



TARGET  
GENDER  
EQUALITY



### Target Gender Equality – Case Study Series – MAS Holdings

“Empowering women at work, strengthens teams and businesses, communities and countries.”



Group CEO of MAS Holdings, Suren Fernando

[Hear from Suren on why MAS cares about having more women in leadership.](#)

**Quick facts:** MAS Holdings – Sri Lanka – Apparel and Manufacturing – 95,000+ Employees

**Target:** 1:1 gender representation in management by 2025

**Date Set:** 2019

**Progress Made:** As of 2021, the percentage of women in management has increased to 22% from the previous year’s 21% despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Female representation on the company’s main Board of Directors has increased from 8% in 2018, to 15% in 2019 and 20% in 2021 with a significant increase in the female representation on many executive committees across the group as well.

#### What is driving your company’s ambition to advance gender equality?

As the CEO of MAS Holdings, Suren Fernando states, “Empowering women at work, strengthens teams and businesses, communities and countries.” The apparel industry is run on the back of a predominantly female workforce. Understanding this, MAS Holdings, which employs over 95,000 people, out of which 70% are female workers, places great emphasis on gender equality. This emphasis was a conscious decision driven by its founders when the company was established in the 1980s’ in Sri Lanka and has been upheld ever since even through its expansion, which is often in rural communities globally.

MAS recognizes that addressing the gaps in awareness, access to resources and safety for women, stemming from social, cultural and economic challenges, is paramount to ensure business success and create an enduring organization. While working towards gender equality is indeed the ‘right thing to do,’ MAS also understands that there is a significant business case in having better diversity among teams and especially within decision-making bodies of the company. MAS wants to be able to enjoy those business results of having an inclusive, diverse and empowered workplace where everyone enjoys equal opportunities and choice.

## What are the concrete actions your company is taking to reach your target and help move the needle on women's representation and leadership?

We have taken an approach which includes mindset change, infrastructure change, policy change and setting targets for ourselves to advance diversity within MAS:

- **Sensitization workshops** have been developed to start conversations on the business case for diversity, building a truly accessible workplace and understanding unconscious bias. Starting with senior leadership, then middle management and moving into the rest of the workforce.
- **Structured programmes of mentorship and sponsorship for women** to connect young women in executive positions to senior leaders through mentorship and women in managerial positions to leaders on the board and executive committees to support and encourage them to pursue the next step in their careers and also to create leadership intention to push female talent into the highest rungs of leadership.
- **Childcare support** is currently provided in 20 locations globally with over 200 children benefiting from this offering. MAS is conducting a survey this year across the group, to understand the current needs and to further evaluate the existing services.
- **Flexible work arrangements and paternity leave** formalized and launched promoting a culture where men and women are encouraged to participate more fully in their families, thereby influencing change in archaic social structures.
- **Focus on recruitment and communication** must be intentionally challenged. Ensuring our processes are not gender blind but instead are gender transformative, taking into account the unequal playing field and the social context within which we operate. We are amending policies and continuously communicating within our organization and outside, our agenda on gender equality.
- **Targets for CEOs and HR leaders** set in a manner that acknowledge where each subsidiary in the company is performing currently in relation to gender representation and agreeing on targets that CEOs and HR Leaders will drive each year, thereby holding leaders accountable for diverse representation across the business.

## What is one lesson or pitfall to avoid that other companies could learn from?

**Sensitization and creating buy-in while setting targets.** Setting targets to hold a company accountable is crucial. However, creating mindset change is equally important. It requires challenging and unlearning centuries of gender-biased socialization and the structures within which the corporate world operates. Thus, it is of paramount importance to set clear leadership intent and inform all levels of employees of the underlying issues that are being addressed and how the company is working to change them. By being transparent and by making everyone a part of the aspired change, it can be achieved collectively and more meaningfully, than forcing a target that people do not relate to.