



Towards a World Bank Group Gender Strategy Consultation Meeting: July 23, 2015 Feedback Summary Colombo, Sri Lanka

The consultation meeting with **private sector leaders** was held on **July 23, 2015** in **Colombo, Sri Lanka**. After a presentation by the World Bank Group Gender Team on the background, intended scope and process for the strategy, the floor was open for participants' comments and recommendations. The summary below captures the main points and recommendations raised during the meeting.

Total Number of Participants: 12. A participant list is available [here](#).

Feedback from Stakeholders

1. TYPES OF CONSTRAINTS/ BARRIERS THAT WOMEN AND MEN FACE WHEN IT COMES TO OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The World Bank Group (WBG) should prioritize the following constraints in the private sector:

- **Educational streaming.** Currently, women stream primarily into the Arts and are underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. This streaming has led to very few women engaging in private sector work, since studying the Arts tends to lead to government jobs. To better understand the gender gap in STEM, exploring the gender gap according to location (rural vs. urban areas) was also suggested.
- **Labour market information.** There is lack of information on job opportunities available in the private sector, particularly among women. Raising awareness about the types of opportunities and relevant skills was suggested. Organizing job fairs at provincial level was proposed as one solution. Improving the match between education/skills development and the labour market is critical.
- **Occupational sex segregation.** Exploring the drivers of why women predominate in the apparel and plantation sectors was suggested. Instead of fighting against occupational sex segregation, working to improve the conditions of work in fields where women predominate and upgrading their skills was suggested. For example, promoting shifts from household domestic labour to

professional housekeeping in the hospitality sector.

- **Vocational training.** Work on changing attitudes towards vocational training was suggested. Often technical trades are not as highly regarded as office work. Vocational training could provide women with alternatives outside government employment.
- **Access to finance.** Currently, rates of financial literacy for both men and women are low. Lack of access to collateral also poses a challenge. Widows are especially excluded by the financial system because they are perceived to be more risky, even when they do have access to collateral. The process for accessing microcredit was thought to be too onerous.
- **Entrepreneurship.** The need to promote market access for small and medium enterprises was noted. Currently, Sri Lanka has mostly “necessity entrepreneurs” rather than “opportunity entrepreneurs”. Many microfinance organizations are engaged in collateral free lending and group lending; these tend to benefit women more than men. However, bad practices are prevalent, therefore more regulation in the area of microfinance is critical.
- **Sexual and reproductive health and rights.** Comprehensive sex education is essential. Currently, this remains an area of controversy among parents and teachers.

2. BEST EXAMPLES OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT COMPANIES HAVE PUT IN PLACE TO ADDRESS QUALITY OF EMPLOYMENT FOR MEN AND WOMEN

- **Safe transport.** A company also shared that it provides **transportation** for its female workers after 6pm, this has helped to pull women into their workforce and improve their retention rates.
- **Intimate partner violence.** To address IPV among its employees, one company provides counselling to address the issue among its employees.
- Companies have also implemented **flexible workplace policies**, such as home-based work, to retain women workers. The private sector in Sri Lanka is leading in this area, improvements were suggested for government employers.
- **Community-based employment.** One company shared that it provides skills training in certain communities and then establishes work centers in those areas. This removes the need to travel for women who face challenges to their mobility. Additionally, the company establishes savings schemes and women’s associations to help women become organized.
- **Control over resources.** Certain plantations have taken measures to make direct deposits directly into women’s accounts to ensure that they have full control over their incomes.

3. COMPANIES INITIATIVES ABOUT CARE RESPONSIBILITIES OF EMPLOYEES

- **Providing a holistic approach to employment.** Due to the challenge of high rates of unskilled migration among women in Sri Lanka, a fair trade company has implemented a more holistic alternative. It establishes **local workshops** in women’s communities so that they can work in a culturally-familiar setting. The company also provides **training in many areas, including skills development, substance abuse, entrepreneurship training and work-life balance.** Additionally, the company provides **care services**, in the form of on-site daycare facilities with English education for the children. This approach has reportedly been successfully increased the

number of women who are staying in their villages. Moreover, the on-site childcare has helped with the stigma of leaving one's children with strangers.

- Another example of a **private sector care solution** was shared. **An IT company also provides on-site crèches.** Additionally, the crèches have **cameras with live feeds** that stream directly to parents' workstations. This approach has shown promise in the area of women's employment.

4. WHETHER SEXUAL HARASSMENT OR VIOLENCE OF MEN/WOMEN HAS BEEN AN IMPEDIMENT TO SMOOTH BUSINESS OPERATIONS

- One company shared its challenges with sexual harassment, which has been a challenge to smooth operations. In the plantation sector, while there have been efforts to increase the number of women in middle management, they often face sexual harassment when they get there. Additionally, this sector has challenges with gender-based violence, since labourers reside on the estates. In addition to establishing sexual harassment policies, the sector has been engaging with men through NGOs on issues of masculinities to help address the problem.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW THE WORLD BANK GROUP CAN BETTER SUPPORT COMPANIES IN THEIR EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR SYSTEMS WITH RESPECT TO GENDER EQUALITY TO YIELD MORE SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

The WBG can better support companies in yielding more sustainable results by:

- Creating a **national dialogue on gender equality.** The topic was considered to be an "invisible topic" in the public arena.
- Working with companies **to assess best practices and establish benchmarks** in the area of women's employment.
- In the area of **gender-based violence, work with companies to develop good practices** and help them with implementation.
- **Working with the private sector to promote nutrition.** Malnutrition is a challenge, therefore promoting the provision of nutritious meals to employees could make a large impact.
- Giving attention to medium enterprises, not just small or large. Moreover, **support for social enterprises is needed.** Currently, a specific legal registration for social enterprises does not exist, an organization can only register as an NGO or a private company.
- **Working with government entities to organize job fairs.**