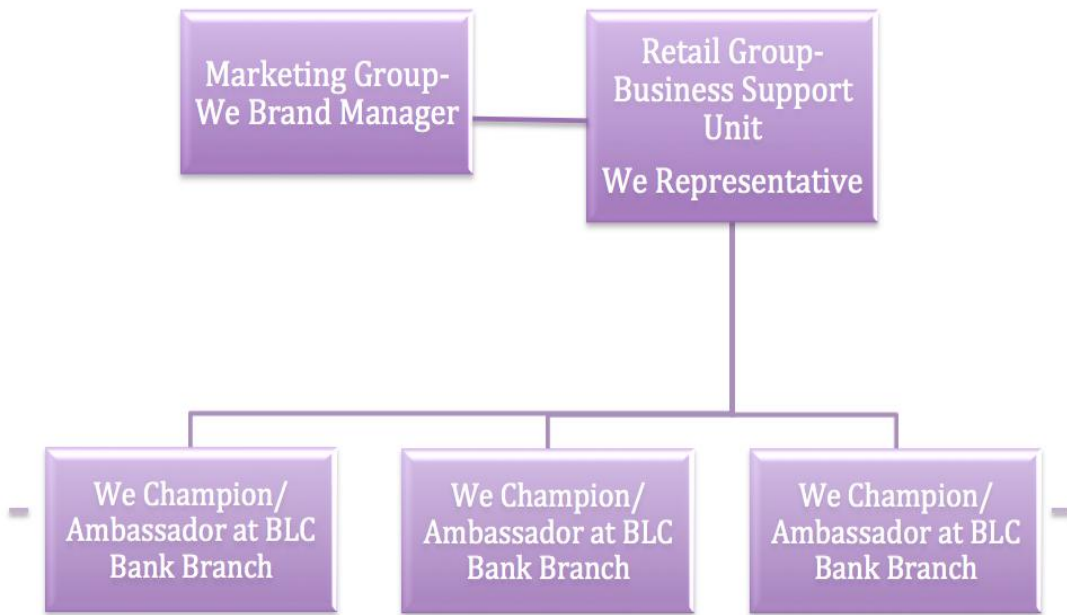


Fig. 6. We Initiative Internal Network

Source: BLC Bank Website; available from <http://www.blcbank.com>; Internet; accessed 21 March, 2014.

CHAPTER V

WE INITIATIVE: STRATEGIC CSR AND THE ESSENCE OF SHARED VALUE CREATION

By providing women with the foundations to become financially independent and the means to exercise their talents, BLC bank is spearheading the quest for gender equality and building the fundamentals for achieving equal opportunities for women and men in Lebanon. Furthermore, by tackling this social need, generating value for its surrounding community and stimulating production, BLC bank is exemplifying its responsibility towards society in areas that revolve around its core competencies, and achieving its own economic benefit in parallel.

Sehnaoui emphasized, “Initiatives like these are key to changing attitudes about the role of women in society. At the same time, we are also demonstrating that there is a considerable commercial advantage in providing women with concrete means to access financing for their businesses” (IFC 2013).

The Bank has adopted the “Boomerang” concept for its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Program. The Boomerang is a curved tool that is thrown in the air, and returns back to its source if thrown correctly. This concept embodies BLC Bank’s commitment to contributing its community and reaping sustainable benefits in return.

BLC Bank is very meticulous in measuring the impact of the We Initiative on their business operations. In fact, women clients are flagged in their information technology system to keep track of women account holders and assess their activity. The Bank furthermore has introduced Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the We Initiative and is keen on evaluating performance on a quarterly basis. Since its launch in 2012, the We Initiative has resulted in considerable business and financial achievements

for the bank including: increase in female bank clients and business loans granted to women as measured between 2011 and 2013 (See Figure 7).

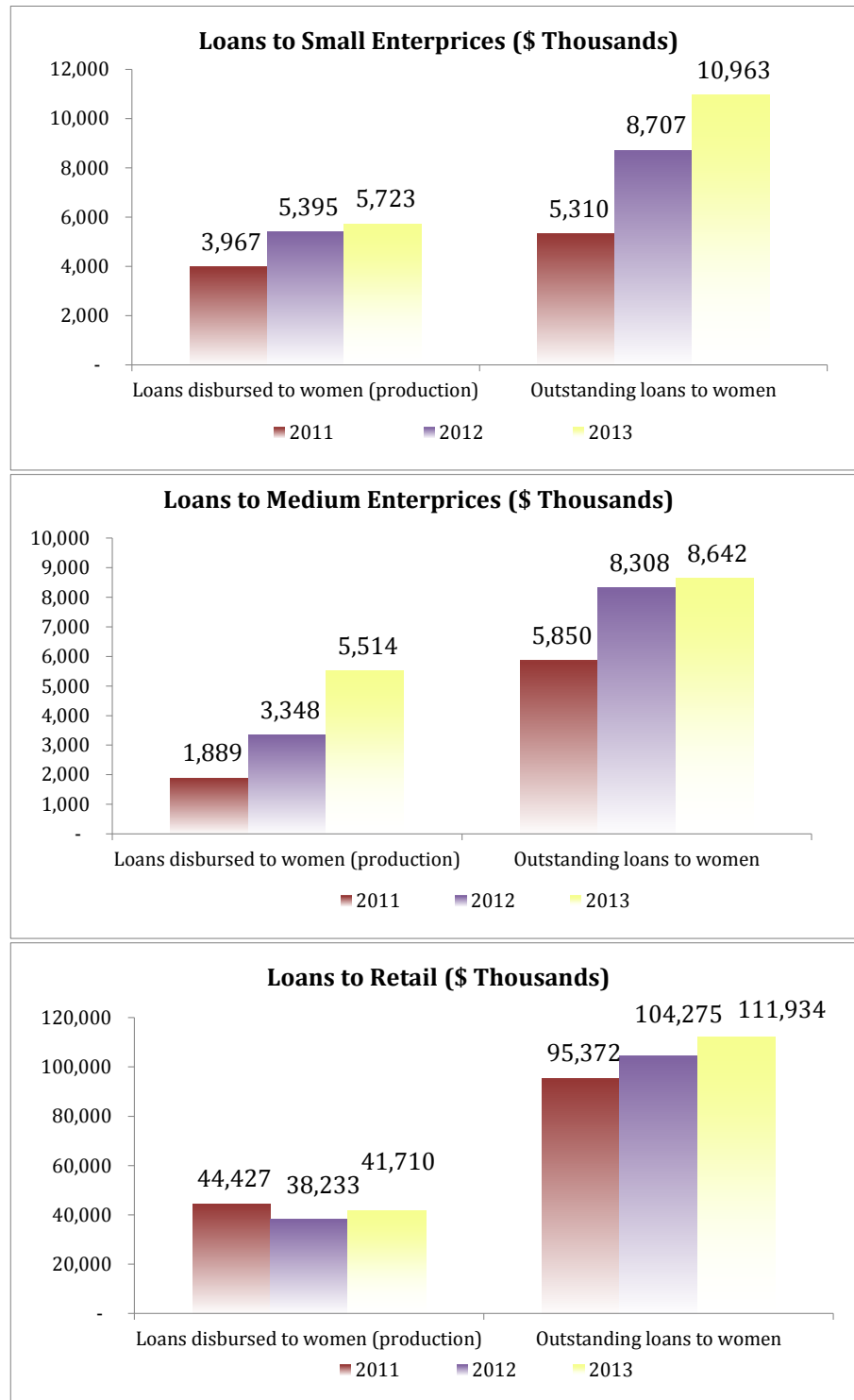


Fig. 7. Loans to Women between 2011 and 2013
 Source: Compiled by authors

CHAPTER VI

CULTURAL BARRIERS OR MENTAL BARRIERS?

Despite the cultural and discriminatory barriers that stand in the way of women development in the Middle East, BLC Bank, through its We Initiative and through its deep interaction with women in Lebanon has realized that women themselves have constructed barriers of their own, barriers that are standing in the way of their personal development over and above the pre-existing societal and cultural barriers. Demolishing these barriers therefore arises as a prerequisite to annihilating those that are set by society.

Akilian illuminated “Women need to learn to shatter the barriers that are in their own heads before asking society to do it for them.. This is the only way for them to move forward”

Spearheading the mission for eradicating cultural discrimination and existing biases towards women hence lingers as a challenge for BLC Bank. Albeit, the We Initiative surfaces as a new program aiming to instill change by paving the way for altering mindsets and cognitive frames and hence changing trends, and making a positive difference over time.

CHAPTER VII

SETTING TRENDS AND ASPIRING FORWARD

BLC Bank has set the trend in the banking industry for women in Lebanon and is on the lookout for continuous opportunities for improvement. With wide-open arms, BLC Bank is eager to share its experience and knowledge; both on a local and global level. In fact, BLC Bank has offered to host a study tour – initially planned to take place in Lebanon but was held at its subsidiary, USB Bank in Cyprus for security reasons- in April 2014 to all members of the GBA global network where BLC Bank will illustrate the best practices for developing a program for women economic empowerment. BLC Bank has furthermore contributed to guides, prepared by the GBA, that highlight the “to-do’s and “not-to do’s” when preparing an economic empowerment program for women (See Figure 8).

BLC Bank has received local and international recognition for its successful We Initiative. Tania Moussallem was elected in September 2013 to serve on the GBA’s governing board. BLC Bank has furthermore received The Women’s Empowerment leadership Award in 2012 from TNE, The New Economy Magazine, a renowned international institution.

Sehnaoui “I am very proud of the We Initiative that aims at empowering women and contributes to enhancing their financial performance.. We, as a bank, employees, agents, investors and society at large, are concerned with providing a fair and healthy environment for enhancing the concept of equality between men and women” (BLC Bank 2012).

BLC Bank hosted the **GBA Study Tour** in Cyprus from April 2nd to April 4th 2014, in the presence of many international institutions:

BHD Bank from Dominican Republic, G&T Continental from El Salvador, Bank El Etihad from Jordan, Bank of Palestine, HBL Bank from Pakistan, Cherie Blair Foundation from UK & IDB (Inter-American Development Bank).

What is GBA?

GBA, the **Global Banking Alliance** for Women, is the leading international association of financial institutions and other organizations interested in building women's wealth worldwide.

What is a GBA Study Tour?

The GBA Study Tour comprises of intensive field visits exposing new members to the best practice of global leaders in women's markets programs and topics.

The Agenda of the 3-Days Study Tour was as follows:

Day 1: Strategy for becoming the bank and employer of **choice for women**, empowering the distribution network, the external CVP.

Day 2: The power of **social media**, SME Academy **Brilliant Lebanese Awards**, measuring results.

Day 3: Women-focused **SME Approach**, Customer panels.

Fig. 8. BLC Bank's GBA Study Tour in Cyprus
Source: Compiled by authors

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