



SECO's approach to gender equality

Over the last two decades, women's lives have improved in an unprecedented way. Women's access to rights, education, services and the labour market has increased. However, many women still do not enjoy equal participation in economic, social and political life. Not only is this unjust, it is also a tremendous economic and social loss. SECO therefore places gender equality high on its agenda.

SECO recognizes gender equality as a universal right and prerequisite to economic growth and sustainable prosperity. Gender equality is a key development issue. SECO's approach follows two principles: First, the principle of do no harm ensures that no development program supports factors that unintentionally perpetuate or reinforce gender inequalities. Second, gender equality is smart economics, meaning that promoting gender equality enhances economic efficiency through higher participation of women in the workforce. This raises productivity at the level of individuals and companies, therefore contributing to sustainable prosperity at the national level. Promoting gender equality is thus not only the right thing to do; it is also the smart thing to do.

SECO contributes to more gender equality

SECO promotes access to markets and opportunities through reliable framework conditions:

- Within its **macro-economic support programs**, SECO systematically addresses gender issues during the policy dialogue with partner countries and takes into account women's needs by promoting gender-sensitive budgeting.
- Within its **trade promotion programs**, SECO seeks to increase participation of women in global value chains, e.g., in the textile industry (see project example below), since export sectors provide better pay than the informal sector.
- In the area of **infrastructure financing programs**, gender aspects are systematically analysed as women and men might have different needs and priorities. For example, safe and affordable transport infrastructure that is targeted to women's mobility needs in a city can dramatically increase their participation in economic activities, since they get more efficient opportunities to combine income-generating activities with care or housework.

SECO promotes jobs through private initiatives:

- Within SECO's **private sector promotion programs**, female entrepreneurship and access to finance are promoted so that women can start or extend their business (see project example below).

- In its **skills development programs**, SECO systematically adopts a gender perspective to improve access to training opportunities for women and foster their inclusion in the workforce.

Project example: Better Work Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh

Countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua and Vietnam

Project Partner: International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC)

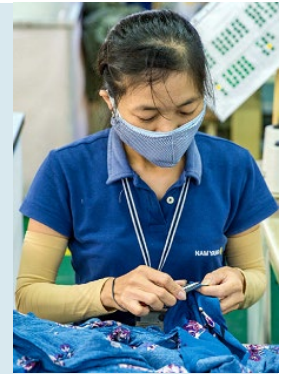
Time period: 2017 - 2021 (Phase III)

Budget: CHF 74.9 million (SECO share: CHF 12 million)

Objectives: Better Work improves compliance with core labour standards and national labour laws in the textile industry. Women make up the vast majority of the workforce in the global garment industry and represent 79 percent of workers in Better Work factories. Gender equality is a key component and the program recognizes women as significant actors in the textile industry.

Results: The results of the independent impact assessment conducted by Tufts University showed that Better Work empowers women by:

- decreasing the gender pay gap by 17%,
- reducing sexual harassment concerns by 18%,
- increasing women's access to prenatal care by 26%,
- making the business case for investments in skills development for women and training female supervisors, which has led to 22% higher productivity.



Project example: Women Banking Champions, Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Countries: Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia

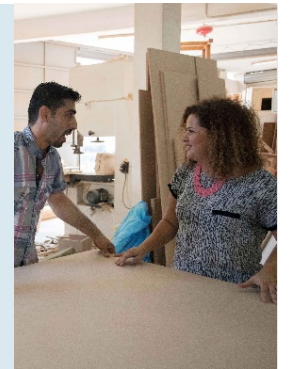
Project Partner: International Finance Corporation (IFC)

Time period: 2017 - 2021

Budget: CHF 12 million (SECO share: CHF 5 million)

Objectives: The Women Banking Champions program aims at increasing access to financial and non-financial services for women and women entrepreneurs through the provision of advisory services to financial institutions (banks and microfinance institutions). The program will create a better environment for micro, small and medium enterprises in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Women and women entrepreneurs in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco as well as financial institutions that are committed to improve their services for female clients benefit from this program

Results in promoting Gender equality: The program is based on a successful pilot project with the BLC Bank in Lebanon. This bank has become a leader for women banking in the region. The Lebanese BLC Bank is employing more female personnel and has established a division developing new financial products especially designed for the needs of female customers. Medium business loans disbursed to women have increased by 92 percent (from \$11 to 21 million).



Women tend to work in specific sectors, have different needs, are confronted with unequal distribution of unpaid home and care work. Furthermore, they often do not enjoy the same access to education, information, assets – such as land titles – or services. Therefore, gender sensitive programming is very important for SECO's economic development projects. Awareness raising within the institutions and among partners is a crucial and logical first step. SECO has developed a comprehensive gender equality guideline and checklist to help program managers and implementing partners identify gender gaps, risks, but also innovation and opportunities. With the help of gender-disaggregated indicators and more gender-sensitive reporting, SECO improves its accountability and makes the gender dimension more visible.

Further information:

www.seco-cooperation.admin.ch

info.cooperation@seco.admin.ch

WEPO, January 2021