South Asia Gateway Terminals

Opening the doors for women to join shipping and logistics sector

Commitment to action
About IFC

IFC—a member of the World Bank Group—is the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in emerging markets. We work in more than 100 countries, using our capital, expertise, and influence to create markets and opportunities in developing countries. In fiscal year 2020, we invested $22 billion in private companies and financial institutions in developing countries, leveraging the power of the private sector to end extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity. For more information, visit www.ifc.org.

About IFC’s Women in Work Program in Sri Lanka

Women in Work (WiW) is a five-year, $9.5 million initiative launched in partnership with the Australian government in April 2017. It is IFC’s largest, standalone country-based gender program designed to close gender gaps in the private sector while improving business performance. The program, which benefits from multisector program design and works closely with the World Bank on research, tackles women’s access to jobs and assets at the same time. It aims to increase women’s workforce participation in Sri Lanka’s private sector, create more and better jobs for women, and has the potential to increase profits and drive overall economic growth. WiW also contributes to the vision of the government of Sri Lanka where all citizens can achieve higher incomes and better standards of living by 2025.

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South Asia Gateway Terminals (SAGT), a flagship venture of the Board of Investment (BOI) and the first public private partnership container terminal in Sri Lanka, commenced operations in 1999, launching the Port of Colombo as a global gateway hub to South Asia. SAGT has over 700 employees of which 4 percent are women.

**FIGHTING THE TIDE TO BRING MORE WOMEN TO SEA**

In an industry where the global average for women’s participation is 4 percent, SAGT, has made concerted efforts to bring more women into the business. Great strides have been made in the executive cadre where a 17-percentage point increase brought the total share of women to 28 percent. SAGT has increased number of women for back-office vacancies as evidenced by the recently opened Assistant Manager and Junior Executive positions being filled with female candidates. For the first time in two decades, SAGT boasts seven women employed in the engineering department. The company has introduced a targeted internship program, where it actively canvasses for female candidates – the current intern pool has an all-time high of 11 women.

Future executive positions will also be targeted towards female candidates. SAGT will leverage existing local sports sponsorships, including with the Sri Lankan women’s rugby team, to develop the network for potential candidates.

**CREATING A SAFE AND RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE FOR ALL**

A comprehensive anti-sexual harassment policy was introduced, and staff were educated via communications in three languages. Posters, seminars and workshops as well as email communications were used to ensure all layers of staff were reached through the awareness exercises. SAGT also implemented a third-party grievance mechanism for transparent and trustworthy reporting, conducting awareness sessions to all staff on the operational procedures of making a complaint.
Ayesha’s Story

Ayesha Abeyratne
Junior Executive Engineering Planner

The first woman to be hired into the SAGT engineering department in 2018, Ayesha Abeyratne felt the pressure to prove her mettle. Fresh out of University, she was tasked with introducing a new system to improve the efficacy of crane maintenance planning.

‘There was a bit of a culture shock, I had to prove myself as a young professional in a non-conventional role,’ Ayesha said recalling the challenges she faced on the job. ‘What I really appreciate is that the management didn’t tell me to back down. They always told me to go out there, learn everything I need to know and strive to make a valuable contribution towards the organization.

Ayesha is a trailblazer in an industry that struggles to attract female talent. Social perceptions around job roles deter candidates from applying.

A mechanical engineer by qualification, Ayesha says that she was reluctant to pursue her passion when she was choosing her electives at university. ‘I was not sure if I should choose a job in Chemical engineering instead, because girls get jobs in Chemical but not in Mechanical. They don’t want girls out there in the yard. But I am so glad that I took the plunge and stuck to what I love.

I think the only way to change the status quo is to have more women in these roles and be leaders.’

Speaking of the impact that Ayesha’s appointment has had, Assistant Manager - Sourcing and Procurement, Nilusha Jayamaha, said, ‘In the last two years I do feel that there has been a difference in the work environment for women. The recruitment drives have targeted more women and it is great to see that we had our first female engineer in the department, Ayesha who is a role model for other young women wanting to join the industry.’

Ayesha is now joined by another female colleague in the Engineering department. Reflecting on the change these introductions have made with other staff, Thushara Jayawardana General Manager of HR at SAGT noted, The paradigm has shifted from the yard floor upwards, where workers see that women can do these jobs. Having two women now in the engineering department has made a great change.’

‘When I was young, I used to watch the ships coming into the Port of Colombo and wonder at how amazing it would be to work here.’ said Ayesha, adding a note to any aspiring female mechanical engineers, ‘Don’t give up on your dreams. You will get a job when you graduate and there is a place for you in the workplace.’
FACING COVID-19

Identified as an essential service, SAGT immediately introduced a slew of safety regulations and protocols to ensure uninterrupted services. Staff and other key stakeholders underwent enhanced health and safety procedures as well as stringent health monitoring. SAGT has embraced digital solutions to enhance ease of doing business, collaborating with TradeLens, a blockchain-powered data platform to improve operational efficacy and implementing a state-of-the-art visitor management system and e-clearance delivery advise (e-DA) process via email.

Non-essential staff and all support staff operations were moved to work from home during the pandemic lockdown. The company provided transport for all staff who were required to report to work, providing all meals and regular health check-ups.
The IFC-DFAT Woman in Work program in Sri Lanka, partnering with leading private sector companies, aims to demonstrate that corporate performances can improve from closing gaps between women and men in the private sector.