John Keells Holdings

Taking decisive action towards gender parity in the workplace

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.

COPYRIGHT AND DISCLAIMER NOTICE
© International Finance Corporation 2020. All rights reserved.
2121 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20433
Internet: www.ifc.org

The material in this work is copyrighted. Copying and/or transmitting portions or all of this work without permission may be a violation of applicable law. IFC encourages dissemination of its work and will normally grant permission to reproduce portions of the work promptly, and when the reproduction is for educational and non-commercial purposes, without a fee, subject to such attributions and notices as we may reasonably require.

IFC does not guarantee the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of the content included in this work, or for the conclusions or judgments described herein, and accepts no responsibility or liability for any omissions or errors (including, without limitation, typographical errors and technical errors) in the content whatsoever or for reliance thereon. The boundaries, colors, denominations, and other information shown on any map in this work do not imply any judgement on the part of the World Bank Group concerning the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this volume do not necessarily reflect the views of the Executive Directors of the World Bank Group or the governments they represent. The contents of this work are intended for general informational purposes only and are not intended to constitute legal, securities, or investment advice, an opinion regarding the appropriateness of any investment, or a solicitation of any type.

IFC or its affiliates may have an investment in, provide other advice or services to, or otherwise have a financial interest in, certain of the companies and parties (including named herein).

All other queries on rights and licenses, including subsidiary rights, should be addressed to IFC Communications, 2121 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20433. International Finance Corporation is an international organization established by Articles of Agreement among its member countries, and a member of the World Bank Group. All names, logos and trademarks are the property of IFC and you may not use any of such materials for any purpose without the express written consent of IFC. Additionally, “International Finance Corporation” and “IFC” are registered trademarks of IFC and are protected under international law.

November 2020
John Keells Holdings PLC (JKH) is Sri Lanka’s largest listed company on the Colombo Stock Exchange. JKH operates across seven industries through 70 companies. JKH businesses span hotels and resorts in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, ports, logistics, life insurance, IT solutions, manufacturing of food and beverages, and supermarkets. The company has a workforce of over 15,000 of which 29 percent are women.

**INCREASING THE NUMBER OF WOMEN ACROSS THE ALL WORK LEVELS**

JKH at present, through its newly formed Diversity and Inclusion team is working on formalizing targets and strategies towards achieving gender parity, but over the last three years has had business unit specific interventions to increase the number of women in the workforce. This led to a 5-percentage point increase in the share of women recruits over a span of two years. Special focus was given to the retail and leisure sectors, where the participation of women is low across Sri Lanka.

**HOLDING MANAGERS ACCOUNTABLE – KEELLS SUPERMARKETS**

A ‘Hire women or explain’ policy was introduced by the Keells supermarket chain for jobs traditionally done by men. As part of this policy one focus area was that each Keells supermarket manager was asked to ensure that the meat counter team included women and managers were required to make an official explanation if this requirement was not met. To increase the number of female applicants for the outlets, a targeted recruitment campaign was rolled out, featuring women supermarket employees. The advertising campaign was designed to tackle negative social stereotypes which were preventing women from applying for jobs in retail.

“The

We conducted a study to understand why we were getting a very low number of applications from females for supermarket jobs. What we understood was that the society perceived women working in supermarkets were less worthy of marriage and that only men did supermarket jobs, especially in places like the meat counters. To challenge this, we ran campaigns with women front and center of our supermarket chain.”

Ashan Ransilige
Vice President John Keells Group –Head of HR Retail sector

**BUSINESS RESULTS:**

- Increase in share of women in senior leadership (Vice President and above) from 19% to 24%
- Increase in share of women in executive and assistant manager roles from 30% to 35%
- Increase in share of women in non-executive roles from 23% to 28%
- Share of women in new recruits, has increased in the executive cadre by 3% and Non-executive cadre by 5%
- Increase in total share of women in the workforce
Lasanthi's Story

Lasanthi Madagama
Meat counter Supervisor, Keells Supermarket
Makola

Lasanthi Madagama was a single mom when she joined Keells Supermarkets. The need to provide for her son, amidst economic hardships prompted Lasanthi to accept a position in the supermarket chain’s bakery as a customer service assistant.

After a fruitful nine years with the company, Lasanthi had to resign to care for her son due to personal circumstances. In 2020 Lasanthi was able to rejoin the workforce and given her experience, this time as a senior customer service assistant, to a male-dominated meat counter. Identifying her potential, she was nominated by her regional manager to participate in the Keells career acceleration program ‘Be the Boss Challenge’ and within three months of her return she was promoted to the Makola outlet as a meat counter supervisor.

“When I rejoined the company, I thought it will take a few years for me to grow into a supervisory role, but because of the confidence my supervisors placed in me to participate in the ‘Be the Boss Challenge’, I feel like I was able to achieve career progression more quickly,” said Lasanthi, adding that as the first female meat counter supervisor in the company, she was glad to see more women taking on the job across the chain.
Paving the Way for More Women in the Leisure Sector

To overcome the entrenched cultural norms that prevent more women from working in Sri Lanka’s leisure sector, JKH’s Cinnamon Hotel chain introduced gender targets, which require each hotel to employ a minimum of 15 percent women. The company plans to increase the target to 20 percent in the coming year.

To encourage more women to apply for jobs at Cinnamon Hotels, targeted recruitment drives were rolled out where candidates were requested to be accompanied by a parent to the initial interview. Parents were encouraged to participate and ask questions to help understand the company culture and address reservations. This allowed applicants to progress through the recruitment process with the support of their families and communities.

A women’s employee resource group, ‘Yeheliya’ (female friend), was introduced at each Cinnamon hotel. Employees were encouraged to raise concerns and share challenges with the HR teams and management through Yeheliya. As a result, the company invested 12 million rupees in improving quarters for female hotel employees. These measures have increased the participation on women in hotel chain from 10 percent in 2018 to 12 percent in 2019.

Nurturing Leaders in the Leisure Sector

Cinnamon Maldives appointed the chain’s first female assistant manager in 2019. In Sri Lanka, the first woman front office manager was appointed at a Cinnamon city hotel.

JKH’s Cinnamon Hotel chain introduced gender targets, which require each hotel to employ a minimum of 15% women. The company plans to increase the target to 20% in the coming year.

“Cinnamon Hotels selected me as one of staff members who were awarded a scholarship to study at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management in Dubai. I received two weeks training in management and leadership skills development. This was the biggest exposure I have received in my career so far. After this training I received a promotion as Executive Housekeeper at the Cinnamon Bey Beruwala, where I supervise 25 percent of the staff at the hotel. Managing around 200 rooms it was a big challenge, but the company supported me to be ready and take on this position of leadership.”

Thanuja Jayanethi
Executive Housekeeper, Cinnamon Bey Beruwala
FORTIFYING THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES

Building on the existing code of conduct and anti-sexual harassment policy, JKH recently revised the policy with enhanced reporting mechanisms, based on discussions and suggestions from employees. Taking a stance of zero tolerance, the policy is supported through transparent, auditable reporting and automatic escalation. Employees were educated on the policy and encouraged to be open and come forward with any concerns. Detailed communications were shared with staff at all tiers, and refresher programs and quizzes were conducted by the HR team.

FACING COVID-19

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, JKH undertook various Group-wide initiatives to support staff, customers and the wider community.

• Agile Working
  During the COVID-19 lockdown, JKH, in addition to the existing flexi-work policy which was in play, introduced agile work at a group level. An agile work policy has been developed and is being piloted across select sectors. Job roles have been assessed based on their ability to function remotely and work from home has been assigned accordingly. The company is conducting detailed monitoring and evaluation on remote work to measure employee satisfaction and productivity.

• Community Service
  In order to rapidly increase Sri Lanka’s testing capacity, John Keells Foundation (JKF) in collaboration with SAGT and Deutsche Bank, contributed to the establishment of a Molecular Diagnostic Laboratory at National Institute of Infectious Diseases (IDH) pending the establishment of a permanent facility. This temporary facility became operational on 29 March 2020. JKF also donated personal protective equipment to five hospitals.

Moreover, JKF together with other Group companies distributed 12,500 packs of essential provisions free of charge to affected families in the Colombo district as identified by the Government Agent.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, JKH, in addition to the existing flexi-work policy which was in play, introduced agile work at a group level.

"It has been incredible to see how empowered and vocal the women have become, compared to a few years ago. I sit on the sexual harassment complaints review committee and I see that our staff are not fearful to call out and report behaviors that they are uncomfortable with. Given the socio-cultural environment, it is great to see that women are not fearful and have the confidence to make their voice heard.”

Nadija Tambiah
Executive Vice President, Head of Legal and CSR JKH

“The communications have been at every level on the anti-harassment policy, and new recruits go through an awareness session as part of their induction and annually, all staff take a refresher quiz on the policy to check understanding. The policy is very detailed and covers issues such as power dynamics and employees are given alternative mechanism when a direct supervisor is involved.”

Imani Perera
Assistant Vice President – Head of Learning and Development JKH
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.