

# INTERVIEWS

spotlight on women

## CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY IN THE “WOMEN’S CENTURY”

An Interview with Muhtar Kent,  
CEO of The Coca-Cola Company

**YJIA: You have entitled the 21<sup>st</sup> century the “Women’s Century,” and you are currently a staunch advocate of women’s empowerment around the world. As the CEO of The Coca-Cola Company, why is the issue of women’s empowerment significant to you? How and when did you become inspired to focus on global women’s issues?**

Muhtar Kent: Women’s empowerment is key to the success of The Coca-Cola Company. From the influence that women have on our business within our company to their impact as consumers in the marketplace, our destiny is linked with that of women. The consumer landscape is dominated by women shoppers. They make the purchasing decisions nearly 70 percent of the time for themselves and their families. Their economic empowerment directly correlates with the health and vitality of our business. Women’s empowerment is not a nice “to do,” it is a must do. It just makes good business sense.

From an early age, my parents impressed upon me the importance of rights for all. I had a very international upbringing and spent a lot of time being in an environment where human rights and economic, political, and social development were topics of discussion. I was able to witness firsthand the power of economics on the family and how essential women’s development was to the well-being of communities.

**YJIA: Why do you think it is important for The Coca-Cola Company as a corporation to care about women’s empowerment? What responsibility and incentives do multinational corporations have in promoting women’s rights around the world?**

Muhtar Kent is Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of The Coca-Cola Company. Mr. Kent joined The Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta in 1978. From 1999 to 2005, he served as President and CEO of the Efes Beverage Group, the majority shareholder of Turkish bottler Coca-Cola Icecek, and returned to The Coca-Cola Company in May 2005. Mr. Kent holds a BS in economics from Hull University, England, and an MS in administrative sciences from London City University.

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MK: We believe we have a responsibility to be a good corporate citizen and to make a meaningful difference around the world. In the 206 countries where we operate, the health of our business depends on the health and vitality of communities. The empowerment of women is essential to the economic and social development of any nation. At The Coca-Cola Company, we have set the ambitious goal to double our revenue by 2020. We know we cannot do that without the economic growth and vitality of women, and through them, the prosperity of their families and communities.

We also believe that to be a great place to work, women's empowerment is essential. Our business strategy specifically calls out our commitment to recruit, develop, advance, and achieve true diversity.

**YJIA: From your vantage point in the private sector, where do you think lay the greatest opportunities for the advancement of women's rights?**

MK: We always are focused on finding the nexus between what is good for society and our business. When an initiative is linked to the business and grounded in the company's strategy and growth, it is sustainable. Our business system comprises nearly twenty million customers, many of whom are small retailers. They are the backbone of our business. Their entrepreneurial spirit is what makes Coca-Cola a household name everywhere around the world.

We are best positioned to help advance women when we use our strengths – branding, marketing, and selling – to increase women's ability to enter the market or to improve their level of success within the marketplace. We have decided to invest in the success of our women small business partners, helping them address the barriers they face to growing their businesses and increasing their incomes. In October, we announced our “5 BY 20” goal to empower five million women through our global business system by 2020.

**YJIA: The Coca-Cola Company has launched laudable initiatives to enhance the role of women through Micro Distribution Centers in Africa and the Women's Leadership Council. Can you briefly explain these efforts and their achievements thus far? What challenges and limitations have these initiatives faced, if any, and how can they be overcome?**

MK: The Micro Distribution Center model is one that has worked exceptionally well in many of our African markets. It is a driver of job creation and entrepreneurship in African communities. In Africa, our MDC model has provided business ownership opportunities for over a thousand women, and we will be scaling up that model globally. We have set the target that at least 50 percent of the MDCs established moving forward will be run by women. The program has increased our sales substantially where infrastructure inhibits traditional route-to-market distribution. We estimate that some \$550 million in revenue has been earned through MDCs in Africa annually.

We are also focused on empowering women within our own system. I have the honor of being involved in our Women's Leadership Council, which was established in late 2007 as a key component of our Global Women's Initiative. This is the focal point of our strategic plan to accelerate the global recruitment, development, advancement,

and retention of women at the Company. The Council serves as an advisory board to our Company’s leadership team and has made good progress since it was established.

**YJIA: What other efforts would you like Coca-Cola to pursue in enhancing women’s rights around the world?**

MK: The Coca-Cola system is committed to using our unique skills to not only help women’s economic empowerment but also their social development. Often, women’s empowerment and social development go hand in hand. For example, our water stewardship efforts are not only helping provide access to clean water and sanitation in communities, but are also helping communities understand how to better manage their water resources. In many parts of Africa, women are responsible for securing clean drinking water for the family, so improving water access will directly benefit the women in those communities.

HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention, counseling and testing is important to the health and safety of Coca-Cola workers – some 65,000 in Africa – and their dependants, and we have the most comprehensive private program on the continent. We also heavily invest in education in Africa, including nutrition education and physical activity programs.

**YJIA: In some societies the impediments to women’s rights and empowerment are cultural. For example, in Saudi Arabia women still do not have the right to vote. How can The Coca-Cola Company and other multinational corporations help promote women’s rights in these contexts?**

MK: We believe that we are best suited to empower women economically through our business system. Together with the public sector and civil society, we are committed to making a meaningful difference in the vitality and health of communities. We do this first and foremost by bringing them into our global business system and giving them the skills and training that they need to be successful.

**YJIA: In addition to the ways that Coca-Cola is helping to empower women around the world, you have said that women will help “transform The Coca-Cola Company over the next decade and beyond.” Can you explain how?**

MK: We know that women will increasingly have jobs of greater responsibility and accountability at The Coca-Cola Company in the coming years. We know this because the Women’s Leadership Council created the goal of having 50 percent of middle management and senior positions filled by women by 2020. This goal was introduced as part of the 2020 Vision. Greater influence by women at the top will change not only the culture at our Company, but also the ways in which we go to market.

Then if you look at our external influences, we know that women will continue to increase their social, economic, and political standing in the world. Their influence on business will only increase – not only as consumers, but as opinion shapers, business leaders, and key stakeholders.

**YJIA: Do you think there are opportunities for public-private partnerships with the U.S. government and international organizations to empower women globally, and if so, what are these opportunities?**

MK: I call it the “golden triangle.” The combination of business, government, and civil society is an extremely strong trio. We can do much more together than we would be able to achieve independently.

We will leverage the power of this golden triangle for our “5 BY 20” initiative, and we are putting this model to work in Haiti. Our Haiti Hope Project launched in March 2010 aims to double the income of 25,000 mango farmers in Haiti. This \$7.5 million, five-year initiative is a joint partnership

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with the Haitian government, the United States Government through USAID, the Inter-America Development Bank’s Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF), the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission, and the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund. We intend to develop the skills of women farmers through this project and to bring them into mango production at an increased level.

**YJIA: In recent speeches, you have expressed excitement about the changing nature of women’s entrepreneurship around the world.**

**Can you explain this trend? What do you think has helped propel women’s entrepreneurship in the past few decades, and what continues to impede it?**

MK: I believe that women will drive the agenda from a social, political, and economic perspective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. As women have gained greater access to education and economic power, we have seen their influence in all of these sectors soar. I have often said that women by nature are better salespeople, and I believe that to be the case. I also think women are incredible people managers – perhaps because I have been managed successfully by women all of my life, first by my mother, and now by my wife of thirty-one years and daughter. I do not take for granted that there are still many barriers to women achieving the same level of parity professionally and economically, but those barriers are constantly being broken down by the tenacity and intelligence of women. **Y**

– *Interview conducted by Hanna Azemati.*