

GENDER-SMART BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

Serena Hotels
Takes Leadership
Role in Tackling
Barriers to Women's
Employment in
Pakistan





The International Finance Corporation's Women's Employment

Program provides gender-smart business solutions to IFC clients in Manufacturing, Agribusiness, and Services. Through the program, IFC partners with private sector businesses globally to assess their practices on gender equality and advise them on how to advance women's employment in their workplace. This series highlights the results of these partnerships and their impact on company diversity and bottom line. We also acknowledge and appreciate the generous support provided by the Government of Canada, which made possible these advisory initiatives on women's employment.

CLIENT

Serena Hotels comprises 36 luxury resorts, safari lodges, and hotels located in East Africa and Central and South Asia. This project was developed in Serena Hotels Pakistan.

THE CHALLENGE

A commitment to achieving gender equality is a pillar of the company's corporate culture. Serena Hotels implemented gender-inclusive initiatives to attract more women and received an IFC-PBC Gender Balance Award for these efforts. Yet, the share of women in its workforce remained persistently low, also influenced by Pakistan's cultural norms and gender stereotypes that limit women's access to certain occupations, including the tourism and hospitality industry.

IFC'S ROLE

IFC conducted a gender diagnostic of the hotel's workforce to understand the country and company context and identify barriers and drivers of women's employment and career development at Serena Hotels.

RESULTS

In 2020, Serena Hotels became the first company in Pakistan and the second company in the global hospitality industry to receive the EDGE Gender Certification for advancing gender equality. Based on IFC recommendations, the organization is also implementing measures to close gender gaps in its workforce: the goal is to double its female employee ratio and boost the share of women in the top and middle management.

CONTEXT

Being the fifth most populous country in the world, Pakistan has a solid female talent pool: 48.8 percent of the population are women¹, and an estimated 60 million are of working age². Despite increased educational participation and attainment, female employment still lags behind. At the global level, women currently represent 38.8 percent of the labor force³, but this number drops to 21.67 percent in Pakistan⁴. Women's access gap in the labor market is challenged by structural gender barriers, cultural norms, family priorities, and a lack of gender-sensitive policies at the workplace.

Social norms and traditional gender stereotypes also influence women's access to some sectors and certain occupations that are not deemed suitable. Considering the tourism and hospitality sector, 54 percent of people employed worldwide are women, while in Pakistan they comprise only 3.29 percent of the accommodation workforce⁵. In addition, this industry employs female staff at the lower levels but very few in higher management. Moreover, women's hourly rate tends to be significantly lower than men's across regions. Yet tourism and hospitality remain a key driver of economic growth, with potential for large-scale job creation, especially for women.

Hotel chains are stepping up to empower women by supporting diverse leadership models, investing in new skills to strengthen the female pipeline, and providing incentives to balance work and family. At the same time, the Government of Pakistan has initiated dedicated efforts to overcome gender inequality (SDG Goal 5) and increase women's representation in the workforce. Initiatives move from preventing workplace harassment and gender-based violence to dedicated quotas in different sectors.

In this scenario, gender-smart business solutions enable Serena Hotels to address operational and workforce challenges, offer business benefits, and provide a favorable environment for female economic participation⁶.

COMPANY

Serena Hotels in Pakistan made a decision to become a pioneer in gender inclusion in the national tourism and hospitality sector. The chain operates six luxury hotels, resorts, and lodges in the South Asian nation. It is owned and operated by Tourism Promotion Services Pakistan Limited (TPSP), an Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) subsidiary.

Serena Hotels' leadership has long been committed to gender equality in its workforce, introducing initiatives to increase the share of women employees across its properties. These sought, among other things, to identify female talent through training and development programs and to increase the visibility of senior female executives through town hall sessions and employee resource groups⁷. In 2018, the company received an Employer of Choice for Gender Balance Award granted by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Pakistan Business Council (PBC) as part of a joint initiative to strengthen gender inclusion among PBC member companies under the IFC Women's Employment Program.

Still, like other companies in Pakistan, Serena Hotels faced challenges in hiring and retaining women employees. As of 2017, women made up only 10 percent of the company's 1,800-strong workforce. In addition to the socio-cultural norms impacting the gender gap in employment, the hotels' chain identified various limitations to attract female workers. These include the global need to invest in higher education as a strategic development priority, facilitating safer workplaces and infrastructure for women, and implementing flexible arrangements to improve low employment rates among working mothers.

To address this situation, in 2019, Serena Hotels partnered with IFC to conduct a gender diagnostic of its workforce using the globally recognized Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) assessment and certification methodology. This was the second time Serena Hotels and IFC collaborated. The partnership between both institutions began in 2007, when IFC invested in the expansion of Islamabad Serena Hotel.

ASSESSMENT

IFC analyzed Serena Hotel's human resources data disaggregated by gender, reviewed company policies and practices, conducted interviews and focus groups with staff members, and deployed an employee survey. The accompanying gender workforce diagnostic sought to understand the country and company context and the potential barriers to, and drivers of, women's employment and career development in the company.

The hotel's female staff ratio was 10 percent and women were underrepresented across all levels. Numerous studies have shown that gender diversity boosts a company's performance and returns, but this finding is even more relevant for the tourism and hospitality sector, where there's an interaction with a diverse customer base. It is "mission-critical" for hotels to have diverse staff and management to understand clients' needs better⁸.

IFC's assessment found that Serena Hotels' gender imbalance was partly due to high levels of male recruitment and higher female staff turnover (20 percent versus 12 percent). Overall, women were more likely to leave in managerial tracks (junior, middle, and top management levels), hampering their efforts to achieve gender equality. IFC also found that Serena Hotels had a significant gender gap in terms of candidates chosen for leadership training at the middle management level. The hotel had a strong female talent pool at junior levels, but their numbers decreased moving up through the talent

pipeline. Despite the company's nondiscriminatory recruitment and promotion policies, women's career growth was impacted by perceptions of female talent as less qualified candidates.

The survey findings also showed female staff perceived the company had a gender pay gap, which was confirmed by the gender diagnostic findings. On average, women were paid less than men for comparable work, a problem prevalent in the global tourism and hospitality sector. The pay gap was wider in Serena Hotels' properties outside Islamabad.

According to the assessment, the company offered certain benefits, such as reduced evening shifts for female staff to support their work-life balance. Still, the limited availability of other flexible work arrangements and insufficient affordable childcare options disproportionately affected women. Finally, despite the company providing transport to all their staff, the lack of convenient and affordable housing options and inefficient transportation services, especially in Islamabad, also hindered women's professional growth.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The IFC assessment helped strengthen Serena Hotels' commitment to gender equality through concrete and measurable actions. The EDGE Gender Certification was a step in that direction. IFC also recommended measures to distinguish Serena Hotels as a leader in the tourism and hospitality sector and in Pakistan. IFC supported the company in developing a detailed action plan covering six key areas of intervention.

1. **EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK:** The assessment found Serena Hotels did not have in place an assessment to regularly measure and ensure that men and women receive equal pay for equivalent work. Implementing transparent remuneration practices and communicating internally have been proven to increase employee satisfaction and retention. IFC recommended that Serena Hotels conduct yearly gender pay-gap assessments, remediate any gaps, and communicate the company's commitment to gender pay equity.
2. **GENDER-SENSITIVE RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTION:** IFC recommended several strategies to help Serena Hotels recruit and retain top female talent and increase the percentage of women in its workforce. These include systematically considering gender in succession planning for key leadership positions; setting ambitious targets for female recruitment; developing an HR policy and interview process checklist to eliminate biases; and conducting equal-opportunity, nondiscriminatory recruitment and training.
3. **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND MENTORING:** Diversity in teams and leadership has been shown to boost innovation and productivity, but Serena Hotels did not have in place formal mentoring programs to support employees, especially women. IFC recommended that Serena Hotels set up formal mentorship programs for female and male employees and ensure equitable promotions for both groups, setting targets for the gender composition of its top talent, improving the transparency of the promotion process, and tracking promotion rates for men and women across the organization.
4. **FLEXIBLE-WORK OPTIONS:** Serena Hotels had a menu of flexible-work options in place, but they were not designed to meet employees' specific needs. IFC recommended that Serena Hotels regularly assess its flex-work options based on employee and business needs, adjust them accordingly, and communicate the policies and any changes to employees. Suggestions varied from identifying job roles where flex work is possible and developing a policy to regulate it, using upper management staff as role models practicing flex work, or motivating men to benefit from flexible work schedules. IFC also recommended that the company find other ways to support employees with care responsibilities, such as expanding its childcare offerings or encouraging uptake of existing paid paternity leave for male staff.
5. **COMPANY CULTURE:** Fostering a respectful work environment stood out as an important theme for staff in the employee survey. IFC proposed several strategies that could help make company employees feel safe and comfortable in the workplace. These include developing gender sensitization, respectful workplaces and unconscious bias training for all staff members, deploying internal communications campaigns around respect, and creating forums that allow employees to voice grievances and concerns anonymously.
6. **INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS:** IFC recommended strengthening Serena Hotel's internal communications strategy by highlighting the benefits of gender diversity in the workplace and offering guidelines to create an inclusive environment for staff, thus improving employee engagement and culture alignment. These efforts replicated externally could help attract more female talent and position Serena Hotels as an employer of choice.

RESULTS & IMPACT

In 2020, Serena Hotels became the first company in Pakistan and the second company in the global hospitality industry to receive the EDGE Gender Certification. This global certification measures and benchmarks where organizations stand in terms of gender balance, pay equity, and other issues related to inclusiveness. The company achieved this milestone despite the social and cultural challenges of employing women in Pakistan. As the only EDGE-certified company in the country, and one of the few in the tourism and hospitality sector globally, Serena Hotels Pakistan demonstrates how companies can overcome barriers to gender equality in the workplace not only for its industry peers in Pakistan but also for the tourism sector worldwide.

In addition to measuring the gender gap in its hotels using the EDGE methodology, Serena Hotels Pakistan has committed to fostering gender equality in its workforce through an action plan to create more gender-sensitive policies.

Based on IFC's recommendations, and in alignment with Pakistan's Government efforts towards women's economic empowerment, Serena Hotels is implementing a series of measures to close gender gaps in its workforce. For example, the company is looking for ways to make its transportation facilities and allowances more efficient in response to staff feedback and requests for more drivers, vans, and better routes.

As part of a wider transformation process and commitment to employing mothers in a gender-inclusive work environment, the hotel chain designed a childcare facility in-house. This benefit allows parents to bring their infants to work and better reconcile commitments in their professional and domestic lives while reducing absenteeism.

The company also reviewed its procedures to encourage women's recruitment, retention, and promotion and equal access to capacity building.

As a result, Serena Hotels introduced an education assistance policy to support staff career progression and alternative work schedules to accommodate time for training, studies, and professional development across all social demographics.

With these efforts, Serena Hotels aims to more than double its female employee ratio and boost women's share in the top and middle management.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the expected timeline for this plan, which continues to be a priority in the post-pandemic company strategy.



Women make up 10 percent of our overall workforce, despite many social and cultural challenges. As a leading hotel chain, Serena Hotels makes every effort to encourage women in their professional development to assume higher positions, including leadership roles”.

—Aziz Boolani, CEO, Serena Hotels Pakistan

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan, 2017. National Census Report 2017, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan
- 2 Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2
- 3 UNDP (2021) “Womenomics: Women powering the economy of Pakistan, Development Advocate Pakistan” DOI: https://www.pk.undp.org/content/pakistan/en/home/library/development_policy/dap-special-edition-womenomics-march2021.html
- 4 World Bank. Labor Force, Female (% of Total Labor Force) (database). Washington, DC. DOI: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=PK>
- 5 World Tourism Organization (2019) “Global Report on Women in Tourism – Second Edition” UNWTO, Madrid DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420384>
- 6 Baum, Tom, and Catherine Cheung (2015) “White Paper: Women in Tourism & Hospitality: Unlocking the Potential in the Talent Pool.” White paper produced by the Hospitality Industry Pipeline Coalition for the Women in Tourism and Hospitality Forum, Hong Kong DOI https://travel.report/Resources/Whitepapers/4e9acf78-4005-4d3c-b980-a6e239b1035c_women_in_hospitality_tourism_white_paper.pdf.
- 7 Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are voluntary, employee-led groups that foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aligned with the organization’s mission, values, goals, business practices, and objectives. These groups also seek to support the development of future leaders, increase employee engagement, and expand market reach.
- 8 Korn Ferry. 2020. Report “Women in Hospitality, Travel, and Leisure 2020: WiH 2020 Review”.



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