

EVALUATION WOMEN IN WORK PROGRAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Women in Work Program

Background

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) commissioned SEO Amsterdam Economics (SEO) and the Kandy Consulting Group (KCG) to conduct an impact evaluation of its Women in Work (WiW) program in Sri Lanka.

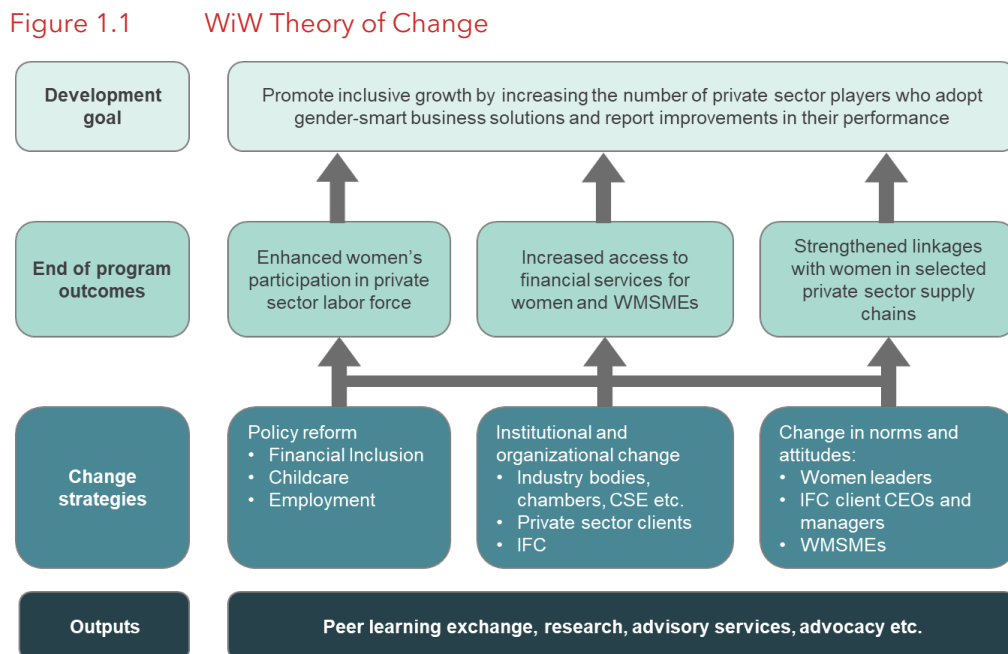
Established in 2017, the WiW program was a six-year partnership between the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and IFC, and ended in June 2023. IFC commissioned the evaluation in order to (1) assess the results of the program, in particular its strategic relevance and overall effectiveness; (2) distil lessons learned and recommendations for similar future interventions.

The WiW program aims to promote inclusive growth in Sri Lanka by addressing gender disparities within the private sector while simultaneously enhancing overall business performance. This initiative is rooted in the fact that female participation in the country is currently low in comparison to other countries, primarily due to certain gender norms and policies that often result in the exclusion of women from various opportunities.

The program aimed to deliver impact across three key areas (“pillars”):

1. Enhancing women’s participation in the private sector,
2. Increasing access to financial services for women and women-owned MSMEs
3. Strengthening linkages between women (entrepreneurs) and other supply chain actors.

The program aimed to impact policy and shift gender norms individuals, corporate and public institutional levels. SEO and KCG carried out the evaluation between April and September 2023, which encompasses assessments at both the program level and the three individual pillars.



Key Findings

The overall finding is that the WiW program was relevant and effective. In particular, there was evidence that WiW contributed to creating change towards gender equality at the level of individuals, firms, as well as at public institutions.

The program aimed to tackle relevant barriers that hinder the success of female employees and women entrepreneurs, both in the workplace and in accessing financial resources. Notably, these barriers encompass a mix of implicit company-level challenges and national policies that obstruct women from entering and advancing in the Sri Lankan workforce. Although conventional employment is typically the preferred means of income generation, women often resort to self-employment due to the prevalence of these hindrances. Furthermore, even within the supply chain, women's participation can be further increased. The issue of financial inclusion also looms large, with the country falling behind in this regard. Commercial banks in Sri Lanka struggle to provide financial products tailored to or specifically designed for women, whilst deeply rooted cultural gender norms significantly contribute to these challenges in all three areas. The WiW program addresses these issues, leveraging IFC's relevant expertise and its capacity to operate at scale, mobilize organizations, and draw upon international best practices.

The program was effective in creating policy-level change within participating firms, and in creating demonstration effects through multiple dissemination events. The WiW program achieved success among participation firms, as evidenced by their satisfaction, the creation of inclusive policies and products, and the high overall target achievement despite various national crises. The program was also effective in creating change at the end beneficiary level, as employees of participating firms reported small improvements in employment and leadership opportunities and family-friendly work options (in surveys, KIIs and FGDs). However, there was less evidence that policy-level changes already translated into effects at the employee level. Additionally, there was anecdotal evidence of a positive demonstration effect on firms not directly involved in the program.

The program provided valuable support that was often unavailable elsewhere. Larger firms had often already been working on improving the legal aspects of gender policy (with the help of consulting firms), but required additional support and guidance when it came to implementing these policies and translating them into practice within their organizations. Stakeholders noted that working with the IFC brought more development expertise to the table. For smaller firms, especially those targeted through the TWC partnership, the program was even more additional, as they had taken fewer steps toward gender equality before IFC's intervention.

While the WiW program exhibited limited overlap with other development partners (DPs), there was potential for enhanced collaboration with both DPs and local organizations to ensure a more comprehensive approach. This minimal overlap largely resulted from the limited number of DPs actively engaged in promoting gender equality within Sri Lanka's private sector. While there were discussions regarding collaboration with other programs co-funded by DFAT, these did not materialize significantly due to differences in mandates. Nevertheless, stakeholders identified opportunities for stronger collaboration, particularly with local organizations. Further engagement with local entities could have harnessed local expertise, especially in areas where IFC's knowledge was more limited, and extended the program's reach to smaller companies. While IFC did engage with various organizations during program design and implementation, there remained untapped potential for exploring synergies and partnerships with local entities. Such collaboration could be especially advantageous for addressing issues that significantly impact the program's overall effectiveness but fall outside IFC's mandate.

The WiW program contributed to sustainable results through a series of strategic approach. Firstly, IFC selected clients already committed to gender equality, as evidenced by their contributions to the program, and tailored recommendations to demonstrate the tangible benefits of their adoption. Moreover, the program tried to institutionalize change within client companies, by incorporating outcome and impact targets that focused on the implementation of IFC recommendations, thus actively pursuing systemic transformation. Finally, the capacity-building activities with local organizations enabled ongoing training beyond the program's duration.

Recommendations and lessons learned

Based on the evaluation findings, the evaluation team presented several recommendations and lessons learned for future similar programs. The main recommendations for IFC/WiW were as follows:

1. Improve effectiveness by **increasing collaboration** with local civil society, government, and other development partners on improving indirect impact.
2. Improve effectiveness by **reviewing the gender sensitivity** of training content more thoroughly.
3. Improve learning opportunities by involving an external **evaluation team from the start** to allow for more rigorous approaches.

The main lessons learned for other programs were as follows:

1. Enhance the **relevance** of program interventions by (a) conducting sufficient ex-ante needs assessments with potential firms and end beneficiaries, and (b) consulting local stakeholders when designing activities and research output.
2. Increase **continuity of results** by building capacity of local organizations (that can continue providing support) and embedding recommendations into participating firms' internal strategies and policies.
3. **Amplify impact** through communication by disseminating research findings from the program and creating visibility around the policies implemented by clients.

Methods

SEO and KCG evaluated the WiW program along the lines of the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria. As requested by IFC, the primary focus was on the criteria of relevance and effectiveness. At both the program and pillar level, the evaluation team used a mix of quantitative and qualitative information sources, which were carefully triangulated:

- Extensive desk research, including project documents, previous evaluations and national statistics data
- Around 30 on- and offline key informant interviews (KIIs) and 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) with internal and external stakeholders.
- Analysis of the available M&E data for each project, including logframe data and completion reports
- Statistical analysis of data from surveys conducted by the evaluation team with two sets of end-beneficiaries of the WiW program (male and female employees of participating firms, and women entrepreneurs).



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